

My friend Debbie told me of a family camping trip when she was a kid. She had two brothers and the older threatened the younger saying that when he went to sleep, he was going to take his brand new fishing pole and use it all he wanted. Little Robby was so unnerved by this that he took his pole with him right into his sleeping bag. About midnight he appeared before his mother bawling. He'd not thought to take the lure off and the hooks were now buried in his posterior. Mom called for needle nose pliers and began the surgery of pushing the hooks all the way through, clipping off the barbs and then pulling them back through. It was a long night for little Robby. I suppose the moral of the story is not to sleep with your fishing pole but that would be wrong. The real lesson is this: see what worrying does to people? It makes them crazy. People who are possessed of worry do crazy things trying desperately to calm and secure themselves. And these crazy things never work. They wind up with even more worries.

How can anybody stop worrying and start living? This is what God wants to teach us in the lesson of the manna in Exodus 16. This stuff appeared in the morning and had to be gathered quickly before the sun melted it away. When the Hebrews first saw it they said "manna" which means "What is it?" or better "Whatchamacallit".

If it has a natural explanation it could be the sweet and edible honeydew found in the Sinai during the summer months. Insects suck the sap of the tamarisk tree and excrete it onto the branches where it crystalizes and falls to the ground. The Bedouin still use it as a sweetener and call it "manna". But the manna that God gives in Exodus 16 is clearly a miraculous provision that was never seen before and has never been seen since.

The manna was a token of the presence of God. Later Jesus would compare himself to this very bread. "I am the bread that came down from heaven." (Jn 6:41) Indeed no one like Jesus has ever appeared on earth before and no one like him has ever appeared since. He is unparalleled, incomparable and unequalled. Like the manna, Jesus Christ is the enduring token of the presence of God among us.

Joy Davidman was the young widow who met and married the great author C.S. Lewis. But Joy was not always a believer. Indeed, she and her first husband were hardened atheists living in New York City. They lived an educated and prosperous life and found the notion of God to be utterly foolish. Tragedy struck and took her husband's life leaving Joy utterly bereft and distraught. Nothing in her life had prepared her for the ferocity of grief that swept over her. Alone and greatly burdened she had an awakening. She wrote this testimony:

“There was another person with me in the room—a presence so real that all my previous life was a mere shadow play...I think I must have been the world’s most astonished atheist. My awareness of Christ’s presence was not conspired up to bolster me about my husband. No it was terror—terror and ecstasy, repentance and rebirth.”

The manna was a token that the Hebrews were living their lives in the presence of God. They were not alone. Likewise the historical fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a token that we are not alone. We are living in the presence of God. The less we believe that the more we worry. The more we believe that the less we worry. There is only one know antidote to worry and that is faith. If you want to stop worrying then start seeking and practicing faith.

God gave the manna to be a test. Verse 4, “Behold I am about to rain bread from heaven for you and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.”

Here is the second step in how to stop worrying: live one day at a time. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t plan ahead, plant a garden or save for retirement. It means you should focus your efforts and your thoughts on the only time that is under your control: today. Live in a day-tight compartment. Ask yourself a simple question each day: What is the right thing for me to do today? Then do it with all your might. Jesus captured this attitude in the prayer he taught us to pray, “Give us today our daily bread.” We don’t pray for tomorrow’s bread. We pray for today. Jesus was trying to develop in us an attitude of habitual dependence. Here the great thing about habits. Once you establish them, you don’t have to think anymore. Habits streamline our thoughts so that we don’t have re-litigate every decision every day. Prayer teaches us the habit of daily dependence on God.

Many people mistakenly believe that happiness comes when you have no more needs. But actually, real happiness comes we our needs are met on a daily basis. The greatest blessings of life you simply can’t store up. You can’t store up love or forgiveness. You need a fresh batch every day. You can’t say, “I went to church every week when I was a kid and that’s enough for me.” That’s like saying, “I saw my kids every day when they were growing up and that’s enough for me now.” Faith, hope and love aren’t something you store up from childhood. You have to gather them fresh every morning.

It is God who provides the manna but the people must do their part. They must go out and gather. If there was anything that Martha Schwaninger taught me in the short time I knew her it was that. “Why aren’t people happy?” she would say, “Happiness is a choice. I choose each day to be happy and rejoice in Jesus.” But happiness won’t keep in your refrigerator. Everyday God lays out a fresh batch like manna on your front lawn. It’s up to you to choose to go out and gather it. Martha did, and you could to.

Finally, the manna was a truth God wanted to teach us. Jesus said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Mt 4:4) The miracle of the manna is really a story about the people believing the word of God and acting on it. This is what gives life to the soul: God's word and our response of faith.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life". By this he means that he provides our deepest needs. I need to know my life matters, that I count for something. Jesus tells me the value of my life by dying to save me. I need to know that I am completely and truly forgiven for all my failures and disappointments. Jesus declares the word of God to my soul: you are forgiven. I need to forgive the hurts I have received because they are eating me alive. Jesus gives me the supernatural strength to let it go and give it to God. I need hope for the future in a world of death, injustice and oppression. Jesus proclaims the great and precious promise that he will make all things new. I need to know the difference between right and wrong. I need to know what God expects of me. Jesus reveals it to me in his teaching and example. I don't need to invent morality, Jesus has already created the moral light for me to walk in.

Buried deep in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula is a grove of white pines. The grove has existed since the last ice age. You will find there giant trees 50 inches in diameter and tower over 200 feet above the forest floor. These specimens are anywhere from 300 to 350 years old. And what are they doing right now? They continue to eat and drink and grow. Satisfaction doesn't come because we have arrived at some destination, achieved some status or finished a meal. Satisfaction comes when we daily receive what we need to keep growing. Only Jesus Christ can satisfy because only he can provide for your soul daily what you need to grow.

When we try to be self-sufficient we frantically try to provide for our own souls. We become workaholics but still have empty souls. We become shop-a-holics filling our garages and real estate portfolios but still have empty souls. We become drinkers, gamblers and gamers but still have empty souls. The United States is the richest and most powerful country on earth, yet a 2010 Gallup survey found that we are 33<sup>rd</sup> on the happiness scale. The survey found that citizens of some of the poorest nations reported have the most positive emotions about life. The lesson is that it isn't money or power or status that translates into life satisfaction. In fact it only increases your worries and anxieties.

Which brings me back to little Robby with the fish hooks stuck in his butt. Worry makes people crazy. The story of the manna is about how to stop worrying and start living. It is a story to simplify your life. Trust in God's presence. Hear his word. Gather fresh bread from him every morning.