

“The Lord’s Prayer Part 3: Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

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Based upon Exodus 16:4-5, 13-26; Matt. 6:25-34

When the newly liberated Hebrew slaves woke up one morning in the wilderness, they found on the ground and bushes around them something new. “*Man nu?*” they asked in Hebrew, “What is it?”, and ever since the miraculous stuff that fed them for years in the wilderness has been known as “*manna*.” No one knows exactly what God provided for them back then, which according to *Exodus* was a substance which kind of looked like coriander seeds but was white and flaky. Scholars today think it was probably some kind of plant sap or insect secretion that gathered on branches like dew in the morning, forming something crystalline like rock candy that the people could eat. If that intrigues you more than grosses you out, then you will be pleased to learn, as I did just this week, that even now in the 21st Century, you can taste something called “*manna*” for a price. Apparently, there are several kinds harvested and sold on the gourmet market. One kind which comes from Iran, called *Hedysarum manna*, was used by a sous-chef named Garret McMahon in Manhattan, according to a 2010 *New York Times* article, to finish off his foie gras terrine with almonds, candied kumquats, and toasted brioche.¹ The *manna*, which comes from the camel thorn bush, resembles “Grape-Nuts mixed with aquarium sand, and tastes like a combination of maple syrup, brown sugar, blackstrap molasses, honey, and nuts.” McMahon explained that “The *manna* allows us to achieve a sweet, salty balance while maintaining a great crunchy texture.” Another Manhattan chef named Paul Liebrandt, who was interviewed for the same article, used something called *Shir-Khesht manna* in his dishes because it provides both chewiness and crunchiness. “No two people taste *manna* the same way,” he said. “I might taste a haunting minty-ness, while you might detect a whiff of lemon. No other ingredient is like that.”²

I would love to try the modern stuff someday, but it’s about the ancient, divinely given stuff that we are supposed to be thinking when we pray today’s petition from the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Now that we have worked our way through the first three petitions about God, we are in the second half of the prayer, in which the remaining three petitions are about our needs. Since we all need to eat to survive, it isn’t hard to understand why bread would be at the top of the list. Bread in Scripture is the “staff of life.” Judaism considers even the idea of bread to be God-given, since it is hard to imagine how we could have figured out how to make it without God’s intervention.³ And of course for Christians, as we will recognize again when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper a little later this morning, bread is associated with Jesus, who made the bread he broke at a Passover meal into a symbol of himself and God’s saving grace.

¹ Arnold, David, “*Ancient Manna on Modern Menus*,” THE NEW YORK TIMES, June 8, 2010; retrieved Mar. 1, 2021 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/dining/09manna.html>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Novice, Carol, “*Doughy Ruminations - The Meaning of Bread*,” FORWARD: JEWISH, FEARLESS SINCE 1897, Sept. 15, 2006; retrieved from <https://forward.com/articles/3902/doughy-ruminations-e2-80-94-the-meaning-of-bread/>

Since Jesus taught his disciples the words of the prayer long before his last supper, however, it is unlikely that he wanted us to be thinking about the bread as a stand in for him when we pray. Nor do we need to limit our thinking to actual bread. This petition is simply a prayer for God to ensure that we do not lack what we need to survive. Our daily bread could be potatoes or salad, steak or fish. What makes this petition interesting is not its use of the word bread, therefore, but the word that is used to describe it, usually translated as “daily.” That adjective, *epiousios* in the Greek, appears in only four places in ancient human writing. Once is in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, the second time is in Luke’s, the third time is in the *Didache*, quoting *Matthew*, and the last, is in a very old shopping list found on a piece of papyrus.⁴ *Epiousios* does not appear in the rest of the Bible or in any other ancient texts. As a result, no one is 100% sure what it means. Did the Gospel writers make up a word in their attempt to translate something Jesus said in Aramaic into Greek? Perhaps. It’s also possible that the word they chose was a very specific word that people once understood, but which gradually fell out of favor until people who lived a few hundred years later did not know it anymore. Do you know that song, “*I love you a bushel and a peck?*” When was the last time you ordered a “peck” of something at Wegman’s? Words come in and out of favor fairly often.

