

# ***God of Wonders: Bread***

*This is the fourth message in a seven part series in which we're looking at God through the lens of powerful Biblical metaphors. All messages in the series are available on [www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons](http://www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons)*

**A Sermon Preached by  
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**April 3, 2011 (A Communion Sunday)**

*The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?" And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him--what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD." Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'"*

*And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD*

*appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. ... The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.'"*

*Exodus 16:1-15, 31-32*

*When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry..." "*

*John 6:25-35a*

What's your favorite kind of bread? Raisin, rye, pumpernickel? Your grandmother's bread? Garlic bread? Any kind of warm bread, fresh from the oven? Everyone has a *favorite* bread. But only one bread is a *forever* bread. Our *favorite* breads fill us for a morning or a day; *forever* bread fills us for eternity. Jesus, of course, is that bread. He says in our lesson: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." Without *this* bread we will always be hungry, always be searching, and always be dissatisfied.

Even when we say that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior we can end up starving if we aren't taking him into our lives – if we are not feasting on him – daily. So what are we eating instead? If Jesus is the "true bread," what are some things we substitute for him? Think of the activities we use to fill the emptiness in our nights, to give direction to our days, to calm the bitterness of our hearts – instead of turning to Jesus for sustenance. When we're spiritually hungry, some of us go to the refrigerator or the kitchen cabinet and we feast on whatever bread or chips or sweet delicacy we can find there. Some of us prefer the liquor cabinet. Some of us turn on the T.V. or the internet to tune out our hunger pangs. Some of us fill every waking moment with activity – many of them helpful and respectable – simply to avoid the silence that comes when we finally slow down – and it's just us and God – or us and our regrets – or us and our fears. At the end of the day we're still hungry.

*Jesus* is the bread of life; we've got to stop filling up on other things.

Mind-numbing, heart-stopping activities are nothing more than empty calories. They taste good for a time. They don't require much effort (or so it seems). But they have no nutritional value. They don't help us grow stronger spiritually or more mature spiritually. To make things worse, they fool us into thinking that we are full – but they just take the edge off. A little while later the hunger is back – the hunger for healing, for hope, for purpose.

We treat these spiritual hungers like they are our enemies; in fact they are our friends. Our spiritual longings are meant to draw us to God (not to the refrigerator). They remind us to feast again *on soul food*. When we feel those pangs sometimes we open our Bibles, or close our eyes to pray, or decide to go deeper with God. More often, we reach for the equivalent of spiritual snack packs – numbing activities, easy answers, or comfort without

commitment. When we give in to temptations like these we're filling our *stomachs* but starving our *souls*.

The problem with nutritious bread, true bread, life-giving bread, is that it's simple and available; it goes with everything. It's not fancy or exotic. Ever watch the T.V. show "Iron Chef"? Some of the best cooks from around the world come on the show to compete. They have a very short time to build the best multi-course meal around a specially chosen surprise ingredient – anything from bacon to buffalo. It's fascinating to see how these chefs work the ingredient into each course. But we'll never see bread as the surprise ingredient on that show; working bread into a meal isn't nearly as challenging as making sherbet out of Japanese Sea Urchin. Bread is boring in comparison.

We can feel this way about God, too. Jesus doesn't come in fancy packages. He doesn't have secret ingredients that make us crave more of him. For those of us who call him Lord and Savior it's easy to think of Jesus as being about as exciting as, well, white bread. Maybe we've forgotten what bread represents in the Bible. Maybe we've forgotten what the Bread of Life means to us. Maybe we've even forgotten what it feels like to be truly hungry for God.

Bread plays a prominent part in some of the most important stories in salvation history. Remember the exodus from Egypt? The Hebrews were in such a hurry to get out of town that they didn't have time to let their bread rise. That's why at Passover our Jewish brothers and sisters eat *unleavened* bread. It reminds them how Yahweh heard their cries when they were slaves. And how Yahweh crushed the false gods of the Egyptians (each of the plagues demonstrated the impotence of a different god in the Egyptian pantheon). That bread practically speaks to them of how Yahweh freed them from slavery. That simple, nearly tasteless, matzo bread reminds Jews of the milk and honey that God promised to his people – and how God delivered on that promise.

Not long after the exodus from Egypt, when the Hebrews were just starting their wanderings in the wilderness, they started getting hungry. And when people of any era start getting hungry they start whining, complaining, and fantasizing about food. So the Hebrews murmured to Moses, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this

wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Exodus 16:3) Of course we know how that story ends, "And the Lord smote them with a might smiting for their whining and complaining..." O.K., not exactly. Instead, God said, "I am going to rain bread from Heaven on you." (What a gracious, long-suffering God we have!) Sure enough, for forty years, God supplied them with manna, daily bread. This manna was like nothing they had ever seen before, and it didn't keep well. But it was enough. Enough to keep them strong and moving forward. And it reminded them once again of God's power – God's power to provide for and sustain his people.

We all need bread for the journey, don't we? Life is hard. Hunger makes us feel weak. Hunger makes us want to turn around and take the easy way out. When you feel that way, and we all do sometimes, call on God. Cry out to God. Complain. Whine to God if you need to. See if manna doesn't start showing up on your doorstep, just enough for each day.

