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***Exodus 16:1–35, highly abridged.***

*The community of Israel journeyed to the area of Sin. They arrived there one month after leaving the land of Egypt. <sup>2</sup>There, too, the whole community of Israel complained about Moses and Aaron. <sup>3</sup>“If only the LORD had killed us back in Egypt,” they moaned. “There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death.”*

*<sup>4</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “Look, I’m going to rain down food from heaven for you. Each day the people can go out and pick up as much food as they need for that day. I will test them in this to see if they will follow my instructions. <sup>5</sup>On the sixth day they will gather food, and when they prepare it, there will be twice as much.”*

*<sup>6</sup>So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “You will realize it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt. <sup>7</sup>In the morning you will see the glory of the LORD.” The next morning, when the dew evaporated, a flaky substance as fine as frost blanketed the ground. <sup>15</sup>They were puzzled when they saw it. “What is it?” they asked each other. Moses told them, “It is the food the LORD has given you to eat. <sup>16</sup>Gather two quarts for each person in your tent. Do not keep any of it until morning.” <sup>20</sup>But some didn’t listen and kept some of it until morning. But it was full of maggots and had a terrible smell. Moses was very angry with them.*

*<sup>21</sup>After this the people gathered the food morning by morning. <sup>22</sup>On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much as usual—four quarts for each person instead of two. <sup>23</sup>Moses told them, “This is what the LORD commanded: Tomorrow will be a day of complete rest, a holy Sabbath day set apart for the LORD. So bake or boil as much as you want today, and set aside what is left for tomorrow.” <sup>27</sup>Some of the people went out anyway on the seventh day, but they found no food. <sup>28</sup>The LORD asked Moses, “How long will these people refuse to obey my commands?”*

*<sup>31</sup>They called the food manna. It was white like coriander seed, and it tasted like honey wafers. They ate manna for forty years until they arrived at Canaan.*

*<sup>32</sup>Then Moses said, “This is what the LORD has commanded: Fill a two-quart container with manna to preserve it for your descendants. Then later generations will be able to see the food I gave you in the wilderness when I set you free from Egypt.” Moses placed it in the Ark of the Covenant, next to the stone tablets.*

## **What is this?**

When I was a boy, I felt totally secure. My father sold truck and car tires, and he worked on cars. My parents barely came up with enough money to care for us, and even though I was aware of this, they made sure that I never doubted that my needs would be met. It allowed me to get up in the morning on Saturdays and Summer mornings, get on my bike, and joyfully ride around town and through neighboring berry and lettuce fields with my friends. On Sundays, we went to church in a very old, incredibly beautiful church, and I loved being there. I went to Catholic school, and it was quite literally like a second home to me. My father worked hard, six days a week, and always came home smelling like tire dust and with grease on his hands. My mother taught me French, and although I have forgotten most of it now, it was our private way of communicating. There was one problem, though, one source of insecurity, something that my father, for the most part, compensated for. He did his best to protect me from this problem.

My mother was an alcoholic. Every once in a while, she would fly into a rage and become violent, smashing dishes and screaming. Back then, I thought it happened when she drank more than usual. Now, as a hospital chaplain, I realize that it happened when she went cold turkey. Only as an older man, did it strike me that I was witnessing my mother in the terrible throws of withdrawal. My

mother was a good person who never bought anything for herself. She was dedicated to taking care of her children. She would drink in the evening, but in the morning, she was up, busily cooking breakfast and making lunches for us to take to school. One morning, though, she didn't make it to bed, and I found her passed out in the entrance to the kitchen. My older brother and my sister were already out of the house. She had not made me a lunch. She had not made breakfast. I was very hungry. But the only way to get to the food was by stepping over her. I was too terrified to do this. I'll get back to this.

We're in a series of sermons that draw on material in Exodus. Today, we're concerning manna, the food that the Israelites ate in the desert – that they ate for forty years. After escaping the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, and after the Red Sea had drowned the entire army of Egypt, the Chosen People continued into the desert. They camp in an area call Sin; the word only coincidentally is spelled S-I-N. The people, as they often do, complain to Moses. Even after being miraculously saved at the Red Sea, they still do not fully trust God to keep his promise to care for them. Just as they did when they were at the Red Sea with the Army of the Pharaoh bearing down on them, they begin to wish they were back in Egypt as slaves. This time, their complaint is that they don't have food: as slaves, they had had all the food they wanted. Hungry slaves are not able to work hard. God tells

Moses that he's going to rain food down for them. They are to collect exactly the amount they need each day and no more. The day before the Sabbath, they are to collect two days' worth, exactly, so that they do not have to work on the Sabbath. Indeed, in the morning, there is dew on the ground. When it dries, a white flaky substance is left behind. The people are puzzled and ask each other "What is it?" In Hebrew this question is one word: Manna. Literally, it translates to "What it?" and it means "What is it?" Some of the people disobey God – by disobeying Moses – and collect extra on the first day. But in the morning, it is rotten and full of maggots. The people are being taught to trust God. God will give them enough food each day – and they are to believe this by not trying to store any extra food. The people display their lack of faith again by going out on the Sabbath and trying to collect food – but no manna appears on the Sabbath. We are told that the manna, the "What is it?" *was white like coriander seed, and it tasted like honey wafers.* This segment of the story of Exodus ends with this:

*<sup>32</sup> Then Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded: Fill a two-quart container with manna to preserve it for your descendants. Then later generations will be able to see the food I gave you in the wilderness when I set you free from Egypt." Moses placed it in the Ark of the Covenant, next to the stone tablets.*

This is a very important piece of Scripture. It tells us that symbolically, the promise of daily manna has been passed down to us.

