

*The Lord and His Prayer:
Kingdom Bread*

1 Kings 17: 7-16

Matthew 6: 11 (Luke 11: 3)

Bread is a key element in many passages of scripture. That's no surprise. The scripture from Exodus recalls the providence of God to his people in the wilderness, and how God brought quail in the evening and manna in the morning. When Moses brings their complaint to God, God promises, "I will rain down bread from heaven." In the Psalm that formed our Call to Worship, this manna is called "the bread of angels." This desert experience teaches these grumbling people that God will provide for their needs, even in the desert wasteland.

You see, God's hospitality came with a twist. Unlike common circumstances, these people of God's liberation and salvation are told to gather **only** the manna they need. When they follow those instructions, then no one has too much or too little; they gather what they need.

The bread of heaven for the Hebrews in the wilderness became a lasting image for the caring, forgiveness, and grace of God for his people. Let's take a few minutes to consider another great bread story, the selection from 1st Kings with Elijah and the widow of Zarephath.

We need some background here. Ahab is the new King of Israel. He quickly makes quite a reputation; scripture says: he *did more evil in the sight of the Lord than all the kings before him* [16:29ff]. Now that's quite an achievement! They were terrible! Ahab is already on the outs with God, but he is an over-achiever. Ahab takes a wife, Jezebel, to be his queen. Jezebel is not a Jew; she is from Sidon on the coast of Lebanon, or then Phoenicia. She worships Ba'al gods and King Ahab joins her.

Ahab also decides to worship Asherah. In the Semitic tradition, Asherah is considered Yahweh's consort, the queen of heaven. You realize that Yahweh doesn't like the idea of being mated to and sharing sovereignty with Asherah. So Ahab found many ways to irritate God.

God is not absent or disinterested. God finds one powerful way to irritate King Ahab. Just one is enough. It's Elijah.

Elijah simply appears out of nowhere, beginning here with 1st Kings 17. We get scant introduction, no real background, no history, no calling, not even a mission.

Elijah appears before King Ahab and utters God's prophecy. Drought will dominate the land for the next seven years, *except at my word* – that would be God's word. This is meant to be a lesson to Asherah-loving, Ba'al worshipping Ahab about the sovereignty of God over all of creation, the Author of every blessing including water. Ahab's gods are powerless to end the drought, and this will be a demonstration for all.

Elijah's prophecy was both threatening to the king and subversive. Elijah had crossed the line with the king and quickly made himself *persona non grata*, a marked man. Having accomplished the first phase of his mission – delivering a rebuke to Ahab – Elijah gets instructed by God to flee and hide in the desert wilderness.

God sent **ravens** to feed his prophet bread and meat. As the prophesied drought dried up the stream at his hideout, God guided Elijah to his next destination, to a widow in Zarephath, a harsh locale in Phoenicia between Tyre and Sidon, well away from Judea and the easy reach of the angry king. However, note the location also just happens to be in the neighborhood of Sidon in Phoenicia, the hometown of **Queen Jezebel**. Elijah is in Jezebel's backyard.

The widow in Zarephath was at the village gate gathering wood. When Elijah requests water, she is ready and willing to help. But when he asked for food, she balked. The man of God was asking too much. She explained: *As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.*

This sharp, stark talk of imminent death is also a reflection of the worth of *her gods* which also happen to be Ahab and Jezebel's gods. In clear contrast to Yahweh's ministry to Elijah by the ravens in the lonely desert, this woman and her son *by the village* had no expectation that her god would do anything to help them. Further, her powerless submission to a fate of death stands against Elijah's words, who is undaunted by the circumstance or the context. The widow of Zarephath stands amid a reality of desolation, poverty, emptiness, and death. Elijah announces – prophesies to her – an entirely different way, a new reality of *abundance*. He says:

Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little biscuit and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For the Lord, the God of Israel says: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.'

He assures her that all of this will work out. 'Just trust me,' or better, 'Trust in my God who instructed me to come to you. My God is not like yours; my God is the real thing.' Now the widow had to make a decision.

Remember, Elijah insisted that she share with him, a stranger, the last scraps of food that she and her son expected to eat. He was even rather blasé about the whole thing. He seemed indifferent to their desperation. He didn't even seem to be hungry. *And* he wanted to be fed *before* she fed her son and herself. 'Feed me, then take care of yourselves,' he said.

Elijah does seem coldly indifferent to her plight, doesn't he? In fact, Elijah refuses, *completely refuses*, to validate the widow's worldview of scarcity, powerlessness, and death. Elijah's refusal is based on his absolute insistence on the sovereignty, power, and blessing of his God Yahweh, a reality that declares boldly and

unequivocally that God is the Creator of blessed abundance, of empowerment, and of new life.

