

Sept/Oct 2022

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

GIVE US  
THIS DAY



ALSO: VIRTUES OVER VICES

Friends:

Whether we eat bread or some other staple, we all need food to live. So it's no surprise that something so basic as "bread" is mentioned more than 500 times in the Bible. This month, Pastor Julia Prins Vanderveen, who loves to bake, focuses on the theme of bread as it's found in Scripture. Ultimately bread in the Bible serves as a vivid image and reminder of our need for God's Word, his truth for everyday living. God's truth is the only spiritual sustenance that can satisfy the deepest needs of our souls.



In the month of October, Pastor Scott DeVries helps us in understanding virtues and vices and how they affect our daily lives. The Bible teaches that virtues, such as contentment, humility, and faithfulness, help us grow into our God-given destiny to become our true selves and to live life to the fullest. On the other hand, vices, such as pride, greed, and sexual immorality, distract and disrupt our lives, harming our relationships with God and others. The Bible's teaching on these matters can help us on our journey of growing into Christlike living as we follow and serve Jesus in the world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**“Give Us This Day”**  
**Julia Prins Vanderveen**



**“Virtues over Vices”**  
**Scott DeVries**

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**ReFrame**  
**Ministries**

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

# september

## Give Us This Day

**Julia Prins Vanderveen**

This month we'll reflect on references to bread in the Bible. Mentioned more than 500 times from Genesis to Revelation, bread is a part of every significant movement of the story of redemption. When Jesus calls himself the bread of life, he is referring back to numerous stories in Scripture in which bread was an important sign of God's care and presence among his people, and Jesus demonstrates that he is the fulfillment of those signs.

And whenever we "take this bread" in celebrating the Lord's Supper (communion), we remember that Jesus is the food of eternal life—and in some ways too we are rehearsing the entire story of redemption.

As we read and think about bread in the Bible, may our hunger for the Word grow, and may our appetite for life with God increase. As we wait for the truth to rise in our hearts, may God prepare a table for us, abundant with the provisions of his grace and mercy. And may we "taste and see" the goodness of God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Julia Prins Vanderveen lives and works in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband, Trevor, and their three sons, Gideon, Levi, and Philip. Julia has served as a copastor in Vancouver, and she is now working at a Christian school there as a campus pastor and part-time English teacher. Her enjoyment of preparing meals for the family and her life-long habit of eating bread have helped her pay attention to the theme of bread in the Bible, inspiring a deep love for Jesus, the bread of life sent from heaven (John 6:32-35).*

**DAILY BREAD**

*"Give us today our daily bread. . . ."*

—Matthew 6:11

As I was growing up, my parents led our family in reading *Today* devotions after supper each day. One of us four kids would read the Bible passage, and another would read the meditation. It's no wonder that, for me, reading and reflecting on Scripture is strongly associated with eating bread. Maybe you also read these devotions in connection with a meal. How does your experience of eating influence your appreciation for the nourishment of God's Word?

Jesus taught his disciples to pray by saying "Give us today our daily bread." And this reveals a few things. We can boldly ask God to provide for our daily needs. And we can trust that God does provide, though not always in a way we might expect. Our daily bread is something we need, and we are encouraged to ask for it

every single day. The Bible is filled with marvelous stories of how God feeds and cares for his people, showing in particular that bread is a rich symbol of God's provision and presence.

Our response to God's gift of daily bread is often an indicator of where we stand in relationship with God. Do we trust God to provide, or do we try to take things into our own hands? And can we see that the many passages about bread in the Bible somehow point to the nurturing gift of Jesus, the bread of life, who is given for us?

Lord, we are hungry—in body and soul—for what only you can provide. "Give us today our daily bread." In Jesus' name, Amen.

## HOW MUCH MORE!

*"How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"*  
—Matthew 7:11

Where I live in Canada, many students and teachers are preparing to go back to school—and for our family that means making school lunches again. We go through quite a lot of bread because we often make sandwiches for lunch. Sometimes one of our kids will come home with an uneaten sandwich, and that can make me wonder, Was it not good? Were they not hungry? Did they not have time to eat it?

In Matthew 7, Jesus emphasizes that if we human parents, as imperfect as we are, know how to provide for our children, how much *more* does our Father in heaven provide good things for us! The problem is that we don't always recognize how God provides for us. We expect something else, or we wait for God to feed us only what we want. Sometimes we have no appetite because

we've filled ourselves with other things. Perhaps we have no time to pay attention to God's goodness because we've filled our schedules with other activities.

Hopefully, reflecting on the theme of bread in the Bible will help us to slow down and notice the many ways God satisfied his people in the past, and that God continues to satisfy our needs through his Word and presence in our lives today. Jesus promises to nourish us—in both body and soul.

Lord, thank you for all of your good gifts. Help us to ask for what we need, and to recognize the ways you provide for us each day, that we may receive all that you intend for us in Christ. Amen.

