

The Benefits of Hunger

[The LORD] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:1-11

Song: “Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer”

Plants don’t search for food. God designed them to make their own food right where they are rooted, through photosynthesis. Using the chlorophyll in their leaves, plants are able to turn sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide into the food they need to grow.

In contrast, God created humans to become hungry. Our bodies contain the hormone called ghrelin that tells our brains we are hungry, motivating us to search for food. We won’t find this food within ourselves, but outside ourselves. Hunger is a reminder that we are not self-sufficient.

Before the Israelites entered the long-awaited promised land, God reminded them of the hunger they experienced in the desert. God wanted them to know that although they were about to enter a place with plentiful food, they were always dependent on God not only for the physical food but also for nourishment for their souls.

It’s tempting to look in other places for soul-satisfying food. But God is the one who provides for us and fills us with exactly what we need.

Dear Father, we praise You for always providing for us both physically and spiritually. In Jesus’ name, amen.

December 28–January 3. **Rachel Schmoeyer** is a pastor’s wife and mom of four school-age children. She lives in Whitehall, Pennsylvania.

The Progression of Freedom

On the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you (Leviticus 25:9-10).

Scripture: Leviticus 25:8-17

Song: “Jubilee”

A big part of parenting is looking forward to each form of liberty as it comes. I remember the freedom that came when all my children were potty trained. No more diaper bags! I rejoiced when they could all buckle their own seatbelts. Finally, all the children went to school, which gave me liberty to use my daytime for other things. Each small liberty reminds me that one day the kids will be totally free from my house and off on their own.

There is also a progression of freedom throughout Scripture. Just before God’s people entered the promised land, God instituted the Year of Jubilee. Slaves were freed, debts were canceled, and land was returned to its original owner. Hundreds of years later, Isaiah used Year of Jubilee language to describe the freedom of returning to the promised land after exile (Isaiah 61). The return from exile was not the perfect freedom they were hoping for. There was more to come. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, He used Isaiah’s words to describe the freedom He would bring to the people. Now we are looking forward to Christ’s return, when God’s people will experience full freedom in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1).

Heavenly Father, we praise You for the freedom You have given us in Christ. Thank You for the promise of perfect freedom when Your Son returns. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Provision in Unexpected Places

The word of the LORD came to [Elijah]: “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food” (1 Kings 17:8-9).

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-16

Song: “Trust in You”

Maybe Chicago is called the Windy City so when you visit you aren't surprised by the windy conditions (from either the weather or the politicians?). Maybe Boston is nicknamed Beantown so you won't miss their delicious molasses-soaked baked beans. It's no surprise to find lots of gambling and other risky activities in Las Vegas, otherwise known as Sin City. Las Vegas was first called Sin City in the early 1900s because of its vices.

How surprised would you be if God told you to go to Sin City so He could meet your needs?

That is similar to what happened to Elijah when God said He would meet Elijah's needs in Zarephath. Zarephath in Sidon was not known for faithfulness to the Lord. It was ruled by a Baal-worshipping king. Wicked Queen Jezebel was from the region. Yet there was also a widow who faithfully obeyed the Lord and provided for Elijah.

God often provides for us in unexpected places. A new job or new home may look different from what we expected. Trust Jehovah-jireh, our provider, to give us what we need. It just may not come the way we think it will.

Dear Father, thank You for always meeting our needs—especially when they come in unexpected ways. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Call to Love Our Enemies

[The Israelite girl] said to her mistress [Naaman's wife], "If only my master [Naaman] would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" (2 Kings 5:3).

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Song: "Mighty to Save"

In 2001, Martin and Gracia Burnham, missionaries in the Philippines, were kidnapped and held captive for a year by a terrorist group. Gracia survived, but her husband did not. Many years later, Gracia gained opportunities, through a prison ministry, to share the gospel with some of her captors. Some of them have come to know Jesus as their Savior!

It would have been easy for Gracia to come away from her captivity and focus solely on her own healing and protection. But she went out of her way to share the gospel with her enemies.