By comparing *epiousios* to other words that sort of look like it in Greek, etymologists have argued that the word probably means one of three things.⁵ The first possible meaning is something like “daily.” That translation seems reasonable because it takes us back to the manna story which is fundamental to our understanding of the provident care of God. In the story, God tells the people that they will be given bread each day. They are instructed to go out in the morning and gather what they need, but not to gather more than they need because the bread won’t last. This, some people find out the hard way. Eager to stockpile a little stash for their life in the wilderness, some of the Hebrews gather extra manna, only to find it rotten the next day. The only time that doesn’t happen is on Friday. When the Hebrews gathered manna on Fridays, it lasted until Sunday because God wanted them to rest on their Sabbath day. Thus, manna became for the people an object lesson in trusting in God’s ability and desire to provide for them each day what they needed.

Now that many people have so much more food in their pantries than they would need for a single day, it may seem like we could or should skip praying this particular petition. Although food scarcity has increased significantly during the pandemic and needs to be addressed, generally speaking, many Americans don’t seek out anything other than coffee in daily doses; when it comes to other foodstuffs, we stockpile. Even before the pandemic made us want to reduce our grocery store trips and hoard our toilet paper, we did this. Mormons consider it a measure of their faithfulness to have a pantry that could feed them for a year. People of all faiths and no faith routinely stock up at places like Sam’s Clubs and BJ’s buying colossal jars of mayonnaise, freezers’ worth of meat, and more. But nothing compares to the stash of extreme couponers. Have you ever seen that extreme couponing show on TV? One woman went into the

⁴ Some scholars now question whether the word on the shopping list is *epiousios*. It is hard to read.

⁵ See Foerster, Werner, “*epiousios*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich Eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1968), 590-99; see also Wikipedia, cf. “*Epiousios*”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiousios>

store with enough coupons to buy 70 jars of mustard.⁶ Who eats that much mustard in a lifetime? If you Google pictures of their home pantries they all look like grocery store shelves complete with 50 bottles of detergent, hundreds of boxes of cereal, and more. These are not the pantries of people who trust in God's ability to provide. They speak to their owner's fears as much or more as to their super couponing skills. This is why, despite our overabundance, we still need to pray this petition. We have lost the trust that comes with recognizing God's provident care each day. Every time we pray this petition, we need to ask God to reset our hearts and minds for this trust, so that we can actually enjoy the present, instead of living in desperate fear of what the future may hold.

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear,” Jesus said. “For the Father knows that you need all these things.... Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.” As a lifelong worrier, I have always found this to be one of the most difficult of Jesus' teachings. I am happy to focus on the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, but that doesn't make me want to stop planning for the future to assuage my worries. Do you remember the old comic strip about the boy and his stuffed tiger called *Calvin and Hobbes*? There was one in which Calvin said, “You could step in the road tomorrow and— wham! You get hit by a cement truck. That's why my motto is, ‘Live for the moment!’” Then he asked his friend Hobbes, “What's your motto?” Hobbes looks at him thoughtfully and replies: “Look down the road.”⁷ I'm with Hobbes on this one. I believe in God's providence and have been blessed with God's daily care in more ways than I can count, but I also believe that a certain amount of preparedness is just good stewardship. So, the question is, “What is a reasonable, a faithful amount of planning for tomorrow?” Maybe not 70 mustard jars-worth, but is having one or two out of line?

With this idea in mind, some scholars say that today's petition helps us find the sweet spot between being foolish and responsible, between trusting and over-worrying in the mysterious word *epiousios*. They say that the word doesn't mean “daily;” it means, “for tomorrow.” “Give us this day, bread for tomorrow” is how they translate it. At first that translation can seem to contradict Jesus' teachings in *Matthew*. If we aren't supposed to worry about tomorrow, then isn't it wrong to pray that God would give us two day's-worth of bread and not just a day's worth? But others say that the reason we pray this is so that we can follow Jesus' teaching not to be anxious. If we have enough for today and tomorrow, that's enough to keep us going without panic. “Dear God, give me a little wiggle room on what I need to live,” we are asking. “I don't want to be a hoarder or live my life in fear, but I can't stop worrying when I have only a day's worth. Please make my life like a Friday in the wilderness. Give me two days' worth so that I may have Sabbath rest for my anxious spirit every day, confident that you are one step ahead of me all the way;” or perhaps more simply, “Give me today what I need to survive, including the assurance that I will have what I need tomorrow.”