## AS MUCH AS THEY WANTED

*Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted.* —John 6:11

This story of the miraculous and abundant provision of bread for a hungry crowd is included in all four gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That's not a coincidence. This story captures the reality of our deep hunger, Jesus' surprising and abundant provision, and the various human reactions that followed this miracle. Jesus truly prepared a table for his people!

There's something so captivating and satisfying about this scene that it's no wonder it's included in each gospel account. With a delightful twist Jesus tests his disciples, saying, "Where should we get bread for these people?" And all the while he knows very well what he is about to do.

Imagine Jesus' joy at being able to provide for everyone! And the way he does this is unex-

pected: the loaves he multiplies are brought forward by a boy.

How is it possible that Jesus could do this? And how could so many people all have "as much as they wanted"?

Jesus could do this because he is God. And this miracle is merely a sign pointing to something greater—for Jesus is about to reveal to the people (as we will see tomorrow) that he is actually the *real* bread of life.

Lord Jesus, bread of life, giver of every good gift, we praise and thank you! We look to you in our hunger, and you satisfy us with your abundance. You are truly a miracle-working Savior. Amen.

## JESUS, THE BREAD OF LIFE

*"I am the bread of life. . . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever."*

—John 6:48, 51

There were reasons why people were so happy to have an abundance of bread out on the mountainside (John 6:1-13). They were really hungry, and suddenly—miraculously—there was fresh, free bread!

But on the next day some people come to Jesus with a few questions. They know the story of Moses and how God fed his people with manna in the desert (Exodus 16), and they are trying to understand who this new bread-making miracle worker is. They know that their ancestors were fed in the wilderness long ago, so how can Jesus claim to be the one sent by the manna-giving God?

When Jesus tells them that he himself is the bread that came down from heaven, they just can't believe it. Jesus is saying that he has been sent by God and that he has seen God. And

when Jesus says, "Whoever eats this bread will live forever," he is referring back to the miracles God did in the past, and he is pointing forward to the everlasting life that is to come. Jesus is putting himself at the very center of the story of all that God is doing to save the whole world. And the only thing we need to do to be a part of what God is doing is to believe in the one God has sent (John 6:29).

Jesus, we believe that you have been sent by God, and we believe that you are the bread of life, which you have given for the life of the whole world. We receive your gift with humble thanks. Amen.

## THE ONE WHO FEEDS ON JESUS WILL LIVE

*“Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.”*

—John 6:57

Jesus tells the people who have come to him with questions that he is the bread of life and that whoever feeds on him will live forever! This is a strange teaching, and not all of the people who heard it could accept it. Can you blame them? It is quite unusual for a teacher to say that whoever eats their flesh will live. When they heard this, some people turned away, saying they could not accept this teaching.

Yet this mystery that we cannot explain rationally is at the heart of the sacrament of communion, the Lord's Supper. Symbolically we eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord, because we accept that he is the one whom God has given to provide us salvation and eternal life. Jesus knows that some people will find this offensive, but he isn't bothered by that. He promises

that the Spirit gives life and that the words he has spoken are “full of the Spirit and life” (John 6:63).

Even today these words are hard to explain. They only make sense in the context of faith when we, like Simon Peter, say, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Lord Jesus, your words are “full of the Spirit and life.” Help us not to be afraid or alarmed when some people find your words offensive, but enable us to trust your word completely, to feed on you, and to receive the eternal life that only you can give. Amen.

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER**

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”*  
—Matthew 5:6

In many parts of the world, people have heard some variation of the saying “Food tastes better when you are hungry.” Can you think of a time when you were really hungry?

Our need for daily bread is a part of God’s design for us to draw closer to him, knowing that we depend on God for all our daily needs. But God doesn’t want us to stay hungry. He wants us to have the food, clothing, shelter, and opportunities we need in order to flourish, giving us life to the full (John 10:10).

There are many situations in our world, though, where hunger is a major problem, and where a lack of basic necessities is a result of injustice. So our Lord also urges us to “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” which aims for providing justice for all people. Where governments and communities

seek to lead by doing what’s right, making laws that are just and equitable for everyone, there is a beginning of justice and righteousness. God’s principles for people living together are honored.

To hunger and thirst for righteousness, desiring and longing for all peoples to live together in peace and with justice, where everyone can flourish (shalom), is God’s design for human living.

Are we seeking justice and righteousness in our world today? If not, why not? This kind of hunger is part of what pulls us closer to God and to each other.

Lord, guide us to “hunger and thirst for righteousness”—that the needs of everyone may be provided for. Amen.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE YEAST

*“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”*  
—Matthew 13:33

Years ago at a family reunion, one of our relatives asked our uncle for his bread recipe. Because he was a baker and he made many delicious loaves of bread in his bakery each day, our uncle kept his recipe a secret. Eventually, though, he relented. But to everyone’s surprise, the recipe he shared had quantities that could only be handled in a large bakery.

