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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“GIVE US THIS DAY”**  
Matthew 6:11

□ Matthew 6:11: **“Give us this day our daily bread.”**

◆ Early in Genesis the first humans disobey God’s direction not to {Ge 2:17} **“Eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”** Do they find ultimate fulfillment, as the serpent suggests? Hardly! You know things are bad when the LORD laments: {3:17, 19} **“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your [bread].”** (Most English translations use the word **“food,”** but the Hebrew literally reads **“bread.”**) As much as pain in childbirth and death, the struggle for bread signals the broad range of sin’s devastating consequences.

◆ In Exodus the Almighty liberates the Hebrew people from centuries of bondage. But after a month and ½ of freedom they grumble, {Ex 16:3} **“If only [the LORD had killed us] in Egypt!”** As slaves **“we... ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve... to death.”** God patiently replies: {Ex 16:12} **“in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord”** – and for the next 40 years, six days a week he {Ex 16:4} **“[rains] down”** manna **“from heaven.”** Not only does this kind of bread nourish their bodies, it is a constant witness to God’s generosity.

◆ God commands Israel to build a portable sanctuary. Among the Tabernacle’s sacred furnishings is a table

overlaid with pure gold and rimmed with gold molding. Holy God commissions his priests to {Lev 24:5-6, 8-9} **“bake twelve loaves of bread”** with **“the finest flour.”** **“Arrange them in two stacks... on the table of pure gold before the LORD.... This bread is to be set out before the LORD regularly, Sabbath after Sabbath.... It is a most holy part of ... the food offerings.”** Prepared and presented to the LORD in the ordained way, bread is a worthy sacrifice of praise.

◆ Evil Queen Jezebel vows to kill Elijah, who runs for his life. At dusk he collapses, and pleads: {1 Ki 19:4-12} **“I have had enough, LORD. Take my life; I am”** as good as dead. Exhausted, he falls asleep. Later, an angel wakes him, saying: **“Get up and eat,”** and **“bread... and... water”** appear. Elijah eats, drinks, and sleeps some more. The angel wakes him again and feeds him more bread. **“Strengthened by that food”** Elijah travels on to Horeb, **“the mountain of God,”** where the Almighty speaks to his prophet in **“a gentle whisper.”** Bread strengthens and enables him to meet the LORD.

✧ The Old Testament has three Hebrew words for “bread.” Together, they are used about 360 times. In addition ancient Jews had a daily mealtime blessing, (still in use today), that is not found in Scripture: **“Blessed art thou, LORD our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”**

Tangible, chewable bread has deep significance in the Jewish traditions Joseph and Mary instill in Jesus. Centuries of history and theology are packed into the petition, **“Give us this day our daily bread.”**

Yet the Son of God does not stop there. He expands on the past, adding layers of rich new meaning.

◆ Early on, the Lord calls Levi the tax collector to follow him. They go to Levi's house for dinner, and many of his low-life pals join them. The scandalized Pharisees ask, "**Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?**" (By the way: while their graceless tone is wrong, their judgment that this is an act worth commenting on is spot on.) "**On hearing this, Jesus [announces]: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'**" (Mark 2:14-17). Breaking bread together creates significant and redemptive – and, to the Pharisees, subversive – relationships.

◆ On to Matthew 14 {14:13-21}: in the wilderness the Messiah feeds a Jewish multitude of 5,000 men, plus their wives and children, with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. The giving of bread recalls the manna, drawing a link between Jesus' ministry and the Exodus. In Mark 8 {8:1-9} he feeds a slightly smaller multitude with 7 loaves and a few fish. Everyone is filled, and there are 7 baskets of leftovers. The textual context, geographic location, and the use of the number 7 confirm that this is a Gentile crowd. The giving of bread prophesies (and begins to accomplish) the inclusion in God's Kingdom of formerly unwelcome outsiders.

◆ Jesus declares with startling boldness, "**The bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.**" "**I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry**" (John 6:33, 35). Later, he gathers with his apostles on the day of

Unleavened Bread. During the Passover meal Jesus picks up some "**bread, [gives] thanks and [breaks] it, and [gives] it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'**" (Luke 22:19). In Holy Communion bread takes on the nature of a sacrament (a visible, outward sign of an invisible, inward grace).