⁶ Holmes, Linda, “‘Extreme Couponing’ Is Here to Prepare You for The Coming Mustard Shortage,” NPR, April 6, 2011; retrieved from

<https://www.npr.org/2011/04/06/135176315/extreme-couponing-is-here-to-prepare-you-for-the-coming-mustard-shortage>

⁷ *Animating Illustrations*, cf. “bread”, HOMILETICSONLINE.COM, Mar. 1, 2021,

https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=bread&imageField2=

We could all benefit from praying the petition with this idea in mind, thoughtfully trying to let go of our anxieties and remind ourselves that God is aware of our needs. But there is still a third way to understand *epiousios* which might be even better food for thought given our circumstances. Recent scholarship rejects the idea that this mystery term has anything to do with time. Noting the non-biblical shopping list, some scholars say that this word is a unit of measure. Whether you think of it as a “day’s-worth” of bread, or “an appropriate amount of bread,” the intention is to get just what you need and no more. Why? Because this is a corporate prayer. We are praying for “*our* daily bread,” recognizing as the Hebrews in the wilderness did, that we need to make sure everybody has enough. We have to pray this because right now we live in a world where some have way more than we need, and others have not nearly enough.

Photographer Peter Menzel and author Faith D’Aluisio have devoted huge amounts of their careers to tracking what people around the globe eat. They have done a series on what children eat in a week, showing how people’s dietary choices for good and for ill are shaped early in childhood. They also produced a fascinating book called [Hungry Planet: What the World Eats](#), which reveals what 30 families from 24 countries eat in a week.⁸ The photographer and author’s intent was partly to show how food choices are changing thanks to globalization. There are people eating McDonald’s and KFC now in places where you would never dream that that would happen. But their photos also show the great disparity between how much people eat and what. A week’s worth of food for some families amounts to little more than a bag of corn and a bag of rice, compared to the quantity Americans and Britons and Australians eat in a week, which is abundant, and is made up of far more processed food than fruits and vegetables and healthier fare.

The book was created long before the pandemic. Now a similar book would show people even in developed countries like ours starving while others hoard more food than they could possibly eat before it goes bad. Sociologists have long maintained that there is enough food on the planet to make sure everyone has enough. It just isn’t distributed equitably. It never has been. Basil of Caesarea, a 4th-Century Greek bishop, who is counted among the great “fathers” of the early Church, preached on this problem in his day: “The bread that is spoiling in your house belongs to the hungry,” he wrote. “The shoes that are mildewing under your bed belong to those who have none. The clothes stored away in your trunk belong to those who are naked. The money that depreciates in your treasury belongs to the poor.”⁹ We don’t like to think this way about our stuff, but this phrase in the Lord’s Prayer invites us to do just that every time we pray it. “Give us this day only what we need,” we pray, or “give us this day our fair share.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful if praying this led us to behave as the Hebrews did in the wilderness, gathering just what we need and no more? Wouldn’t it transform the world if praying this led us to behave as the little boy who gave Jesus his lunch to multiple for the crowd of thousands did, sharing what we have so that all can have enough?

⁸ Menzel, Peter and D’Aluisio, Faith, [Hungry Planet: What the World Eats](#) (Berkeley: Material World Books and Ten Speed Press, 2005). Slide images were shown in worship. You can see pictures from this book on Google images; just search the book title.

⁹ As quoted in Willimon, William H., Hauerwas, Stanley, [Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer & Christian Life](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 76.

A college friend of mine recently moved to France. It's the first time he has lived full-time outside of the United States. One of the things he discovered when he got there was that the refrigerators are smaller. This week he posted the following observation about how that has changed how he approaches food: "One of the weirdnesses that follows from having a small fridge, freezer, cupboard: You eat what you have in order to make room for new things instead of piling up things you'll never eat because they have been there too long."¹⁰ Leave it to God to enable even refrigerators to teach us. It's hard during a pandemic not to stockpile. I buy food all the time, "just in case." But good stewardship of resources is not just about saving, it's also about savoring what we have and expressing gratitude for it. It's about learning to use what we need and no more. This petition can help us to learn this because in effect, if you weave all the possible meanings of *epiousios* together, it asks, as Greek scholar Werner Foerster put it: "The bread which we need, give to us today, day by day."¹¹

Proverbs 30:8-9 says, "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God." In other words, "Help me find the sweet spot Lord between not having enough and having too much. Help me to have just what I need." As you taste the bread of heaven this morning on your tongue, given to us by Jesus Christ, and as you pray the prayer he taught us to pray, I invite you to ponder these words in your heart, so that we can move one step closer to a world where all have daily bread, daily gratitude, and trust, and hope for tomorrow, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹⁰ Kevin Adair, "weirdness" Facebook post, Mar. 1, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/kevin.adair.121>. Shared with permission.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 599.