In Jesus’ short parable about yeast working through flour, one of the most surprising details is the amount of flour he describes. Sixty pounds of flour would make over 50 loaves!

Another surprising detail, of course, is the yeast. Here Jesus is challenging his listeners in the way they think about God. Yeast is something so small that it is practically invisible, and yet it has the potential to bring significant growth, making dough

to rise dramatically before it is baked into bread.

Why would Jesus talk about little yeast particles that could work surprisingly through so much dough? The kingdom of heaven, he said, is like that yeast. This helps us see that even though we may not always notice it, God is working constantly in and through people’s lives throughout this whole wide world, building up his kingdom and providing us with the “bread of life” that we need in order to have life to the full.

God of wonders, you can use the smallest good things to bring abundant goodness and life as you grow your kingdom everywhere. Amen.

## GIVE THEM SOME BREAD

*“He answered, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “That would take more than half a year’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”*

—Mark 6:37

Near the beginning of this chapter, Jesus describes what life will be like for his disciples if they follow him. He says, “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts” (Mark 6:8). His followers were to be dependent on the hospitality of others to feed, clothe, and shelter them.

Then, sometime later, they are surprised when Jesus asks them to provide a huge, hungry crowd with food. They wonder, “How on earth can we do that?” Even if they work to provide the money for all the food for these people, they will have to work for a whole year!

Perhaps Jesus instructed them to take no bread or money on their journey so that they could experience not only hospitality

from others but also the extraordinary hospitality of God. Maybe he instructed them not to bring anything so that they could acutely experience their own need and realize that they couldn’t rely on themselves for a solution.

Do you ever feel like you are being brought to the end of your ability to do what God is asking of you? Could God be inviting you to see what he can do for you that you simply cannot do by yourself?

Lord Jesus, sometimes we are like the disciples, unsure and confused and without many options. Surprise us with your generosity, and help us to realize that we depend totally on you. Amen.

**“BY THE SWEAT OF YOUR BROW”**

*“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground. . . .”*  
—Genesis 3:19

In the very beginning, God gave to Adam and Eve all the seed-bearing plants for food (Genesis 1:29). But after the fall into sin, God tells them that one of the consequences of their sin is that they will have to work hard for their food. The word translated here as “food” is the Hebrew word *lehem*, which means “bread.” This means bread is so vital that it basically refers to everything that sustains life. Essentially this refers to all food, not just what we call bread. In the context of these sobering words, bread symbolizes our vulnerability and even our mortality as our bodies go back to the very dust we are made from.

Today people still have to work hard to grow and buy food—or in some cases, to wait in long lines for food.

Notice, however, that the ground is cursed and the

serpent is cursed but that the people and the food are not cursed. Though we suffer the impacts and consequences of sin, we still experience some measure of blessing: the ground still produces food. And because our mortal bodies will not live forever, the time needed to work hard for food is limited. This is a kind of mercy in disguise. This difficulty also foreshadows the tremendous gift it is that God provides bread, and that in the end God himself is our bread.

Lord, have mercy on us. Life is not easy, and we endure the consequences of sin all around us. Forgive us, we pray, and give us this day our daily bread. Amen.

## BAKE SOME BREAD!

*“Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.”*  
—Genesis 18:6

Part of me has to laugh when I read Abraham’s urgent instructions: *“Quick . . . bake some bread.”* Baking bread from scratch is not something you can do quickly! It requires careful work and time.

But hospitality required that Abraham and Sarah’s visitors should have bread and choice meat and curds and milk prepared. So, whatever time it took to prepare all that, it was worth the work and the wait to provide a hospitable, generous environment for their guests.

Hospitality was central to the culture of that time, and it demonstrated God’s purpose for relationships. When people break bread together, something important happens. People who eat together develop a deeper understanding of each other.

Sadly, in our North American culture today, we’re often in

such a hurry that we don’t take the time to really extend hospitality to each other. Yet the Bible often depicts the kingdom of God as a hospitable, even extravagant feast.

In our lives today, could we learn from our neighbors in other cultures about what it means to be hospitable? Could we make room for each other in a patient, generous way—even using the finest ingredients—so that our gatherings echo a biblical vision of hospitality?

Jesus, you promise to gather us at a great banquet. May that extravagant vision of breaking bread with you inspire us to spread a generous table for others who might even be your messengers (Hebrews 13:2). Amen.

## BREAD FROM HEAVEN

*"The LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you."  
—Exodus 16:4*

Our boys sometimes sing a funny song called "It's raining tacos." It suggests that you should just open your mouth, close your eyes—no need to ask why—and enjoy "all you can eat" tacos from out of the sky. It makes us laugh to think about such an impossible situation, and yet God said something similar to Moses—that he would "rain down bread from heaven" for his people.