Jesus knew these Old Testament stories. As a boy he would have celebrated Passover with his family and eaten the unleavened bread; he knew exactly what that bread represented. Jesus knew, too, that the Ark of the Covenant was the holiest treasure in the Temple and that, by God's command, it contained a measure of that mysterious manna. God told the people to place it there, right next to the tablets of the Ten Commandments, so that they would never forget God's mercy, generosity, and provision. Jesus knew the power of bread—both as a meal and as a memorial.

So it's no surprise, then, that when his followers were hungry and they were starting to get restless, he fed over 5000 of them with a few loaves and fish. He could have shamed them for their hunger, teased them about how they were so captive to their bodies. But he didn't. He knew that people can't connect with the Bread of Life if they don't have any bread in their stomachs. So he fed them – first with wheat, then with his words. Both are necessary for life, eternal life.

But just a little while after this incredible miracle of the feeding of the 5000, the Disciples asked Jesus for a sign, as if he had not just given them a little clue about his power. No.... they wanted a little something more to show them that he was as great as Moses was; they wanted bread from *Heaven*. And again, we know how the story would have concluded, if *we* were the Son of God, and *we* had just made lunch for 5000 people out of almost nothing, and now some of those same people were asking for just one

more sign of *our* power. If *we* had been Jesus that story would have ended, “And then the Lord smote them with a mighty smiting...” But that’s not how it ends, is it? Jesus gently explained to them that it wasn’t *Moses* who gave the people manna in the wilderness, it was *God*. Then he explained how the true bread from Heaven – the best stuff – isn’t *manna*, it’s the *Son of Man*. Then Jesus states things plainly, because the disciples still weren’t getting it: “*I am the bread of life.*”

In the last week of his life, Jesus sat down with those same disciples, at a Passover meal, and he took the bread – that same unleavened bread that reminded the Jews of God’s power and compassion – and he said to them, “*This is my body.*” He said to them, and he says to us, “when you eat this bread, remember me – my power, my compassion, my provision, my mercy, for I am God in your midst.” And just as the unleavened bread of Passover reminds the Jews of God’s victory over false Gods and slavery, so does the risen Bread of Life remind us of God’s victory over death and how God has rescued us from slavery to sin.

When we see bread in the Bible, we have to ask ourselves, what meaning does God want us to take from this story? Some meals are about more than meets the eye.

*Many years ago, high in the mountains of Peru, a missionary was preparing to celebrate the Lord’s Supper for the first time in a very poor village. The missionary’s Spanish was just as poor as the people were, and he did not wear a clergy collar, so the villagers could only guess at who he was and why he was in their village. But the man was not easily discouraged. He was young and felt he had something to offer. They had no chapel there and no priest would even bother to bring them communion. He hoped that when the villagers saw the sacred meal he was preparing for them, the bread and the cup, their eyes would open and they would see his good heart and how much he wanted to share Jesus with them.*

*So earlier that morning he had hiked down the mountain into town where he purchased six Chancay rolls, tiny sweet Peruvian rolls topped with sesame seeds. He placed them in a cloth bag and hiked back up the mountain. The rolls were not what he thought of as communion bread, but they would do. It’s what Peruvians ate on special occasions.*

*He was standing in the small hut that he was hoping to use as a chapel when a boy, perhaps five or six years old, appeared in the doorway. The boy was naked except for a ragged shirt that went about to his knees. He was watching intently as the missionary pulled a roll out of his bag and placed it on a simple dinner plate, one he had brought all the way from the capital city just for this purpose. As the boy watched he put the plate and the roll on the table.*

*The missionary invited the boy in with a gesture and offered him a seat at the table. The missionary hoped to practice his Spanish while he continued to put out the elements for the Sacrament. The boy was very shy, but that didn't keep the man from babbling away about the beauty of the mountains and the cool of the night. The boy made no sound as the missionary prepared the communion meal.*

*When the man turned his thoughts and his eyes back to the table, the roll was gone. Not a crumb was left behind. The boy, however, was smiling. So the missionary tried to explain to the boy that this was a special meal; a gift from God, and he was a pastor. He tried to explain that the roll wasn't meant for dinner, but the boy just looked confused.*

*Undeterred, the missionary took another roll from his bag and placed it on the plate. This time he covered it with a cloth napkin that a peasant woman had made. She had carefully sewn in Spanish the words, "Give us this day our daily bread." The missionary securely tucked the napkin over and around the second roll and went back to his duties; this time not speaking to the boy. It seemed to the missionary that he had turned his back only for a moment, when he looked at the table and discovered that the second roll was gone. The boy, of course, was smiling.*

*Four more times the missionary and the boy played this game. Until, finally, after the sixth roll went missing, the missionary explained to the boy, as best he could – "I have no more bread to give to you—or to anyone else. I don't even have anything for the Lord's Supper." The boy patted his stomach and smiled, indicating that this was ok with him: he was full. And then the boy reached under his shirt and pulled out a half-eaten roll and offered it to the man. The missionary took it and placed it on the plate. The missionary said, "Gracias." The boy replied, "De nada." When the missionary celebrated the Lord's Supper later that evening, with just half a*

*roll, but all the boy's relatives from the village in attendance, he knew that this was his second sacramental meal that day.*

It has been said that when Christians share our faith with others, it's just one beggar telling another where to find a crust of bread. As we share the Bread of Life with each other today, let us remember the people of the world whose stomachs are empty. And let us be mindful of all the people whose souls are hungry for God. We have something special and sacred and eternal to offer them. Amen.

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