

Walking by Faith: Prayers You Don't Want Answered

[Numbers 11:4-6, 11:13-20](#)

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

Any prayer that begins with the words "If only" is very dangerous. The greatest danger is that you may receive what you are craving, and then how would you explain your unhappiness?

When the Hebrews left Egypt to begin their desert journey to the Promised Land, they brought with them a group of people that the Bible calls "the rabble." The rabble were not true believers in this journey or in the God who called them to it. In Cecil B. DeMille's movie, "The Ten Commandments," the rabble were personified in the character played by Edward G. Robinson. Remember him? Every time the going got tough in the desert, he was the guy who kept saying, "Yeah, Moses, where's your God now?" And soon a riot would break out.

The rabble's toleration for discomfort was low, and their capacity for complaint was high. Nothing is more infectious or deadly to spiritual community than complaining. It doesn't take much to get everyone worked up in a lather of anxiety. Our text tells us, "The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again and said, 'If only [there it is] we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at'" (11:4).

We were introduced to manna about a month ago on this journey. We noted that it was a small bread-like substance that appeared every morning in the desert. It wasn't much: just enough to keep the people alive. The people had to collect it every day, because it couldn't be stored. And everyone had to collect it for themselves.

We also noted that a literal translation of the name manna is "What is it?" So every day the people nurtured their faith by taking in the great question: "What is it, Lord?" "What is it you are doing? What is it you are making of my life?" Since the whole purpose of being on life's journey is to learn faith, you don't get a lot of answers. Mostly, you get questions and a choice still to believe in spite of those questions, which is how faith is formed. We keep thinking we can convince people to have faith if we give them the answers. But if we could do that, they wouldn't need faith. No, it is our unanswered questions that make room for faith, and it is our faith that binds us to God.

The rabble undermine our tentative faith, not with doubt, but by getting us to focus on that terrible phrase, "If only." We hear them say, "If only we had meat. If only we were still back in Egypt. If only we didn't have to keep settling for questions. Why don't we have some answers?" When we hear that, the faith that once allowed us to see the presence of God, starts to dim.

As a pastor, I cannot tell you how many times I hear a sentence that begins "if only." Sometimes we use it because we are focused on the future: "If only I could get a better job." "If only I could find someone special in my life." "If only I could afford to retire early, then I would be okay." Sometimes we use the phrase because we are focused on the past. "If only I had my health back." "If only I had my husband back." "If only I had the money back I put money in the market last year, then I would really be okay." Speaking these words preoccupies you with either the future or the past. It assures you that your happiness lies in those places, which implicitly defines your present life by what is missing. Thus, the words "if only" are always a judgment upon the present day, which is the only day you have, and the only place where joy is found.

One of greatest dangers in contemporary society is that we are losing the present tense because things are moving so quickly. Within a few generations we went from traveling by horseback to jet airplanes. What used to take months to travel we now cover in minutes. Our computers move so fast that we have to speak about nano-seconds, because a second is no longer a short enough unit of measurement. Our children are hustled through life at the same breakneck speed. Within nano-seconds of getting to high school, someone starts talking about college. "If only they could get into a good college." Then they are out the door. "What was it that just blitzed through our home? Oh, it was our children." The world itself is changing so fast that if you begin a day without reading the paper, you are hopelessly out of date.

Psychologically, this has the effect of reducing the present tense to being nothing more than an anticipation of the rapidly approaching future. In my grandfather's generation the present lingered for a while as it stretched relatively unaltered from a distant past to a distant future. Today the past is much less prescriptive, the future is much less predictable, and the present scarcely exists at all.

Here's the danger: When the present tense disappears so does the manna. The mysterious, life-giving, blessed grace of God only comes in the day you have. If you miss that day dreaming about the future, or longing for the past, your soul will never find it's only source of nurture and you will never survive the desert journey. Without the ability to see what God is doing today we are always anxious, never at home, and never joyful.