Imagine the confusion, joy, and relief when people saw that there was food—and yet how disorienting it must have been to receive food in a way that was completely different from anything they had experienced before.

Think about why God made manna appear in such an unfamiliar way to the Israelites. Could it be that God was inviting the people to accept something from him in a way that

required them to trust and to look at reality in a whole new way?

God was clearly doing something new among them, and it was their task to receive it—so that they would not only survive but also know that it was from the Lord when they had all the bread they wanted (Exodus 16:8). Later on in the ministry of Jesus, God also provides bread so that people will know the Lord and trust that he provides everything we need for life.

Lord, we want to know you too. Help us to recognize the ways you reveal yourself to us, and help us to receive whatever you offer us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## WE DO NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE

*“He humbled you . . . to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”*  
—Deuteronomy 8:3

During pregnancy, I often experienced quick shifts from feeling indifferent about food to feeling ravenously hungry. The child growing inside me and all of the changes taking place caused me to hunger.

In our Bible reading for today, though, it was God who caused the people to hunger. He brought them into a situation where they didn't have enough to eat and they needed to depend on him. Only when his people were really hungry could they appreciate that God provided for them.

Sometimes God may allow us to experience a lack of something in order to humble and teach us to grow in faith too. Could it be that when there's a profound need and a deep hunger, we need to realize that God is not abandoning us but preparing us for something

greater, as when a woman is carrying a child?

It's hard to be in a place of neediness, especially if there's pain and discomfort involved. And it's tempting to conclude that whatever isn't going well should be fixed as soon as possible. But sometimes God leads us into situations to teach us to be utterly dependent on him—to show us that we don't live on bread alone. God teaches us in order to show us that there's more to our survival than merely having what we need. We need “every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

God our Father, Help us to hunger for you, and feed us with your holy Word. Amen.

## WHERE BREAD WILL NOT BE SCARCE

*“Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God. . . .”*

—Deuteronomy 8:11

Moses was instructing the people on how to live. He mentioned bread, eating, being satisfied, and being fed. Clearly the theme of bread and eating was important for understanding God’s saving work in the people’s lives.

We need tangible experiences of grace, and God often reveals his goodness and abundant love through visible signs of flourishing: a land where his people would eat bread without scarcity (Deuteronomy 8:9) and where they would lack nothing. There would be water, olive oil, fruit, and much more in abundance.

But it can be surprisingly easy to overlook God’s generosity—and even to forget the tough times we have survived by God’s grace. Moses reminded the people that the hard times they went through were there to test them, shape them, and

ultimately do them good. It’s also easy to congratulate ourselves when things start going well. Moses didn’t say that the people didn’t participate in their own flourishing, but he did remind them that God was the one who gave them the power to do well in the first place. And Moses warned his listeners: If you start living as if you did all these good things for yourself, you’ll forget the source of every good thing, and then you’ll see for sure that you don’t live on bread alone.

We all need God, so let’s remember him in everything—when things are hard and when things are going well.

Blessed be your name, O Lord. Help us to remember that we need you in all situations. Amen.

**“TELL THESE STONES TO BECOME BREAD”**

*“The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”*  
—Matthew 4:3

Are you ever tempted to take advantage of a situation for your own benefit?

While Jesus was being tempted, he quoted from the Scriptures to show that we do not “live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (see Deuteronomy 8:3).

No matter which way people fell short in their lives, Jesus showed the perfect way. For example, even after the Israelites were well fed and satisfied, they became proud and forgot that it was God who had fed them. But Jesus—even when he was tempted to make bread out of stones—showed restraint and humility, and he explained that God’s Word is the ultimate food.

Moses had urged God’s people to remember how God rescued them from many precarious situations, and yet they

soon forgot about God’s saving acts. But Jesus did not forget those lessons, and he refused to put God to the test. Why should he dishonor God by acting as if God should prove himself again and again?

Moses also warned the people not to think too highly of their wealth and power or to serve other gods, but they failed at that too. Jesus, however, would worship and serve no one but the one true God.

Jesus showed us how to obey and honor God. When we live by “every word that comes from the mouth of God,” we are more able to resist temptations.

Lord Jesus, you are perfect in all of your ways. Like you, may we trust God to guide us, rescue us, and provide for all of our needs. Amen.

## BREAD FROM THE RAVENS

*"You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there."*  
—1 Kings 17:4

In the Bible there are many stories about God's people disobeying God's instructions to do certain things—and all of those things were designed to help the people learn to trust in God. God loves and cares for his people, and he always wants what is best for us. But we often like to do things our own way—so instead we disobey God, and that leads to trouble and eventually to ruin, unless God rescues us.