◆ One more: John 21 {21:1-14} describes Christ's third post-resurrection appearance to his disciples. Seven of the men are fishing on the Sea of Galilee when the Risen Lord appears on shore. "**When they [land], they [see] a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.**" Jesus invites them to "**Come and have breakfast...** [He] [takes] **the bread and [gives] it to them,**" and "[does] **the same with the fish.**" After they finish eating the Lord restores Peter, who has been ruined by his courtyard denials. Sharing bread initiates true reconciliation and enduring healing.

✧ We have barely scratched the surface. In the New Testament there are two Greek words for "bread" that appear more than 100 times in the older manuscripts.

☆ In Scripture bread is sustenance, symbol, sacrifice, strengthener, social catalyst, sign, sacrament, and source of transformation. It is no small matter for us to pray, "**Give us this day our daily bread**"!

The doctrinal implications and practical applications are endless. Let me focus on one: in all the episodes we have reviewed the line between

material and spiritual reality is paper-thin. Bread frequently functions as a point of intersection for these two dimensions.

⊗ When the Messiah tells us to request daily bread he is speaking of material provision and spiritual sustenance alike. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we ask God to feed body *and* soul.

Some Christians so overemphasize spiritual bread that they ignore the physical: they do not consider eating as a stewardship issue; they mock the idea that God expects us to manage soil and water gently, so future generations can eat; they dismiss compassion and justice ministries as distractions from the real work of evangelism and discipleship. In the process, they devalue the bodily incarnation of Christ, the Word made flesh.

Some Christians so overemphasize physical bread that they disregard the spiritual: they fail to nourish their spirits and minds with Holy Scripture; their prayer muscles waste away through neglect; they engage in corporate worship as a merely human event; they dismiss ministries of evangelism and discipleship as pie-in-the-sky distractions from the real work of compassion and justice. In the process, they strip the incarnation of its power.

Each error is wrong. Hyper-spiritualized faith (The Feast, p 143) **“can topple into the kind of mission that [offers] bread to the hungry only if they are receptive to a tract along with it... Of course,”** secularized Christianity **“that is concerned only with physical needs and [pays no attention to] spiritual poverty”** is **“every bit as sad.”**

**“Give us this day our daily bread”** reminds us that (The Feast, p 75) **“Spiritual reality can never be fully contained within its [physical] metaphor, yet without the [physical] metaphor [the spiritual reality] can never be fully perceived.”** We need both.

I would like to read an extended passage from a beautiful little book titled, The Feast:

**We stand at a fork in the road. In one direction we see a... boulevard -- with many inviting way stations and markets along the route .... To look is to want. But to have is to hunger, for the wares offer but a hollow crust of reality. The things are real, but they are not real enough. They are not what life is about. There is a confusion of signs and a riot of buying and selling and trading....**

**In the other direction we see a...narrow path. It is traveled, but not heavily.... The way is overgrown, the terrain is difficult.... There is only one sign. It reads: True Bread. The footprints tell us that many started down this path and then turned around and took the other one....The smells of the carnival have pulled them. Those messages of frying fat and spinning sugar have drifted over from the other path and masked the finer scent. But if one stands there and opens one's nostrils – if one concentrates – one can distinguish the smell of fresh, warm, lovely bread.**

**We understand, however, that the path itself is no picnic. Some of the persevering footsteps are deep and tilted... Clearly the path to peace and feasting travels [a difficult way]. It is... not a playground. And the promise of great reward – is it only a rumor? How can one be sure that the goal is worth the struggle? ....**

**Many a pilgrim has passed up God's bakery to feed on sugarcoated vanity. We stand at a fork in the road where a crucial decision must be made. In a sense we stand here at the beginning of each day. Down which road will we travel? What will we eat along the way? More to the point: On what will we feed when we reach our destination?**

Hear Matthew 6:9 and 11 once again: **“Our Father in heaven... Give us today our daily bread.”** This is the word of the Lord!