

## Menus

[Numbers 11: 4-9; John 6: 25-40](#)

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I was thinking a while back that it seemed to me that we could describe a lot of God's history with humankind by describing that history in terms of menus. Yes, menus. Now I know that the word menu does not appear in a biblical lexicon or a theological dictionary, but menus present themselves right in the third chapter of Genesis when God tells Adam and Eve what they can eat. The menu for Paradise is fruit from every tree except the one in the center. Of course, they want what is not on the menu.

Another menu presents itself when Esau comes home from a hard day on the range hunting whatever is out on the range. He's famished and his brother Jacob gives him the menu for the evening meal. He can have all the Jacob Stew he wants. The price for this all-you-can-eat supper is all you have to give. In other words, if you eat what I've cooked, it'll cost you your inheritance. The world has never really fully recovered from that menu choice.

And you may remember the menu choices of the exiles in Babylon. The brightest and the best had been hauled off to be trained for high government work in Nebuchadnezzar's court, but they wanted only vegetables and water on their menu, instead of the Babylonian menu of meat and wine. Their menu choice resulted in their excelling in their training program and they ended up in positions of leadership.

But you know now that menus are no longer just about food. Anyone who uses a computer has pull-down menus that give us options about how we will manage all the work we do on our computers. We get to choose what style font we will use in our word-processing. We get to pull down a menu screen that even lets us set our own preferences (of course within the world Bill Gates and Microsoft have created for us).

And likewise, the menus in the Bible were not just about food. At the end of his life, just as the people of God are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses tells them they have two choices. They can either obey and receive the blessings of God, or they can disobey and suffer the consequences. Soon after that, Joshua, their new leader, tells them that they can choose the living God or the pagan, illusory gods. One choice will lead to life, the other to death.

Fruit, stew, vegetables, obedience, God. These are just some of the menu choices before the people of God. Menus are placed before us all and we hope that the choices we make will satisfy our hungers or help us get something done the way we want it done

Well, the Hebrews out in the wilderness are thinking about menus, too. They are out in the desert, having just been rescued from Egyptian slavery. When they needed water, God made gallons of it spew forth from a rock. When they were hungry, God provided bread from heaven in the form of manna. (You can read more about this later in Numbers, in Exodus, Deuteronomy, in the Psalms and Nehemiah. It's in a lot of places because this is a big event in the life of the people of God.)

Anyway, God had taken care of them, but they have gotten just a little too used to what He has done, so the complaints start to pile up. Psalm 78 records this complaint: "Sure you rescued us and you gave us water out of a rock, but can you feed us?" That would test my patience, but God sends manna. Bread from heaven. We will often say of something nourishing or refreshing, "Oh, that's manna from heaven!" Well, the Israelites just called it manna. Manna means simply, "What is it?" They looked at God's answer to their prayer and complaints and said, "What the heck is this?"

Now if you think their bewilderment was followed by recognition and thankfulness, think again. By the time we get to the story Stacey read today, they're sick and tired of it. All they can see is this stupid manna - as far as the eye can see - manna, manna, manna. It's no longer the life-saving bread from the Savior; it's just the boring same-old, same-old stuff.

No, they prefer the menu of Egypt - meat, fruit, vegetables, spices - that variety tasted really good. They must have forgotten that the price of buying a meal from that menu was slavery, persecution and no future for their children.

So, now they want meat, so after the Lord and Moses have quite an argument about the people and how to feed them, God says that he'll give them more meat than they can stand. And that meat ends up being the death of them and the place where they buried their dead is called Kibroth-hattaavah -- the Graves of Craving. Trying to get more, better or different from what God has given us will kill us.

But what's wrong with wanting a little variety? (Actually they had a little variety. Manna? Baked or Boiled and do you want fries - fried manna - with that?) Well, their problem was not so much that they were dissatisfied with their food. Their grumbling about the menu showed that they were really dissatisfied with God.

In fact, if you go on to Numbers 21 you hear them just wailing: "So, did you bring us out here to die? There's no food, no water and, by the way, the bread we don't have, we loathe it. It's detestable."

If they hadn't forgotten God's rescue of them entirely, we do know that they surely wish He had saved them in a different and certainly more comfortable and convenient way. Now, it's important to note that they got to this state by listening to those who had not experienced God in the way that they had experienced Him - as savior and rescuer. No, the rabble inciting the discontent saw God as some sort of cosmic vending machine.

So, not only are they discontented, they aren't thinking straight. They say they have NO bread, but they do have bread and they loathe it. You see, it doesn't count as bread if it's not the kind they want. It reminds me of my childhood arguments with my father. I would ask for something and he would say no. I'd ask again. He'd say no again. This would go back and forth until I would say "You haven't answered me yet!" And he would say, "I have. The answer is No."

The deadly cravings of the people are all wrapped up in their rejection of God's salvation. When they were starving to death, they cried out and God gladly fed them manna. Their need was great and God's supply was sufficient. But as time went on, they refused to be satisfied with the gifts that God has given.