In 1 Kings 17, Elijah demonstrated complete trust in God, even when it didn't seem to make sense. God told Elijah to go to a place that was unfamiliar to him, and Elijah trusted that God would provide for him there—even though it wouldn't have seemed possible in the midst of a drought. But, amazingly, Elijah was able to drink from a fresh stream, and he ate bread and meat brought

to him each day by ravens—birds that the Israelites were taught to view as unclean and off limits! As strange as it was, Elijah received the gift of bread and good care by trusting that God would sustain him.

Can you trust that God will provide for you even in ways that may seem surprising?

Can you recognize God's call in your life, prompting you to do right instead of wrong, to obey his Word and follow his way instead of going your own way?

Lord, guide our hearts to trust that you will provide for us in ways that we would not even imagine. Amen.

## A SMALL LOAF

*"The jar of flour will not be used up . . . until the day the LORD sends rain on the land."*  
—1 Kings 17:14

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sudden demand for flour and yeast. Many, many people wanted to make bread at home! This surge caused a shortage of supplies, leaving shelves bare at the grocery store and causing some people to go without the basics they needed.

Today's story in 1 Kings highlights significant shortages: the stream runs dry, and the flour and oil are about to run out. Scarcity is everywhere, and Elijah and the widow and her son seem to be living on the edge of survival.

Imagine how the widow must have felt when Elijah asked her to make him a small loaf of bread with her limited resources. Largely because of a custom to be hospitable to strangers, she did it, not wanting to bring shame on her household. It couldn't have

been easy, but she made a small loaf of bread and served it to Elijah. And, miraculously, God replenished her flour and oil so that they did not run out until the end of the drought.

The fact that this takes place in Sidon, a land outside of Israel, shows that the Lord God, who makes all things abundant even in times of scarcity, is stronger, better, and more powerful than the gods of other nations. In fact, God is the only true God, the Lord of heaven and earth.

Lord our God, you are our provider. At times we are scared about running out of things, and yet we see that your power is greater than our fears. We trust in you. Amen.

## IN THE HOUSE OF BREAD

*When Naomi heard . . . that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home.*  
—Ruth 1:6

Ruth and Naomi's story begins with sadness and hunger, and it ends with fulfillment and joy.

After Naomi's husband and her sons died, she heard that God was again providing food (literally *lehem*, which means bread) in Bethlehem, which means "house of bread" (see Ruth 1).

When Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, God provided for them at every stage of the bread-making process—in the field as Ruth picked up leftover grain; at mealtime during the workday when the harvesters ate roasted barley; and at the end of the season at the threshing floor.

In this story, all kinds of references to the abundance of grain and bread show fulfillment by the Lord's hand. Ruth was permitted to glean with the crew and to bring home

a basket brimming with grain. At mealtime, Ruth ate until she was satisfied, and she even had some left over. Ruth also harvested grain throughout the season, after which she approached Boaz to help her (Ruth 3). And many of the signs of fulfillment are not only in Boaz's words but also in his gestures of kindness and provision.

Many years later, Jesus, a descendant of Ruth and Boaz, was born in Bethlehem. And he became the bread of life, the greatest fulfillment of all time.

God our Father, your ways surprise and delight. Thank you for our daily bread. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

## A DREAM ABOUT BREAD

*"I had a dream. . . . A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed."*

—Judges 7:13

Have you ever had a significant dream that you couldn't understand?

At different times throughout the history recorded in the Bible, God spoke to people through dreams, and it often took another person to interpret the meaning of a dream. Sometimes still today people find that God speaks through dreams, and sharing them with others can help them discern what God is saying.

In our story for today, God tells Gideon to go to the enemy camp at night, and he hears an enemy soldier describing a dream he has had. In the dream, a loaf of barley tumbles into the Midianite camp and collapses the tent of the Midianites. Another soldier interprets the dream, saying that this means the God of Israel will bring destruction on the

Midianites through Gideon. And Gideon, encouraged by this dream, goes back to his camp and musters his army to trust in God's power—and God overcomes the enemy for them.

God demonstrates that he can work by any means, and often he uses what may seem to be a weak or unlikely option to show how powerful he is.

Do you believe that God can reveal his plans in unlikely ways, and that God can use what seems weak to us to reveal his power in our lives?

Lord our God, lead us to trust that you can use whatever ways you choose to reveal your power and goodness in our lives and in this world. Amen.

## THE BREAD OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

*“Arrange them in two stacks, six in each stack, on the table of pure gold before the LORD.”*  
—Leviticus 24:6

When someone wears a wedding ring, it shows that they have a distinctive relationship with another person. The ring is a constant reminder of a promise made, and it affects the behavior and identity of both persons in the present and in the future.

In some ways, the visible symbol of bread at the center of the tabernacle was like that: it was a symbol of the people's life committed to the one true God. Though the book of Leviticus is not always easy to understand, it helps to know that the overall point of Leviticus is about God graciously providing a way for his beloved but flawed people to live in his presence, just as he lived in theirs. Not long after God sent manna, bread from heaven, to his people in the wilderness (Exodus 16), God gave them these Levitical

guidelines for holy living. In these ways the people could demonstrate their gratitude, awe, and worship of God. Twelve fresh loaves of bread were to be on display on a gold table in the holy tent of meeting as the “bread of the Presence” (Exodus 25:30)—a visible symbol that God was present with his people. The bread was a covenant reminder that God had rescued his people, set them free, and called them to live distinct lives of love for God and for their neighbors.

