

Exodus 16:11–21 (CEB)

¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses, ¹²“I’ve heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat. And in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp. And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the desert surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” They didn’t know what it was.

Moses said to them, “This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. ¹⁶This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Collect as much of it as each of you can eat, one omer per person. You may collect for the number of people in your household.’ ¹⁷The Israelites did as Moses said, some collecting more, some less. ¹⁸But when they measured it out by the omer, the ones who had collected more had nothing left over, and the ones who had collected less had no shortage. Everyone collected just as much as they could eat. ¹⁹Moses said to them, “Don’t keep any of it until morning.” ²⁰But they didn’t listen to Moses. Some kept part of it until morning, but it became infested with worms and stank. Moses got angry with them. ²¹Every morning they gathered it, as much as each person could eat. But when the sun grew hot, it melted away.

Numbers 11:30–34 (CEB)

³⁰Moses and Israel’s elders were assembled in the camp. ³¹A wind from the LORD blew up and brought quails from the sea. It let them fall by the camp, about a day’s journey all around the camp and about three feet deep on the ground. ³²Then the people arose and gathered the quail all that day, all night, and all the next day. The least collected was ten homers, and they laid them out around the camp. ³³While the meat was still between their teeth and not yet consumed, the LORD’s anger blazed against the people. The LORD struck the people with a very great punishment. ³⁴The name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving.

Matthew 6:9–13 (CEB)

⁹Pray like this:

Our Father who is in heaven,
uphold the holiness of your name.

¹⁰Bring in your kingdom
so that your will is done on earth
as it’s done in heaven.

¹¹Give us the bread we need for today.

¹²Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you,
just as we also forgive those
who have wronged us.

¹³And don’t lead us into temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Abundance is God’s way!

Here we are in the midst of a sermon series on food and feasts. You’d think I’d be right at home. The problem is that I am conflicted when it comes to food. On the one hand, I enjoy eating. But on the other hand, I just don’t eat as well as I should; not enough fruits and vegetables, too much processed food, and so on. I know this and if I forget there are daily reminders everywhere I turn. Countless magazine covers and news stories tell me how I could do a better job of nourishing my body. You’d think that at my age, I’d realize that my body needs all the help it can get.

More than 3,000 years, the Hebrew slaves who escaped from Pharaoh faced a more pressing problem of nourishment: starvation. The problem was that there just hadn’t

been much time to pack. When Moses said go, everyone had simply dashed for the Red Sea. They somehow found the time to plunder the Egyptians, grabbing jewelry and clothing, but they had not prepared any food provisions other than some loaves of unleavened bread.¹ When the Hebrew slaves reached the safety of the Sinai wilderness, they realized that choosing gold over food had perhaps not been the best decision and they began to complain, “you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exodus 16:3).

But of course, they were completely wrong. They were God’s people and God would provide for them. Soon, God began raining “manna” upon them, the “bread from heaven,” a flakey, nutritious substance that could be gathered off the ground each morning. When the sun grew hot, this bread from heaven melted, but there was no need to store any food. God provided them with fresh manna every day. A powerful reminder that God provides every day. It is so easy to forget that God is deeply involved in our daily lives, not just the occasional “big” moments. Terence Fretheim writes:

How common it is among the people of God that a crisis, whether of daily need or physical suffering, occasions a crisis of faith. Material and spiritual well-being are more closely linked than we often care to admit (see 6:9). The discernment of the people of God has often been so clouded by physical difficulties that they cannot see that God is much involved in providential ways in their everyday lives. Israel’s situation is not unlike a community of faith whose understanding of “act of God” has been largely determined by their insurance policies. **The connections of God with daily affairs has, for all practical purposes, disappeared** [emphasis added]. The resolution is not to stress the extraordinary acts of God one more time but to keep God linked with everyday blessings. And, as with Israel in this text, it will be in *discerning the presence of God in connection with daily needs* that they will be able to return once again to the confession: Yes, we now know, Yahweh is the one who brought us out of Egypt; Yahweh is God indeed. God’s dramatic acts of creation are of one piece with daily blessings. The confession of the one is tied closely to the confession of the other. Moses’ task is to instruct the people such that the divine factor in *every* blessing is made apparent.²

