

Give us this day our daily bread

CHAPTER FOUR

Feeding Ourselves

Prayer is an act of remembering: We call to remembrance who we are, who God is, and what God has done for us. We also call God to remembrance, begging that past mercies not be forgotten. What is surely the most majestic of all biblical prayers says,

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits. (Psalm 103:2)

Listen to other psalmists:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? (Psalm 13:1)

Remember me, O LORD,
when you show favor to your people;
help me when you deliver them. (Psalm 106:4)

I remember the days of old,
I think about all your deeds,
I meditate on the work of your hands. (Psalm 143:5)

In prayer we recall—and bring to God’s remembrance—our dependence on God for the primary needs of body and soul: food, forgiveness, and deliverance. With the final three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer we cast ourselves on the mercy of God and ask for what we need to live.

In the fourth petition, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we acknowledge a basic fact of existence: **We cannot feed ourselves.** However independent and self-sufficient and mature we are as human beings, we cannot feed ourselves. We are dependent on other people; we are dependent on nature; we are dependent on the political economy of our nation and the community of nations. If any of these fail us utterly, we shall perish. The

starving people in Africa and eastern Europe we see on our television screens are humans just like ourselves. If our systems fail, we too shall starve. The words of Robert Bellah and his collaborators, writing in *The Good Society* (Knopf, 1991), are true for all nations:

[T]he way our economy has worked up till now [has] obscured the truth about work: namely, that we are not isolated individuals picking fruit or making money; we are all profoundly dependent on the work of others...the work each of us does is something we do **together** and **for each other** as much as by and for ourselves.

Prone to Forgetfulness

Our dependence on others is easily and regularly forgotten. And this forgetfulness is not something new. Read **Deuteronomy 8** where Israel is called not to forget God as the source and sustainer of life. The passage is best understood as a sermon, delivered long after Israel was settled in Canaan and had known prosperity, even abundance. Israel is reminded that when the people were dying of hunger in the wilderness, Yahweh provided manna, “with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” (Deuteronomy 8:3) Israel is commanded not to forget that it was Yahweh who gave a good land, rich in food, “a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey...(vs. 7-8) Israel is also warned not to forget God, saying, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” (v. 17) The nation is to remember the Lord its God, “for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.” (v. 18a)

The message of Deuteronomy 8 is clear enough: God’s people do not feed themselves. Whether as the giver of food, the giver of the land, or the giver of power to get wealth, God is the one who feeds Israel.

That same point is made in a dramatic way in the story of the feeding of the four thousand. Read **Mark 8:1-10**. Like the wilderness where Yahweh fed Israel with manna, the setting of the feeding is a desert scene. A large crowd has come away from homes and pantries to listen to Jesus. But several days have passed. Food supplies have run out. Jesus is concerned lest the people faint from hunger. And so, with the aid of a few bits of bread and fish, he feeds them all.

What is most significant about the story is not the miracle of multiplication, but its recapitulation of the feeding of Israel with manna in the wilderness. The author of Deuteronomy 8 admonishes Israel: “Remember the long way that the LORD your God has

led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna..." (Deuteronomy 8:2-3a). The message of Mark 8:1-10 is the same. Those who look to God for bread in the desert will not be disappointed.

When We Pray

When we pray "Give us this day our daily bread," we are remembering who we are and who God is. We are those who are dependent on others for sustenance. God is the one who fed our forebears in the wilderness and who provided us with a land that produces in abundance. God is also the one who gives us the power to get wealth.

Some may quickly object that we had better not forget the other truth about food and abundance, that God helps those who help themselves. Indeed, the creation story says of us:

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken. (Genesis 3:19)

And the Apostle Paul wrote bluntly to the Thessalonians, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." (2 Thessalonians 3:10)

The apparent contradiction between "We cannot feed ourselves" and "God helps those who help themselves" is really a paradox. Those who forget their dependence on God will perish, warns the Deuteronomist: "Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes...If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish." (Deuteronomy 8:11, 19) But those who remember their dependence and look to God, these shall be fed. The psalmist prayed:

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits...
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalm 103:2, 5)

We are dealing here with a paradox, not a contradiction. There is no thought here of setting prayer over against work, the welfare recipient against the hard-working citizen, the helpless child against the responsible adult. God helps those who help themselves. God also helps those who cannot help themselves. God is the source of sustenance for one and all. It is this God whom we address in the fourth petition and ask for daily bread.