Lord and God, just as your people were reminded of your awesome, life-giving presence when they looked at the “bread of the Presence” in the place of worship, so may we remember your love and mercy. Amen.

## A TABLE PREPARED BEFORE ME

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

—Psalm 23:5

Have you ever arrived at a banquet or a special event and been surprised at the beauty of the table that has been set up for the occasion? Sometimes a decorative “centerpiece” draws attention to the beauty of the table, but often the table itself is the centerpiece of an event!

There are many reasons why Psalm 23 has sustained people through difficult times, and one of the most hopeful images is that God will prepare a table for us. In the book of Exodus, a similar phrase is used as an instruction to Moses, outlining the expectation that the sanctuary was to include a table set in a certain way, and that the table would only be completely set when “the bread of the Presence” of the Lord was placed on it (Exodus 25:30).

But the table in Psalm 23 doesn't actually mention any bread. In Psalm 23, God's pres-

ence itself is nourishment, and the bread of God's presence is experienced in the “goodness and love” that follow us all the days of our lives. The wonderful table is set for us even while we are surrounded by difficulties. Not everything is perfect yet, but as we pass through dark valleys and are taught by the comforting rod and staff of God's Word, we arrive at a place where we can feast with God. And this feast lasts not just for a day but carries us through all the days of our lives.

Lord, we are humbled and in awe of the table you have set before us. Your presence is at the center of it. May we dwell in your house forever. Amen.

## BREAD THAT SUSTAINS

*He makes [plants] grow . . . bringing forth food from the earth:  
. . . bread that sustains [people's] hearts. —Psalm 104:15*

Near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the teachers at my school made a loaf of bread and brought it to our home on a Friday evening. Because of the lockdown, we hadn't seen many familiar people face-to-face, and her gesture remains one of the most memorable moments of that uncertain time. The loaf of bread was delicious, but it was the act of friendship that sustained us.

Psalm 104 describes a joyful celebration of God, our generous Creator. Things that are vast and incomprehensible and even things that are ordinary are included in this song of wonder: everything good comes from God's goodness, and all of it points to God's glory.

Near the center of the psalm is a picture of humans flourishing and radiant in the midst of a

lively, colorful creation. People flourish because God causes them to flourish. Their faces shine because God provides oil for them, and their hearts are strengthened because God provides them with bread.

The phrase "bread that sustains their hearts" points not mainly to physical strength but to the inner strength we experience when we are well cared for. Our bodies may be weak and vulnerable, but our spirits within us can be resilient and strong. The confidence here is that God's character is dependable because God gives bread—the bread of life.

O good and generous Creator, strengthen us in our inner being through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## GET BREAD THE HONEST WAY

*To show partiality is not good, yet a person will do wrong for a piece of bread.*  
—Proverbs 28:21

It has been said that the Psalms were given to us so that we could know how to speak to God, and that the Proverbs were given so that we'd know how to speak to each other. Proverbs 28, as well as the chapters around it, reveal how delicate and complex human relationships are.

It's often a challenge to know what to say to each other, and sometimes we get it really wrong: saying wrong things for the wrong reasons, and even saying *right* things for the wrong reasons. The proverb in verse 21 points out that it's not good to play favorites—and it's also not good to act with false motives. To say what someone else wants to hear just to keep the peace or to gain a reward—even for a basic thing like bread—can be deceitful and corrupt.

This echoes a similar message found in Proverbs 20:17 (NRSV): “Bread gained by deceit is sweet, but afterward the mouth will be full of gravel.” Saying what we think another person will want to hear usually doesn't bring satisfaction, and it can eventually hurt everyone involved. Jesus teaches that “the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45). If we are satisfied by the bread of life that only Jesus can give, we will speak truth.

Lord, speak to us so that we may speak truth, and help us to resist speaking falsely or doing wrong just to please others. Amen.

## CAST YOUR BREAD UPON THE WATERS

*“Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return.”*  
—Ecclesiastes 11:1

The meaning of this passage in Ecclesiastes has often puzzled people. Translated more literally, it says, “Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.” Some think this refers to being generous toward others or to teaching people various skills that may take a while to learn. Others suggest that it has to do with trade and economic markets, which may bring a great return on investment. Still others say that, like other parts of Ecclesiastes, this simply describes some of the uncertainties in life.