It is this story that Jesus draws on in the Lord’s Prayer. To pray for our daily bread is to acknowledge the discipline of “dailyness” that is God’s way. In ways large and small God provides for us. All we have comes from God, even our lives – and Jesus’ prayer teaches us to be thankful – daily, in all things and at all times. We humans can be fiercely independent, resisting the very notion that we are dependent on God. But, every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer we acknowledge that God provides for us every single day. He always has and he always will.

But this “dailyness” isn’t the only point of the manna story. This is also a story of abundance. So much food that it covers the ground. So much food that everyone’s needs are met. This too is God’s way. Can anyone doubt that in 2016 we humans are capable of growing enough food to eradicate hunger and starvation? Of course we can and probably do. So why does starvation still stalk the planet? Because of war, greed, fear, theft, indifference, and so on. Though that is our way; it is most assuredly not God’s way. The story of the manna in Exodus 16 prefigures another dramatic story of God’s abundance – but with a deadly twist.

On the march

After the story of the manna, God leads the people on to Mt. Sinai, the place where Moses had encountered God in the burning bush. At Mt. Sinai, God gives his people the Law and the instructions for building a dwelling place for God called the “tabernacle.” Things don’t go well at Mt. Sinai, for the people are often just as

¹The bread they take is unleavened because there was not even enough time to wait for the bread to rise.

²Fretheim, T. E. (1991). Exodus (p. 183). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

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ungrateful and fickle as they had been on the march out of Egypt. They even build a golden calf and thank it for saving them from Egypt! At one point, things are so dire Moses has to persuade God to go on with them. But God agrees and on they go.

On their journey to Canaan, some of the Israelites begin whining and complaining, rebelling against both Moses and God. They have tired of the manna and want meat to eat. So Moses turns to God and confesses that he is pretty much done with leading this company of complainers. Moses feels like he just can't go on; it is all too much. So God helps Moses. First, God deals with the leadership issue, pouring his spirit on seventy other leaders who will then share Moses' burden.

Then God turns to all those who are craving meat. God tells them that he is going to provide meat, lots and lots of meat. So much meat it will be pouring out of their nostrils! And sure enough, God provides quail. So much quail that they are piled about three feet deep for a day's journey in any direction from the Israelite camp. Work out the numbers and you get more than 36 trillion quail, an inconceivable number.

So all the ungrateful whiners charge out from the camp and began gathering vast bushels of the quail. As these rebellious meat-cravers sit down to eat, they are "consumed by the LORD's anger" and die with meat still between their teeth! After burying the dead, the Israelites who gladly accepted the manna without complaint march on toward Canaan.

Quite a story. It reminds us that these were ancient people and the writings they have passed on to us come from a world very different from our own. But if we look at this story through the lens of Jesus, there is still much to be learned. At its center, the story is about ingratitude, the unwillingness of some to see the blessings they have. Too often, we think we know better than God. Surely, God sees things our way: we desire meat, so surely God will give us our heart's desire. After all, doesn't he love us?

Really? Our hearts are inclined away from God, not toward God. We abuse the abundance that we have and then shake our fists at God when it isn't enough. Is anything ever really enough? When does nourishment become gluttony?