When you think about your salvation in Jesus Christ, you dare not limit his life to thirty-three years and then a cross. Don't reduce him to an historical figure who sacrificed his life for your sins, because that limits his salvation to being nothing more than providing a second chance to people who are still on their own. Already today it has become clear that we need a lot more than that. Neither can you limit his salvation to the future or what he will do to get you into heaven. Everything the Bible says about the future is meant to help you live better today.

Jesus rose from the dead, as we said earlier in the Creed. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. Through the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, Jesus continues his manna-like salvation today. Again, like manna, the salvation of Jesus Christ in your life today, and in our world, has more questions to it than answers. But when we begin a day by asking, "What is it, Jesus, you are going to do in this day," we open our eyes to his presence with us. Then we are not made anxious by the rabble.

You see, the most dangerous rabble are not the complaining people around us but the rabble that lives within each of our own hearts. It's as if we have a tiny Edward G. Robinson living in there who will keep tempting us to be anxious. Since there are so many voices within our hearts we have to choose which voice of the heart we will obey. We make that choice by how we start our day. If we start with prayer and Bible reading, we take in the manna and find the grace for that day. But if we rush into our anxieties, we soon find the rabble of anxiety overwhelming us. Then we can only lament, "If only I can get through this day."

Here's the really scary part: God will honor your choices. When the people insisted that they were sick of tired of living by daily regimens of manna and were looking for something a little meatier, God said, "Fine. You want meat? I'll give you meat, until it comes out your nostrils" (11:20). Then he sent hoards and hoards of quail, and the people devoured the meat until they choked on it.

Hasn't it always been true that when you finally got the thing you thought would make you happy, you were not happy after all? That's because contentment is never found in something waiting in the future. It is only found in the grace you have been given today. Until you learn how to receive today, you will never know how to receive tomorrow.

One of the hardest places to find present tense contentment is when you are in leadership. It doesn't matter if you are leading the nation or leading a family, you will soon grow exhausted listening to the complaints of those you are trying to serve. That is why the primary function of spiritual leadership is to give the complaints to God, rather than to service them yourself.

Up to this point in the journey out of slavery, Moses has been the model of spiritual leadership. When the people complained that Pharaoh was going to kill them, Moses prayed and then stretched out his staff to open the waters of the Red Sea. When they complained about the lack of water, he prayed, then found water in the desert. When they complained about the lack of food, he again prayed, then pointed to the manna. When they complained that he was gone too long on Sinai and turned to the idol of a golden calf, Moses interceded on their behalf and talked God out of consuming them. In the first three verses of our text today the people complained again. This time God couldn't resist sending down a little consuming fire, and would have burned up all of them if Moses hadn't interceded again. But when the rabble got everyone going on the quail thing, this time Moses snapped.

In verse eleven, Moses asks God, "Why have you treated your servant so badly, that you lay the burden of this people on me?" In verse twelve, he asks, "Am I their mother?" In verse thirteen he asks, "Where am I supposed to find meat for all these people?" In verse fourteen, he says, "I am not able to carry this people." And in verse fifteen, Moses tells God that he would rather be dead than spend one more day in this lousy job. Clearly, this is a leader who has gone over the edge and has burned out trying to save the people.

When you're in leadership, it is tempting to think your job is to get the people to the Promised Land. But that's just another "if only" phrase that places your calling in the future. It's God's job to get your people, or your family, to the Promised Land. Your job is to lift their burdens up to the Savior. But that means that you first have to take these burdens into your heart. We prefer just the opposite: "Let God love the people, and we'll just move them along." But your calling is to love, to love even the rabble, as they are today. For your love is the prayer that places the people's lament into the heart of God.

As Moses eventually discovered, God will let you quit if you continue to insist that you would be happy if only you could stop leading. So Moses wasn't with the Hebrews when the day finally came that they crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land. But it didn't make him as happy as he thought it would. It never does.

O God, open our hearts to all the gifts of today, even the burdens that you call us to bear, that we may not waste our lives searching for the joy that is found only in the day we have. Amen.