

## **When the Manna Stops**

By M. Wayne Benson, 5-20-20

It won't be long now! As the coronavirus graphs level off or turn downward, forced lockdowns are being lifted and things will soon be back to "normal"...whatever the new normal might be. Obviously, our gatherings, whether churches or businesses, will not look like they once did in pre-pandemic days – not for a while. Pastors and business owners are being told to limit their re-openings to either some capriciously selected number of people or (more sensibly) a percentage of occupancy. The sanitizing and six-foot guidelines will still be part of the new normal.

What we have experienced is extraordinary in our lifetime. At no time in our history has the entire world economy been shut down due to a worldwide pestilence. True, there have been epidemics that have even eclipsed the number of deaths we've seen during this pandemic. However, the worldwide web in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has not only made possible ongoing church and business connections but also has enabled government entities to enforce lockdown regulations that probably would not have been tolerated by citizens in free countries a century ago. People did what they had to do because it was logical and prudent. They isolated themselves, wore masks and temporarily limited their gatherings because it made sense to mitigate the spread of the disease. And yes, many more died for lack of timely universal guidance, 21<sup>st</sup> century medical equipment, effective treatments and vaccines.

Another extraordinary thing has happened in our lifetime: Manna! Who would have imagined the government issuing \$1,200 checks to every taxpayer? Or, even more unimaginable, SBA forgivable loans to churches to aid in keeping church staff employed. The numbers alone are beyond comprehension – “three trillion here, three trillion there” – here, there, everywhere. Of course, it isn't really “given” to us since the national debt will someday demand repayment from us and our children. But, for now, it's “manna”.

Probably the greatest unexpected blessing is that many churches have actually increased their radar “footprint” during this period of isolation. Churches have been forced to meet as a congregation online. Who would have imagined that we would see our virtual attendance numbers actually climb to double, triple and even greater exposure while quarantined? Various formats of online giving have sustained churches and probably repositioned the offering method for the future, even when churches reopen.

Things are about to change. The extraordinary virtual attendance numbers are already starting to taper off. As government stimulus funds are tapped out and unemployment numbers become a reality in the days ahead, financial reality may hit home, personally and collectively. Those who observed the Joseph wisdom of fat and lean years will undoubtedly have an advantage. But what happens when the “manna” stops?

In the Old Testament story of the Israelite wanderings, we learned of God's miraculous sustenance of His people. When they ran out of the provisions they hauled out of Egypt, God then provided for them miraculously. Not only did they have the Shekinah cloud covering and leading them, but also, they were blessed with a daily portion of manna from heaven. The manna was meted out in exact proportions to each family to sustain them – no more, no less than what was needed during their journey. It was a season of miracles and divine economics!

Here's the interesting thing about that episode in the lives of God's people. God stopped the manna! When they had reached the Promised Land (yes, for the second time), by faith they entered in and began the arduous labor of actually possessing the land of promise. One would think God would have been a bit more subtle, gentler, more seeker sensitive than to simply yank away their dependence upon His miraculous provision. But the manna stopped. It was a miracle for a season, and that season had now ended. It was time for God's people to enter into the new normal of sustaining themselves on God's promise – a new territory He had prepared for them decades, probably centuries before.

So, what about today? Jehovah Jireh will always provide for those who see Him as their source. Since the mission of the church has not changed, neither has our God who enables us to fulfill it. The point of it all is "God"... "Emmanuel"... "God with us!" Not the manna, SBA loans, virtual numbers or online giving. It is no accident that the final focus of the Great Commission is not the mission itself, but "...lo, I am with you always, even to the ends of the age."<sup>1</sup> God was with Israel during its season of wilderness wanderings – and He remained with them when they entered the Promised Land. God has been with His people during the pandemic and He will remain with us as we move past it.

When my wife, Kathy, and I were called to lead a renowned counseling center in Ohio, we were excited to step into a new season of our lives where we had not been before. It fit perfectly into our vision for helping ministers and ministries, since thousands of ministry families had been helped through that ministry over the years. What we discovered as we studied the financial vitality of the center was that it could not survive, let alone pay a new president. It took some serious "carpet time" with God to be convinced that we were called to revive a ministry, and not called to a paycheck. I agreed to take leadership of the center, but with no paycheck until it became financially sustainable. That "wilderness journey" lasted nine months. What was amazing was that friends and supporters began to send us provision, knowing about our step of faith. For those nine months, we literally went to the mailbox and received "monthly manna". It was enough to pay every bill – we never lost traction. Miraculous! When the ministry entered a sustainable level of financial vitality, the manna stopped. Why? Because it was time for the ministry to support us.

Following every miracle in the Bible there comes a new mandate or a new source of provision. With the healing of the lepers, there was to be a confirmation by temple

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 28:20

priests – and yes, gratitude to the Healer. After the deliverance of the demoniac, he was to return to the town he had terrorized and demonstrate what it was to be freed by Jesus. Following the infilling experience of the upper room, there was to be an anointed “altar call” for thousands to be saved – and then a journey to the “uttermost parts of the earth” to tell the Good News. After the miracle comes the assignment. And with the assignment comes the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfill it.

The Holy Spirit has inscribed new territory on the map – new beachheads to be claimed! As we return to the new season of “normal”, things cannot...must not...go back to the “old normal.” There is an assignment to gather all those new virtual attendees into the loving arms of our influence. There is an assignment to help the hurting, the grieving and the displaced who are dealing with their “new normal.” There is an assignment to “tell of His mighty acts...that one generation might praise His works to another.”<sup>2</sup> There is an assignment to awaken the Bride with the kiss of the Holy Spirit.

After the manna, or the signs, or the wonders, there is always a mandate – a new revelation of Who God is. After “I Am the Lord” (Jehovah) there was “I Am the Lord Who Provides” (Jehovah Jireh). And after those revelations of God’s identity came deeper revelations until Jesus, Himself, shows up. And that’s the whole point, isn’t it? Jesus shows up! We will not be sustained by the manna forever – but we will be sustained by Jesus forever. After guidelines and regulations and lockdowns, we need Jesus! After the journey of miraculous sustenance, we need to arrive at the predestinated point of it all...Jesus! I’ve heard the names of pandemic, COVID-19, and coronavirus until it bounces around in an echo chamber. I’ve heard the names of doctors, medical scientists and epidemic modelers until I wonder if they’re in my iPhone contact list. But everything that is named will bow at the name of Jesus, the name above every name.

When the members return to our sacred gatherings, we’ll celebrate the reopening, the fellowship (albeit at a distance) and the worship. And we’ll grieve with those who have lost something or someone. But, above all, let’s give them what they really came for. As the seekers once said to the disciples long ago, “Sirs, we would see Jesus.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ps 145:1-7