In 1991, following the collapse of the communist rule of the Soviet Union, a number of experts were asked to explain what caused the debacle. Each expert had his or her own explanation: the built-in conservatism of one-party rule, the inner contradictions of Marxist doctrine, the failure to offer economic incentives to individuals. Had the Deuteronomist been on the scene, he might well have offered the following explanation. Remember that the Soviet state was organized on what were believed to be scientific principles. Religion was excluded from influencing the political economy because it was thought to be reactionary. And look what happened! God was forgotten and the Union came apart at the seams. Those who forget the source of their bread will find bread in very short supply.

Soldiers in God's Army

The placement in the Lord's Prayer of the request for bread is significant. In the first three petitions we believers concern ourselves with God's affairs, with God's victory over all the powers that would oppose and defeat the divine purpose. We pray for the advancement of God's cause in the hallowing of God's name, the advent of the kingdom, and the doing of God's will on earth. By praying in this way, we put ourselves on God's side. We enlist, as it were, in God's army. And so in the final three petitions we ask God to come to our side and to care for our most basic needs.

If we do not press the military metaphor too far, it can help us to understand the inner logic of the Lord's Prayer. Soldiers do not have time to cultivate crops or tend to other civilian matters. As the writer of 2 Timothy 2:4 remarks, "No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer."

Those of us who have served in the armed forces know the two dominant realities of that life. First of all, one is under orders. One is no longer in control of one's own goals and purposes. That is analogous to the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Secondly, one's temporal concerns get taken care of by others. Food, clothing, and shelter are provided for all.

So it is in the life of faith. We are people under orders, living by the will and at the command of Another. As Deuteronomy 8:1 states clearly, "This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe." But in the very next verse the other side of the coin is revealed: "Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness...feeding you with manna...in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone." (vs. 2-3)

There is the paradox again. We need bread to live, but we cannot live by breadwinning alone. No matter how hard we work to sustain ourselves, that effort—in and of itself—will not feed us.

Do you remember how, in yet another wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus to turn stone into bread? Calling on this same chapter in Deuteronomy, Jesus countered the devil's suggestion with, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" (Luke 4:4) It is one of our own great temptations to suppose that we can, by our own efforts, sustain ourselves. However, in praying "Give us this day our daily bread," we acknowledge that such is not possible.

Some may counter that in these modern times it seems a bit phony to pray for daily bread, when in most of our cupboards and refrigerators and freezers there is enough food to last the family for several weeks. Those familiar with New Testament scholarship may remind us that "daily bread" in Jesus' time was commonly understood as a day's rations—a kind of minimum wage. So we may be inclined to think that this petition applies to others, and not to ourselves. And so some have abandoned the practice at mealtime of thanking God for food and instead pray that the hungry be also fed.

But remember what was said earlier about Deuteronomy 8. It was very likely written long after the people of Israel had settled in Canaan, had gotten wealth, had built goodly houses, and had vast flocks and herds. Many in Israel had forgotten the manna in the wilderness and Yahweh's gift of the land. Very likely among the well-to-do "daily bread" was a concern only for the indentured servant, the landless alien, the beggar, the poor widow, the luckless orphan. And their hearts, like ours, were lifted up in pride and self-sufficiency.

Again a paradox confronts us. The greater our prosperity, the deeper our reserves, the fuller our freezers, the more important it is that we should humbly ask, "Give us this day our daily bread." Or, as a footnote in the New Revised Standard Version offers, "our bread for tomorrow." It does not matter which version we choose. The meaning is the same. We cannot feed ourselves.

There is a temptation to "psychologize" this petition—to say that we are really asking God to relieve our anxiety about food and clothing and such. Anxiety hinders work. So we pray that God will relieve our anxiety and any other hindrances to profitable labor. But that interpretation only serves to hide what Scripture would hammer home: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Are we not with this insistence on God's sustenance cutting the vital connection between food and work? What of Paul's advice to the Christians in Thessalonica which we quoted above, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat"?

There is a modern version of Paul's injunction: "There is no such thing as a free lunch." I once asked a lobbyist what he had learned in five years in Washington, D.C. He replied that it could all be summed up in the single phrase, "There is no free lunch."