Now, God could have laid out lavish banquets and given them great surpluses of food so they wouldn't have to worry about tomorrow. He could have, but he didn't. Why?

Well, first, we need to know that God does not act arbitrarily. He has a reason for all that he does. One purpose behind God's actions is his desire to show us what He is like. He wants to reveal his great and good character. Another purpose is to show us what we are like. Our own journeys into self-knowledge are always tainted by just a bit of self-centered delusion. Socrates said, "Know thyself," but the prophet Jeremiah is closer to the truth when he says, "The heart is perverse. It is devious... Who can understand it?" So, we not only have to depend on God to know who God is. We also have to depend on God to know who we are.

And in the manna story, we discover what the Hebrews in the desert and what we, in our own wilderness are like. We are blind to God's provision for us. Like the manna, God's gifts are all around us. We see them, but fail to grasp that it is from the Lord, so we just stare at it and say, "What is that stuff?"

And we are inclined to doubt God and his goodness. Sure, he provided for us today, but He probably won't show up tomorrow. We are also those who think that we can manage resources better than God can. And, I know I'm not stretching things too far here to say that we are often people who would rather rely on ourselves rather than on God.

The picture we get of our ancestors and, by extension, ourselves is not very flattering. But, it's a true picture and the merciful grace of God's truth-telling is this: when we get the right diagnosis, we can move on to the cure.

So, what are the lessons from the manna story? What's the cure? It seems clear that we all operate with a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately attitude and subject God to our judgment rather than the other way around. That being the case, the best thing that can happen to us is that God gives us just what we need for each day - nothing more, nothing less. That teaches us to trust God in each and every day. That's what behind Jesus teaching us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Next, this manna story is a reminder that God can care for us when we see absolutely nothing for miles around - when there is no visible means of support. The whole imagery of the bread coming from heaven says, "So you have nothing? Well God can feed you out of thin air. It reminds us that if God created the universe out of nothing, then when nothing is all you see, God can create life for you!

The daily provision of one day's worth of bread also tells us that we could not receive all that God has for us all at once. Don't you have this suspicion that if God had given the wilderness people all the food they would need for forty years all at once, then the next sound we would hear is, "It's too heavy! Send donkeys!" That observation aside, we would drown in the torrent of God's abundance. As one ancient rabbi preached, when we receive God's daily gift, we should see it as just a portion of God's abundance and then remember that God is the Dispenser of all that remains. As the old Doritos commercial used to say, "Eat this one bag of chips. We'll make more."

The manna story teaches us as well, that we live from minute to minute. With God there will never be a surplus or a lack. There should be a just-rightness about surrendering our self-managed security and living life in the hands of God.

If we start longing for the menus of Egypt - for the way things were before God rescued us - for the way we think things ought to be, then we need to remember that that kind of craving is really not a craving for a different food. It's a craving for a different god - preferably one's self. And that is a craving that leads to the Graveyard of Cravings.

The manna story tells us this: When you're at the end of your resources, what comes to you to save you is not luck or happenstance. It comes from God and God has even had it set aside for you from the beginning. Your need never catches him off guard or unaware.

When we understand this manna story, then we can better understand what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the Bread of Life." Jesus had just fed thousands of people and those who were following him were asking him to do it again. Actually, they were asking him to do it all the time - forever. Just keep delivering that bread to us, Lord.

Some of us may remember home delivery services. I actually remember not only the iceman and the milkman, but growing up in Key West, Florida in the late fifties, I even remember bread deliverymen. People would tap in a huge nail right outside their door and early in the morning, the man from the bakery would make his rounds and just slap a loaf of fresh Cuban bread on the nail. It was great. People got what they wanted when they wanted it.

Jesus, the Bread of Heaven is not to be confused with the bread deliveryman. Thinking of Jesus as the delivery person will get us into trouble every time. What we need to know is this. Jesus doesn't bring the bread. He is the bread. And when we see that, we will realize that our life, now and in the future, comes from Him, is in Him.

This last week, our Vacation Bible School students learned a rather peppy song (which I am not going to sing). They were learning about the fruit of the spirit and one of their songs had these lyrics:

I like bananas; I know that mangos are sweet; I like papayas, but nothing can beat That sweet love of God.

I was running around in circles more than five miles an hour, Trying to make my way back to the heavenly Father. The world tasted sweet but then it turned sour. I asked God in and received his power!

Are you hungry for something that will sustain you and that won't turn sour? The menu God gives us has only one item listed: the Bread of Heaven. But it is bread that will never spoil. It will always nourish and sustain us. God never abandoned that wilderness people, even though they had trouble understanding that God really was taking care of them...that he was going to get them to a new and better place.

And he will not abandon you. You will not starve in whatever wilderness you may find yourself, for you can taste and see that the Lord is good. May the Lord Jesus Christ himself satisfy your hungry heart and may your cravings only and always be for the presence of God with you each and every day as each and every day comes along. In the name of the Father,