Finally, the widow has to ponder: ‘There is no future after this meal. This last meal isn’t going to give us life... is it?’ Perhaps figuring that, if this was going to be her last meal anyway, why not share it with this strange prophet? She did as he requested.

Indeed, the flour and the oil never did run out. Yahweh wins; the sacred mandate of abundance emerges victorious. The useless royal gods of Ahab and Jezebel, which defined reality emphasizing scarcity, are invalidated by their powerlessness.

Last week, we considered the three opening petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: *Our Father, let your name be holy, let your Kingdom come, let your will be done.* We discovered that those first three petitions which we sail through to get to the important stuff like bread, forgiveness, and temptation, are radical and subversive. They focus on bringing God’s Kingdom and God’s will to fulfillment. This means the end of the worldly order and the Powers that govern it, and the reign of God’s justice, love, peace, and new life. But that also means parting with our beliefs in the pride of nationalism as we exchange grossly imperfect, worldly government whatever and wherever it is, including our own, to receive the Kingdom of God and all of its blessings.

Remember how we left things last week, *on earth as it is in heaven*, or more simply and literally, *as in heaven, so on earth*. The notion that the heavenly pattern of God’s Kingdom should be sought on earth in our lives and society is continuing. The reconciliation of heaven and earth is God’s will and fulfilling that goal is what we strive in Jesus’ ministry to do.

So, you’re thinking, “Daily bread” is pretty simple and clear, right? That’s our daily food, sustenance, and can even be extended to include the provisions for whatever we need. Most commentators would suggest that, and I don’t know why. The problem is that we started talking about this big cosmic stuff, the Kingdom and God’s will, and heaven on earth, and then we’re supposed to drop that huge, big context and ask for a loaf of bread? By the way, this is what the church does all the time. It takes big ideas, the sharp radical thoughts, and the rough revolutionary movements and pounds the living daylights out of them until they’re unrecognizable. The church takes the wild lion of Jesus and his gospel and turns it into an adorable pussy cat suitable for an Instagram post. The church takes the gospel of Jesus to the Neuter Commuter and <snip>!

We hear (and scholars, too) a loaf of basic bread, and we ignore the cosmic context of the Kingdom that immediately preceded it. We then personalize it to ourselves, as in ‘Give me bread each day,’ or ‘Give me today’s bread every day,’ or something equally loaded with 12 grains and carbohydrates.

But wait – isn’t that the kind of bread that the widow in the Elijah story had? That’s the same bread that was going to run out, that would bring her and her son to death. Elijah pushed her in faithfulness and showed her Kingdom bread, the bread that the widow’s gods, the royal gods, couldn’t provide. It’s the bread that gives life where

death has visited. It's the bread of God's Kingdom that is produced in God's economy, driving away scarcity with abundance, driving away the death with life's liberation, driving away the pretender gods and worldly Powers and their empty promises with the solid promise of God, the Sovereign Lord, who is faithful in love and compassion in sharing the new life promise.

The problem with this sentence of the Lord's Prayer is simply one word, in Greek: *epiousios*. It's the key word; the one translated in our prayer as ... *daily*. That word used to describe *what* "bread" we're talking about is a complete mystery.

This word only appears once and nowhere else, not only in the Bible, but in all of the Greek and Christian literature known to humankind. That one place is here in the Lord's Prayer. What seems most likely is that the recollection of Jesus' prayer by the source (Q) forced the creation of a new word. Jesus taught, spoke and prayed in Aramaic, and the word or expression Jesus used in Aramaic had no translation in Greek, and probably nothing close in Hebrew. So the source created a kind of hybrid word from Greek to convey what Jesus was talking about. The problem is that now – 2000 years later – no one really knows what is meant. Actually, just 200 years later, an early Christian theologian named Origen didn't know what it meant either.

We think it talks about asking for bread in a forward-looking sense. But recall how God's economics gives everyone just enough, but not to stockpile and enrich. A person's most faithful spirit trusts in God's providence each day, so one is unlikely to ask today for tomorrow's bread. It's rather flat and missing something, isn't it?

There are features we should *expect* to see, but they don't show up in our translation. We expect to see continuity with God's unfolding Kingdom, people wonderfully filled as each one receives just enough. We need to discover Kingdom bread.

We've described it and named it already, the *bread of heaven*, the *bread of angels*, the widow's bread transformed by her faith. This bread brings the fullness of being to a struggling life. This bread can't be hoarded or stockpiled. This bread provides what people truly need for life as God intended. This bread comes to us in seasons when we're stranded in the wasteland, feeling abandoned, and led astray. It comes to us miraculously – heaven-sent – to give strength, hope, and new life. This bread is shared in the Kingdom, *on earth as it is in heaven*.

May we petition our Father for this bread, the bread of heaven, the bread of the Kingdom that means new life for us and new life for all.