For example, while some industries and businesses have thrived during the pandemic, others have struggled enormously. And in recent years, extreme weather events—droughts, floods, wildfires, and record-breaking temperatures—as well as social and

political tensions, have made life alarmingly difficult and uncertain. Recovering or rebuilding could take a long time, and in some respects there may be no return to the way things were before.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes suggests that whatever you do, be aware that it may take a long time before you see results. Overall, Ecclesiastes emphasizes that while life is fleeting and fragile, we live and act with trust, enjoying things that can simply be enjoyed now, and believing that God, not us, guides the outcomes. We take risks, and we may or may not see a return. There are no guarantees—except that God will sustain us.

Lord our God, help us to trust you in all circumstances. Amen.

## MAKE BREAD FOR YOURSELF

*“Take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them in a storage jar and use them to make bread for yourself.”*

—Ezekiel 4:9

In some grocery stores you can find “Ezekiel 4:9 Bread,” which contains the same ingredients God told Ezekiel to use here to make bread.

But the recipe God gave Ezekiel wasn't intended to be an expensive specialty food. Although the combination of grains forms a complete protein and would have given Ezekiel a lot of important nutrients as he ate the small portions he was told to eat, the mixture of those ingredients was not part of his cultural tradition. It pointed to a pared-back diet for times of poverty and crisis. The wheat was to be mixed with grains and legumes that made for a scant vegetarian diet and weren't very desirable. To make matters worse, Ezekiel had to cook the bread over manure!

This strange story is unsettling: Why would God ask Ezekiel to do this? And why did Ezekiel follow through even though it was awfully uncomfortable to do so?

There are no easy answers, but it seems that the message God intended here was that there would be harsh consequences for Israel's disobedience, and yet this unusual bread would sustain people. A coming siege would bring horrible discomfort, but it would not completely obliterate God's people. It would be a wake-up call to turn back to God. Many years later, Jesus would sound a similar call for the people to recognize God in their midst.

Lord, your ways puzzle us sometimes, and yet we trust you to turn us back to you. Amen.

## RECOGNIZED WHEN HE BROKE THE BREAD

*Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.*

—Luke 24:35

There's a story about a woman who happened to wander into a church on a Sunday morning. She was an atheist, so she wasn't quite sure why she decided to sit there in a pew, and then when she was offered communion, for some reason she didn't turn it down. As she heard the words "Take this bread" and ate the piece of bread, it was as if she received a revelation. From that moment on, she followed Jesus and then started a food bank so that she could help feed others.

This story and our reading in Luke today give glimpses of what's possible even when people aren't aware of who Jesus is. When we read the story of the men walking on the road to Emmaus, it's hard not to wonder why Jesus kept them from recognizing him. He could easily have told them

earlier who he was and filled them with joy. Yet God's ways are not our ways. And then somehow, when Jesus "took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them," their eyes were opened.

Can we accept that we can't control how or when Jesus reveals himself to us, and that it may not depend on our intellectual ability?

Jesus allowed these followers, on the very day of his resurrection, to recognize him first and foremost in the breaking of bread, permitting them to understand and even to taste the truth of who he really was.

Lord, our hearts are burning within us too. As we taste your goodness, we know that you are the risen Savior. Amen.

## THEY BROKE BREAD IN THEIR HOMES

*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. . . .*

—Acts 2:46

For a time, our church received donations of day-old bread from a bakery nearby. An elderly man from a neighboring church would pick up the bread and bring it to us on Sunday mornings. Some of it, however, was too tough for his church members to eat, he said, because many of them couldn't afford dental care and were missing teeth. They could enjoy soft breads, but not the bagels, artisan loaves, and so on. So I suggested that some members in our church might like the breads that their members couldn't use, and the elder thought that would make a great arrangement.

Early each Sunday morning, he dropped off a few gigantic bags of bagels and seedy artisan loaves, joking each time that this was his gift for "the church of the strong teeth"—and every week without fail

we laughed about it. He saved the soft bread for his congregation, and our young people ate bagels after the morning service—and then also each morning throughout the week. This became a regular part of our Sunday gatherings. Our churches became closer because of it, and in a very real way we "ate together with glad and sincere hearts."

Acts 2 gives a glimpse of the early church and how they gathered for worship and ate bread together. When we break bread together with glad hearts, we remember Jesus and take part in the joy shared by those early followers.

Jesus, by your Spirit be present among us as we break bread together. Amen.

## WHENEVER YOU EAT THIS BREAD

*He broke [the bread] and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." —1 Corinthians 11:24*

In the Lord's Supper (communion) bread symbolizes nourishment and sustenance in faith, but it also symbolizes the death of Jesus that saves us from destruction. It's like water and wine. These symbols are like a double-edged sword: water can sustain life, but it can also create deadly floods. Wine can gladden the heart, but it can also destroy people's lives.