In the same way, it would have been easy for the servant girl in today's Scripture to keep her mouth shut when Naaman needed help. The servant girl had been stolen into slavery. Naaman, the Aramean (Syrian), was her enemy. But instead of remaining silent, she gave a rave review of what God could do for him.

God's healing power and saving grace are offered to all, not just your friends and family. Jesus is our example. He died on the cross in our place while we were yet sinners. Take the initiative to soften your heart toward your enemies so you can share God's love with them.

Father, I pray that You would soften my heart and make me ready to share Your love with others—even my enemies. In Jesus' name, amen.

You Deserve a Break Today

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only’” (Luke 4:8).

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Song: “To God Be the Glory”

When Keith Reinhard was asked to pitch an advertising campaign for McDonald’s, he had no idea that his slogan would last for decades. When Ray Kroc, CEO of McDonald’s, first heard “You deserve a break today,” he loved the corny slogan. It proved effective since it gave people permission to indulge themselves with burgers, fries, and not having to cook for themselves. In the mid-1980s the phrase was tweaked into a question: “Have you had your break today?”

In the wilderness, the devil tried to distract Jesus from His mission by dangling some self-serving suggestions in front of Him. Food after 40 days of fasting, the “authority and splendor” of all the kingdoms of the world, and a miraculous rescue from God the Father would give Jesus a break from the tough life of a man on earth. But Jesus remained focused on His mission: giving all glory and honor to God and not himself.

It’s tempting to serve ourselves. We can trudge through our days focused on the next break that we can get, since we are sure we deserve it. While God does tell us to have a proper balance of work and rest, in both work and rest we are to glorify God and not ourselves. After all, He truly does deserve it!

Heavenly Father, may the Holy Spirit empower me to glorify You and not myself as I work and rest. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Faith in the Midst of Familiar

Jesus said to [the people of Nazareth], “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum’” (Luke 4:23).

Scripture: Luke 4:23-30

Song: “Faith of Our Fathers”

When our church sends out a new missionary, we have expectations that the Lord will do great things. The missionary will share the gospel, and many will come to saving faith in Christ Jesus. We believe that needs will be met through the missionaries who work with refugees. We have faith that orphanage workers will see children’s lives change.

But then we look around at our own hometown and feel full of skepticism. It doesn’t seem like God is doing anything here. Your church is full of ordinary people, not superstars. Wayward family members keep doing the same old thing, showing no sign of turning their lives over to the Lord. You feel hopeless that God would actually do anything amazing in your own town. The people in Jesus’ hometown were cynical too, even when Jesus was in town preaching at the synagogue.

Have faith that God can work right where you are in the midst of the familiar. God’s power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is still at work all over the world through the Holy Spirit. The same Jesus who visited Nazareth still loves your ordinary neighborhood and family. Pray for Him to work. Expect great things!

Father, give me faith that You will do great things in the midst of my familiar surroundings. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Who Is Calling?

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18).

Scripture: Luke 4:14-22

Song: “I’ve Got a River of Life”

When I was learning proper phone etiquette as a child, my mother taught me how to put the powder-blue, corded receiver to my ear and say, “Hello. This is Rachel. May I ask who is calling?” But when I taught my own children how to answer the phone, they did not need to ask who was calling. The phone told them with the caller ID technology.

Jesus didn’t have to wonder about His “calling”; He is the Messiah. Believers are called by the Holy Spirit unto salvation. And believers also have a calling on their lives to serve the Lord and share His love with others.

If you are pondering whether some specific duty, job, or opportunity may be the Holy Spirit calling, spend time in prayer and ask others to pray for you. Evaluate whether or not the calling is focused on others or self. A calling is not a calling if it seeks to benefit only ourselves and give us fame and attention. A calling from the Holy Spirit always invites us to serve the Lord and others.

Father, give me clarity to know Your calling on my life. Help me be focused on others and not myself in fulfilling my calling. In Jesus’ name, amen.