But tell that to the four thousand who seated themselves on the ground at Jesus' command, whose lives were at risk in that desert place. They got a free lunch. Jesus collected a few fragments of leftover food, thanked God for the provision, and fed the whole crowd. Mark 8:1-10 is not a story about a heavenly grocer who miraculously puts bread and cheese and jam on the kitchen table of a poor widow with hungry children. It is about us. As we hear it, we are to remember that our lives are at daily risk. God fed our forebears in the wilderness with manna. God has given us this good land. God has given us the strength and power to get wealth. And if we forget this, **we shall perish.**

When in saying the Lord's Prayer we come to the fourth petition, we would do well to imagine ourselves as soldiers, called to active duty. We have left behind our jobs, our gardens, our kitchens, our family tables, farms, and supermarkets. Some of us are generals with drivers for our staff cars and orderlies to lay out our uniforms. Some of us are nurses, whose duties are not much different from those in a civilian hospital. Some of us are buck privates, who are put to mopping kitchens and cleaning grease traps and scouring latrines. But all of us are under orders. Other people set our purposes, our plans, our priorities. And because we do not have primary control of our lives, we cannot be concerned about supplying ourselves with uniforms, bunks, blankets, medical care or rations. These things have to be provided if we are to be good soldiers. We cannot afford to be entangled with civilian pursuits. And so we dutifully pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Biblical Spirituality

In each of the previous chapters we have shown how biblical spirituality steers a course between options offered by contemporary spiritualities. In the first chapter that course sought to avoid self-actualization and self-effacement. In the second chapter it steered between optimism and pessimism regarding the future. In the third chapter it sought a way between fatalism and heroism. And in this session we have tried to show the biblical paradox, which combines daily work with a plea for daily food.

What does this suggest about biblical spirituality? If nothing else, it rules out what is called "other worldliness." There need be no neglect by Christians of bodily needs. There

is no virtue in going without decent clothing or in depriving ourselves of food. In Scripture there is a frank recognition of bodily requirements. Note that in the Lord's Prayer the petition for bread is placed ahead of the requests for forgiveness and deliverance from evil. Note also that Deuteronomy 8 does not condemn wealth.

The opposite of other worldliness is, of course, hedonism, in which pleasure is regarded as the highest virtue. But there is nothing in Deuteronomy 8 or in the Gospels to suggest that in eating and drinking we are glorifying God. Hedonism, as well as other worldliness, is a threat to biblical spirituality.

Perhaps we ought to look again at the practice of fasting, which has fallen out of fashion among Christians. There are reasons for our suspicions of fasting, of course. Many have rightly perceived that fasting tends to self-righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus himself observed that hypocrites "disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting." (Matthew 6:16) Today, one who fasts is thought to be slightly dotty, so resolutely "this worldly" are we about Christianity. But fasting has the virtue of reminding us how dependent we are for well-being on food. It keeps us from taking our daily meals for granted. It gives immediate meaning to "Give us this day our daily bread." And thus we affirm the paradox that is so close to the heart of biblical spirituality: Work as hard as we may, we cannot feed ourselves.

Pressing Questions

You may not be content with paradoxes. You may still be muttering under your breath, "How does it benefit anyone if I work less and eat less?" Reference was made in this chapter to a new book by the collaborators who gave us *Habits of the Heart*. It is called *The Good Society*, by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. (Knopf, 1991) It is an attempt to rethink the goals and strategies of the free market system, to the end that it be of greater benefit to everyone. This book is but one of many efforts to rethink our attitudes toward money, work, the corporation, etc. Such books can help you to rethink your own attitudes about work, sufficiency, and interdependence. Another volume, *Bread for the World* by Arthur Simon (Paulist Press/Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), will shake us out of the notion that there is plenty for all, if we will just work a little harder.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. Deuteronomy 8:3
2. Psalm 103:2, 5

Research

1. Select one thing that is very important to you (food, clothing, shelter, job, music, library, just to suggest a few). Make a list of the people and the processes that make possible the satisfaction of the need that you have selected.
2. Church World Service is an agency through which many churches try to fulfill their obligation to God to feed and cloth the needy, and to help in times of emergency and disaster. Find out how it works. Your church, or some church in your community, will have the information.
3. Take the hymn, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," and identify its symbols of God's provision for Israel during the wilderness wandering (manna, water, etc.). How do these symbols add up to God's providence for the people of the exodus? What symbols (perhaps the same, perhaps different) can we use today to stand for God's providence for us?

Reflection

1. Part of a Christian's vocation is service on behalf of others in need. How do you work out that aspect of your vocation? Upon whom do you depend to help you in the process?
2. How are spirituality and service mutually dependent? Read the hymn, "We Thank Thee, Lord, Thy Paths of Service Lead." What light does it shed on the question for you?
3. These are the words of an old table grace: "O God, make us grateful to you and mindful of others, as we partake of this, your bounty and the fruit of their labors." In light of "Give us this day our daily bread," how is this prayer particularly appropriate as a table grace?