Some stories about bread in the Old Testament include this element as well: manna that was greedily kept until the next day became rotten and unsafe to eat (Exodus 16:20); a soldier's dream showed a loaf of bread destroying the Midianite camp (Judges 7:13); and the odd bread that Ezekiel had to eat warned the people of an impending siege (Ezekiel 4:16). And here, in 1 Corinthians, the Lord's Supper reminds us and warns of judgment and how

Jesus came to save us from certain destruction.

There is an element of being completely open with God and each other when we come to the Lord's table, especially because we gather to eat together. None of us really wants our life to be scrutinized, but at God's table, there is always mercy. Mercy is greater than judgment; provision is greater than scarcity; life is greater than death; "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). And God's presence with us through the bread of Christ is greater than anything we could ever ask or imagine.

Thank you, Jesus, for your death, which gives us eternal life. Amen.

## HIDDEN MANNA FROM JESUS

*"To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna."*  
—Revelation 2:17

Whenever we read from the book of Revelation, it's important to keep in mind that it is full of symbolism. It isn't meant to be read literally, and if we try to read it that way, we will run into many difficulties.

In this passage, the apostle John is writing down a message from Jesus to a church that needs to hear encouragement as well as a warning. The bottom line is this: Stay true to God's Word. Don't get distracted by other slick ideas that might lead you in directions where you can get defeated and discouraged. Keep your eyes on Jesus! Whoever does this will be victorious, and whoever is victorious will be given "some of the hidden manna."

"Hidden manna" is probably a reference to the manna that was placed in the ark of the covenant (Exodus 16:33-34; Hebrews 9:4); this reminded

the people that God was present with them in every situation. This manna was some of the bread sent from heaven, a reminder of God's abundant provision to his people in their need. It was a sign of God's generous hospitality and God's presence. It also pointed to Jesus' coming to save us and give us new life.

Jesus' offer of "hidden manna" reminds us that he is the bread of life (John 6:32-35). So let's keep our eyes on Jesus and trust that he will help us stand firm in faith, no matter what challenges may come.

Lord Jesus, our eyes are fixed on you. We trust you to give us all we need in every situation, that we may remain true to your name. Amen.

## I WILL COME AND EAT WITH YOU

*"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. . . . I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."* —Revelation 3:20

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people struggled even more than usual with loneliness and isolation. Not being able to meet and eat with friends and family weighed heavily on populations worldwide.

For many people and for many different reasons, though, eating alone was a reality long before COVID restrictions came along, and in those cases the lifting of restrictions won't mean there will suddenly be people to eat with. So Jesus' words of invitation here may be especially welcome for people who yearn to eat with someone who loves them.

Jesus' words in this passage echo some of the lines in another book of the Bible, which is associated with tender, intimate love: the Song of Songs. In Song of Songs 5:2, the woman says, "Listen!

My beloved is knocking." And her beloved says: "Open to me. . . ."

Both the scene in Song of Songs and this scene in Revelation are very tender, and the word for "love" here is *phileo*, referring to love that is affectionate, as warmhearted as a close friend, and as near to one's heart as a lover. It makes sense, then, that the great feast that culminates the entire story of God's love for his people is the wedding supper of the Lamb, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Listen, he stands at the door and knocks. Will you open the door and let Jesus in?

Lord Jesus, I hear you at the door, knocking. Thank you! Lord, please come in and eat with me. Amen.

## THE GREAT FEAST

*Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come. . . .*  
—Revelation 19:7

In the school where I teach, our senior students spend a lot of their spare time planning their graduation banquet. They taste samples from a banquet menu, raise funds so that they can have a special celebration, and imagine how great it will be to celebrate their long-awaited milestone.

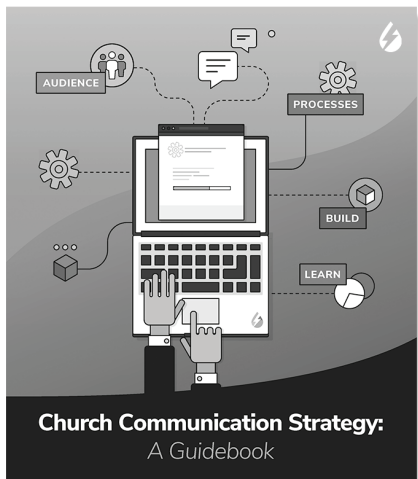
A great feast is also at the culmination of God's great story of redemption in the Bible. Throughout Scripture, many stories show how God feeds his people. It's like a long bread-thread woven through and baked into the whole story of God's amazing work in and through his people. And this great feast will have the finest and best of breads—no meal could be complete without it. This great feast combines so many things at once: it is high and long and wide and deep with the love of Christ;

it celebrates manna in the wilderness and the "bread of the Presence" of God; it multiplies the feeding of the 5,000 exponentially; it recalls the bread that Jesus gave thanks for and broke with his disciples; and it fills us with Jesus himself, the bread of life.

All of these great memories and the fullness of every promise come together at the great supper of the Lamb in the new heaven and earth.

"Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"  
(Revelation 7:12)

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