The story of the trillions of quail is also a story about our actions as God's people. Can others see the state of our hearts? No, they can only see what we do. What we do matters. What we do defines us. In his commentary on Numbers, Thomas Dozeman writes:

[This story] is a strong reminder that our identity as the people of God is determined by what we do, not by what we say or by our social location. We often prefer to identify ourselves on the basis of other criteria. But God recognizes us by our actions. When members of the wilderness community judge their journey as misfortune, God prunes them from the camp by fire (11:1-3). The rabble who complain about meat reinforce the same conclusion. They are not named individually. Anyone who craves meat more than the nourishment of God belongs to this group. The act of leaving the camp for meat determines identity. The stories illustrate how fluid our identity is as the people of God; it can change over time. Pruning takes place on the basis of life-style. A central goal in preaching and teaching these stories is to determine what we crave in the contemporary church that puts us in conflict with God's leading. The object of our craving changes. The meat desired by the rabble may be money, employment, or social prestige. The message of the story remains the same, however: God recognizes us by what we do. If we leave the camp in pursuit of the thing we crave, then we forfeit our identity as God's people. We die with the meat still in our teeth.³

There are feasts that are godly, there are many that are not. Abundance can be used well or it can be abused. Through it all, we are to pray that we will "filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

³ Dozeman, T. B. (1994–2004). The Book of Numbers. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 2, p. 111). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

“Filled with all the fullness of God”

In the chronicling of American anxiety and unhappiness, which has worsened not lessened over the last five decades, so much of it seems to stem from a deep dissatisfaction and emptiness. We might chase after lots of stuff and status in this life as we seek to fill our hearts, but as Augustine wrote more than 1500 years ago, our hearts will not rest until they rest in God, or as Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, until we are filled with all the fullness of God. Here is Paul’s short prayer on behalf of the believers in and around Ephesus:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

(Ephesians 3:14–19, NRSV)

But what an odd phrase. How could we possibly even speak of being filled with God’s fullness? We are not God. Is it simply some sort of nice sounding but meaningless sentiment? Of course not. Rather, it is the climax of the prayer. Paul prays that the Christians, individually and as a body, might be strengthened in their inner being, rooted and grounded in love as they come to comprehend and to know the limitless love of Christ. Paul prays that Christ might dwell in the hearts of these Christians. And all of this takes our eyes and hearts ever upward to the very fullness of God.

In another letter, Paul spoke of this fullness: “For in him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him . . . (Colossians 2:9-10).” It is not that we are God, but that in Christ we participate in the fullness of God that dwelt in Jesus. This fullness is “already” ours, but “not yet” fully. It is ours and it is our goal. We are moving toward God’s fullness, which we can best understand as God’s presence and power. Such a bold prayer by Paul. It may be a bit fuzzy, but that’s how it often is when we seek to understand God and the things of God.

Surely Paul would want us to understand that only in God can we find the abundance (v. 20) that God desires for us. If we seek first anything other than the kingdom of God, we will be disappointed. But if we seek God, living within his moral will for our lives, then at the end of our journey we will find a fullness, a love, an abundance beyond our imagining. Indeed, we will find that what we thought would be the end of the journey is only the end of its beginning.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In what ways do we fail to appreciate all that we have? Why is it so easy for us to focus on what we lack rather than on we already have? What is a time in your life when you have seen abundance abused?
2. The story from Numbers 11 is pretty “out there.” Have you ever known someone who choked to death (figuratively!) on their own abundance? How often do we leave the camp of God’s people to chase after our heart’s desire? How well has that worked out?
3. Paul prays that the Ephesian believers would be “strengthened . . . comprehend . . . know” so that they would be “filled with all the fullness of God.” Discuss what you think it means to be “filled with fullness.” How would we experience such abundance? Is it something we would feel? How can we trust our feelings about such things? What part do we play in this “filling?” Perhaps the verbs in the prayer are a clue!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 16 The full story of the manna and the quail</p>	<p>Tuesday, Numbers 11 The full story of the 36 trillion quail.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Psalm 107 “Consider the steadfast love of the Lord.”</p>	<p>Thursday, Colossians 2:6-19 The fullness of our life in Christ</p>
<p>Friday, Ephesians 4:1-16 This follows Paul’s prayer quoted in the study. You’ll see that, as usual, Paul wants us to understand that we are called to build up the body of Christ. Put that abundance to work! Also, don’t get off track with Paul’s mysterious aside in verses 9 & 10.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