There have been a lot of attempts at figuring out just what manna was. Some academics have suggested that it could have been the excretion of an insect; that excretion solidifies as yellowish-white globules on the leaves of tamarisk trees; it can be baked into bread. This certainly sounds very tasty to me. One theory is that the story of Exodus is itself a myth. There is virtually no scientific evidence to back up the story of Exodus. If the People of God lived in the desert for forty years, they left behind nothing, not so much as a single Twinkie wrapper. Neighboring peoples did not write about these nomads wandering in the desert, and since there had to be at least a million of them, this is very surprising. So, perhaps Exodus is in truth a faith story, and perhaps the insect secretion on these weedy desert trees could have been the inspiration for the manna that appears in the Exodus story. But to me, the issue is not the historical accuracy of the Exodus story. To me, what strikes me is that over and over, God must put up with the lack of faith on the part of his people, and he must prove over and over, that God does keep his promises. We can depend on God. It tells us about faith, about how difficult it is for us to keep God in our hearts and minds, and to develop that close relationship with God, the relationship that lets us live each day with joy and security. We do not have to spend forty years in the desert eating insect secretions. But we do have to live every day in doubt, not knowing what could happen next, not knowing what will

happen to us or to our loved ones. Just as the Chosen People had to trust God to leave manna for them every morning, we must trust God to be present for us every day. Exodus is about trusting God to lead us through life, to guide us through our problems, and to never, never abandon us.

We've looked at Leviticus in the past, and discovered that although at face value, it contains a seemingly irrelevant, massive collection of rules and rituals that the Israelites had to live by; this body of theological legislation, though, had a magnificent purpose. The lives of the Israelites were filled with constant reminders of God. They didn't come to church on Sunday mornings and then find themselves totally on their own the other six and a half days a week. They wove God into their daily, weekly, and seasonal lives. They kept God in their minds and their hearts all the time. Only in this way, can you ever get to a point where you fully trust God, where you develop a close relationship with the person in whose image we are made.

I believe that the way to work God into our lives is through daily prayer and by reading the Bible. We need to find deliberate, conscious ways of putting God into our secular world. If you pause a few times a day, calm yourself down, and just project your thoughts toward God, that is prayer. You can lay out what worries you. You can express thankfulness for what you have. You can ask God to help you

develop faith and trust in God. It's something you must do many times before it becomes a comfortable, warm habit. The Bible can be very intimidating. It is huge. Much of it, especially the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, is filled with impenetrable history, with places and people and stories and geographic references that mean little to us today. This is why I spend so much time up here going through the Bible and trying to explain its context and its meaning. I try to make it readable, digestible, meaningful. I suggest finding a book of the Bible that you feel somewhat comfortable with and read through it, slowly, a little each day. By getting a simple commentary that covers that Book, you easily understand the parts that initially seem foreign. There is a good reason for the Bible to have the incredible depth and weight that it has – this is how it is rich enough to feed us every day of our lives. There is always something new to find in it. Pausing for brief prayer a few times a day and reading the Bible for perhaps fifteen minutes a day – that is all that is necessary to do what the Israelites did. That is the way to collect your manna every morning, and by making it a habit, you will learn to trust that the “What is it?” food will be there for you every single day.

I'd like to get back to my mother. My first thought was to find my father. He normally would have already left the house, but I knew that he would never leave my mother laying there for me to discover when I got up. But he was gone.

I concluded that he had left for work in such a hurry that he hadn't noticed that she had never gone to bed, and he never went into the kitchen. Indeed, he often left for work through the back door, directly into the garage. So, I was alone. I simply got dressed, got on my bike, and rode to school. It was early and I was hungry. As I pedaled along, I worried about getting through the day with no food.

But then, when I got to school a good half hour earlier than normal, I discovered something. There were several kids already there, in fact, perhaps a dozen or more. They were standing around the back door of the convent, which was next door to the school. I went over there. It turned out that any kid who didn't have enough food at home could show up before school and get breakfast at the convent. One of the sisters was standing outside. She saw me and ushered me into their dining room. I sat at a huge oval table, the same table where the sisters ate, and had hot oatmeal with brown sugar, orange juice, milk, and a cinnamon roll. I stuffed myself. Then, the sister who was ladling out the oatmeal wrote down our names. She reminded us that we could just go through the cafeteria line, and the sister who was working the cash register would just nod us through without us having to pay. She added that we didn't need to be embarrassed: other kids would just think that our parents paid for our lunches monthly. You guessed it: I stuffed myself at lunch, too.

God will always give us our manna. It's okay if we must keep learning over and over that we can trust God. In truth, we're just learning incrementally, through repetition, the way that we normally learn. I encourage you to go out and collect your manna every day. God will make sure that there are countless insects secreting something gross all over the leaves of the tamarisk trees in your yard. It will always be there. You just need to go get it.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says this: "*I tell you the truth, Moses didn't give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven.*"<sup>33</sup> *The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*" Then people around Jesus reply with this: "*Give us that bread every day.*" Jesus answers: "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" So please, everyone, just remember that the bread of life is there, every day, in prayer and in Scripture. Please pray with me.

*God, come into our lives every single day. Fill us with your grace and your presence. Make us want to seek you out through prayer. Inspire us to connect with you through prayer and to read that admittedly very long and complex faith story, the Bible. Amen.*