

First Course – Sustenance

Check-In

How are you? Where have you seen God working in your life in the last week? And… If you could have one meal delivered to your door right now, what would you choose? Would you DoorDash some Vindaloo? Maybe UberEats a woodfired pizza? Perhaps you'd just have your neighbor bring their world famous chicken noodle soup?

Opening Prayer

God of Provision, remind us that you will take care of us, sustaining our needs, because you love us.

Introduction

We want to be fed, to be nourished, and to be provided for. Okay, yes, in the DoorDash or GrubHub kind of way—but really, in all areas of our lives. And now that it's November, in this season of Thanksgiving,

a series on food metaphors is perfectly appropriate. See, here's the problem: If you've been around the Christian world for any length of time, you've heard someone say something like, "God will provide" or "God will take care of you." There are books and sermons, modern songs and old hymns, addressing this topic. And yes, it's a good phrase and a solid way to think about your faith. The general theme of putting your trust in God is a positive one. But when we think about it practically—when we're faced with bills, stress, and life; when we suffer loss, heartache, and uncertainty; and when we have family, friends, and coworkers depending on us—the phrase "God will provide" can seem pretty abstract and unhelpful. What does that even mean? And so, for the month of November, that's what we're going to do: take a serious look at this question. What does it mean for God to take care of us? What does God's provision really look like?

Review Question: What does it mean for God to provide for you? What do you think it means that God will take care of you?

Scripture

To get at this topic, we're going to have a little fun and unpack a lunch of the Bible's munchiest stories. Have you noticed how prevalent food is in the Bible? It's the setting for stories about weddings, banquets, and meetings. It's the manner and mode of a multitude of multiplication miracles. And all sorts of food metaphors are used to drive home a message. Food is everywhere in the Bible, so it's the perfect analogy this Thanksgiving season for talking about God's provision in our lives. Each week, we'll unwrap a snack pack of a Bible

story and pull out some truths to help us understand God's provision in our lives.

So, where do we start? Well, when we're answering the question, "What does it mean for God to provide for us?" there's a distinction we need to make first. It will help us put the rest of what we're going to talk about into perspective. To get at that, let's dig right into our first story. It comes from Exodus, the second book of the Bible. Here's your setup: The Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt. Moses came and led them out of captivity across the Red Sea, and now they're wandering in the wilderness. Just one month after this incredible event—after they had witnessed miracle after miracle, capped off by the parting of the sea, which enabled them to walk across on dry ground—their stomachs started rumbling, and suddenly their memories got really selective. They began to grumble: "We're hungry! I have to pee! We're starving! Are we there yet?" And this is where our story picks up.

Read Exodus, chapter 16, verses 11 through 18.

Here we see how God provides for the Israelites in the desert, manna and quail… not a bad GodDash order. And there are a few other morsels tucked into this story, that can help us understand how God provides for us.

Question 1: Have you heard this story before? What stands out to you or catches your attention? If you were an Israelite in this

scenario, how would you have responded? Would you have been one of the complainers? Or would you have trusted that God would provide?

Reflection

The first thing we learn from this story is the distinction we mentioned earlier, which we need to get a handle on before we talk about anything else because it gives us a foundation for how God operates. Take a look at verse 18:

18 But when they measured it out, everyone had just enough. Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough. Each family had just what it needed.

Each person had just what they *needed*. So, in order to understand God's provision, we first have to understand this: **God knows the difference between our *wants* and our *needs*.** (Read that again, that's important.) And if we're honest with ourselves, our "needs" list is often just a "wants" list in a good disguise. If you ask a 9-year-old what they *need*, they'll tell you they *need* to eat the entire garbage bag full of candy they brought home from trick-or-treating on Halloween. But are we much different? We'll say we *need* a three-week tropical vacation and for nobody to speak to us before we've had our first cup of coffee. But when we pull off the disguise, those aren't needs; those are wants. None of those are actual biological or spiritual requirements for life. There's a difference between our wants and our needs, and God knows that difference. But it's for our

benefit, right? When we constantly confuse our *wants* with our *needs*, we just get frustrated with God. When in reality, God is just keeping us healthy. If God gave us everything we *wanted*, it would ruin us. God loves us too much to indulge our cravings all the time. So, step one in understanding God's provision—how God takes care of us—is to run that little litmus test on what we think we *need*. Ask yourself: Is it really just a "want" in a noble disguise?

Question 2: Take a moment to consider something you really want right now that you would ask God for? Now, ask yourself, is that thing a need, that might it just be a want? Is there a different, genuine need underneath it? How might you pray about that thing differently?

Okay, so, we understand that God is providing for our needs, not our wants, but that still doesn't answer all our questions, like: *how much* does He provide, *how long* will that provision last, and *what* does He provide to meet those needs? Let's start with those first two questions: *How much and how long?* This was a sticking point for the Israelites. Take a look at verse 16. What was God's command?

16 "These are the Lord's instructions: Each household should gather as much as it needs. Pick up two quarts for each person in your tent."

There's an implied message here, and Moses even states it explicitly a little later: "Take only what you need—and only what you need for

today." How much? Only what you need. How long? Only for today. But what do the Israelites do? If you know human nature—especially if you lived through the great toilet paper shortage of 2020—you know exactly what happens when you tell a crowd of humans, "Only take what you need for today." Somebody is going to bring a shopping cart and load it up. And if you scroll down the chapter a bit, that's *exactly* what some of them tried to do. They gathered extra manna, dragged it into their tents, and went to sleep feeling pretty good about themselves. But when they woke up the next morning, the Scripture says the hoarded manna was full of maggots and smelled terrible. God promised them enough for each day, but only for that day. Why? Well, it meant that **God's provision couldn't be hoarded; it had to be trusted.** The way God provided for the Israelites didn't allow them to hoard it. They simply had to trust that God would provide.

The same thing is true for us. God provides for us, but only what we need and only *just enough* for now. If we get more than that, we'll just get comfortable or greedy, and we'll lose the foundation of our trust in God. God's provision is fresh every single morning. When we try to live off *yesterday's* provision because we don't trust that God will provide for *tomorrow*, it just starts to smell like rotten manna. God commanded them to take *only* what they needed because He was teaching them a daily habit of dependence. He wasn't just feeding their stomachs; He was teaching them about faith. He wanted them to wake up every morning, look at the ground, and say, "Wow, God did it yesterday, and He did it again today. Look at that! I bet we

can trust Him for tomorrow, too." Are you relying on God in that way? Are you waking up every morning, looking at God's provision, and saying, "God took care of me yesterday. I trust in Him today"?

Question 3: What makes it difficult for you to trust God's provision? Has there been a situation recently where God has provided for something you were needing? How can that help you trust God's provision in the future?

Now, let's address the other question: *What*? That is, what is God providing? Or, let's ask it in a more practical way: "Will I be happy with what God gives me?" Well, that's another thing the Israelites struggled with. If you scroll even farther down the story, all the way to the Book of Numbers, the Israelites begin to complain again: "Man, we've been eating this same thing forever!" Numbers is two whole books away, so they've probably been relying on this diet for years. And, as you can imagine, they start complaining: "Manna and quail again? I just long for a salad." But here's the thing: could you blame them. Quail isn't bad, and the manna, we're told, was made into little manna-cakes. But do you know what manna means in Hebrew? "What is it?" It literally translates to "What's that?" Imagine waking up, walking outside, looking at your front porch, seeing a layer of white flakes, and turning to your spouse to ask, *"What is it?"* And your spouse says, *"That's breakfast!"* So, could we blame them for complaining about the lack of options? God doesn't rain down a five-star steakhouse meal, a table full of sides, and dessert carts every night. It's just quail in the evening and manna in the morning. But

God limits it to a very simple diet for a reason. See, back in verse 3, we hear their complaint. The Israelites say:

3 "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."

When the Israelites were out in the desert, they started looking backward. They forgot about the slavery, the forced labor, and the oppression, and instead they started yearning for what had been. God didn't give them the rich and luxurious meat and bread they had back in Egypt because God knew it would only keep them looking backward. He gave them manna and quail so that they would keep moving forward.

Again, the same is true for us. What is God will use to meet your need won't be a return to what your life *was*. God's provision will keep you looking forward, not longing for what's behind you. Sometimes the things that *were* aren't bad things. There were good things about the Israelites' time in Egypt—the food, apparently. And it's okay to miss things from your past. Many of those things are really good: good times, loved ones you've lost, a former way of life, or a place you once lived. It's okay to miss those things. But when it comes to how God is going to provide for you now, it likely won't include a trip back to what was. A smorgasbord would only have kept the Israelites looking back at what they used to have. A simple diet of quail and *what's*-

that? kept them looking forward. The way God provides for us will often keep us looking forward, too.

Question 4: Is longing for a past season making it harder to recognize what is sustaining you now? Is there something from your old life you need to grieve or give thanks for?

CLOSING

If we fast-forward a few hundred years to when Jesus lived, he told them:

"Look at the birds of the air: They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them." (Matthew 6:26 NLT)

It was Jesus's way of reminding them of the provision their ancestors experienced in the wilderness. But Jesus, in good Jesus fashion, goes farther. He gives us the why: Why does God give us sustenance in this way? This is something the Israelites back in the wilderness didn't understand. (Moses just liked to say, "do this," and not give too many reasons.) But Jesus then says, "Are you not more valuable to God than these birds are?" It is out of God's great love that He sustains us in this way. These rules aren't here because God is just a cranky parent who wants to ruin our fun and make us eat quail and manna-muffins. These rules are for our good and come out of God's great love for us. God provides in this way because we are so loved.

When God provides for your *need*—and just what you *need*—in a way that keeps you trusting and looking forward, we have another word for that… it's called sustenance. And we are sustained because of God's great love. What the Israelites received was sustenance, designed to sustain them as they wandered in the desert. God's provision will sustain you through your desert if you understand these rules about how His provision works, knowing that it is out of God's great love that we receive it. So, wake up tomorrow morning, step out in faith, pick up your daily quart of God's grace, and trust that the God who provided today will be right there waiting for you tomorrow—because you are loved.

Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations and close in prayer.