

MIRACLES: FAITH IN ACTION

A DEVOTIONAL BIBLE STUDY

EVERYDAY DEVOTIONS



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INTRODUCTION

The Bible is God's story revealed from His perspective. It tells us how He lovingly created us, how we rebelled against that love. We read of all the things He has done to redeem us and restore us into a relationship again. Throughout the Bible, God has pursued His wayward children, time, and again revealing Himself and His love.

Our rebellion is so pervasive that despite God's persistent pursuit, we continued to run away from Him. Even when God stepped into the course of human history, we managed to miss the point and return to our self-centered ways.

The great news is that despite such overwhelming rejection, God did not give up on us. He did not abandon His efforts and leave us to our justly deserved fate. Instead, He continued to reveal Himself to us and show us how much He loves us.

Throughout the Bible, we see how God sometimes directly engaged with individual people to demonstrate His power and love. We call these occasions "miracles." A miracle is an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention. (Miriam-Webster: Miracle) We call them extraordinary because they go outside the boundaries of our own human experience. They are something that only God can do.

In these miraculous moments, we see God in action.

Do you have a friend who is all talk and no action? When they tell you that they'll do something for you, you never expect that to occur. You know that it's just talking, and doesn't reflect anything more than a vague desire that's not connected to any commitment. For that friend, talk is cheap; actions are a completely unrelated thing.

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God isn't like that friend. One of the reasons we believe what He says is because we can see what He does. If we pay attention, we'll notice that His actions and His words are in perfect alignment.

We gain a special insight into God's heart and values when we see Him engage in our lives. We see how He loves and cares for us. We gain an understanding of how much sin pains Him. We see how far He is willing to go to keep His word.

In short, God's miracles should be a great encouragement to us today.

Of course, God's greatest miracle is found in the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. This is the good news of the gospel. Sinners rebelling against God, who did not deserve His love and who had earned His judgment, were allowed to exchange their sinfulness for Jesus' righteousness. Since Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, we are now free to enjoy the relationship as daughters and sons of God.

The gospel changes everything when it encounters our lives. It changes our past, our present, and our eternal future. As we look at the miracles in this book, we will also see how each one of them points toward and illustrates a part of the same gospel. And in that way, those miracles will be able to change our lives.

When we read the Bible, we are looking back in time. We are seeing the things God has done long ago. Does that have any relevance to our lives today in the twenty-first century?

Absolutely!

Hebrews 13:8 says "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever." James 1:17, talking about God, says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

Do you get the idea that what was true about God in times past is true about him today as well? That's the point I'm trying to make. The lessons we learn about God in our Bible are still true about Him today in our lives. We can count on Him to be consistent and constant.

This is what makes studying miracles so exciting. The very same God who did these wonderful things we read about is active in our world today! He has the same values and the same objectives and the same determined pursuit of our hearts.

Our circumstances do not control God.

While many of our external circumstances may be different than what we read about in the Bible, God is the same. We know that He will deal consistently with us because change is not in His nature.

This doesn't mean that we should be looking for Him to part the Red Sea for us. However, the same love and care He had for the Israelites at that moment is also directed toward us. We can expect the same things from Him today, even if they are delivered differently.

In the Bible, we see that God remained active with His creation. He didn't wind it up like a big toy

and set it into motion while He sat back and watched. I don't think that's changed in the years since the Bible was completed. I think God is at work in the world around us today. It remains for us to understand what that action is and what He wants to accomplish.

Faith is a critical element in God's action.

I'm not saying that faith makes God act. That would be wrong to think. But as we look at the miracles explored in this book, you will see that faith plays an essential role.

Faith makes miracles personal. Whether the miracle is testing a person's faith, or breathing life into it, time and again we see that miracles are connected to faith. And while God might be moving in the wider world, He is also moving in the hearts and lives of the people whose faith is placed in Him.

What's in the book?

In this book, we will look at ten different miracles recorded in the Bible. There are many more than that, but we're going to focus on just these few. If this topic gets you excited, I encourage you to continue this study on your own when you have finished.

As we look at these stories, we'll take a moment to enjoy the miraculous side of what God has done. But we'll also look much deeper than that. I think this is where the real lessons will be found.

These miracles happened in the lives of real people. We'll look at them to understand what was going on in their lives that resulted in such grand displays of God's power. As we go deeper, we'll see that God was working in their hearts as much as He was in the physical world around them.

Each session in this book will focus on a story in scripture. Take the time to read it. This is the anchor-point that everything else rests upon. It's the word of God about the miracles of God.

As you read these stories, notice how faith plays a part. Faith is a consistent theme throughout these miracles. Without faith's influence, it's possible that the miracles wouldn't have happened.

We'll look deeper together to see what else was going on in that miracle. God's actions are typically only part of the story. We'll put the whole story together to gain further insight. Based on this insight, we'll be able to draw applications into our own lives today.

I'm not going to tell you that you'll be able to experience the same miracles in your own life. That's not for me to promise. I think God is still deeply involved in His world, although He often works in more subtle ways than the stories we'll read.

We will look for ways to identify God's heart and character. Then you'll be equipped to look around you in your life to discover where you'll find God's same character at work. It might be quiet or simple, but it's still the same God doing miracles.

Finally, I've identified some questions to stimulate your thoughts about the stories. You can do these by yourself with a journal, or you could bring them to a small group where you share

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your answers. It's up to you. The main thing is to engage and let God's word work its way in you.

My prayer is that by reading this book your faith will be encouraged and made stronger. I want you to see God more clearly and have more confidence that what He says is true and good. I want your life to be changed by the ongoing application of the gospel.

This book isn't the answer. God is. But this book does its humble best to point you to Him in effective ways that matter.

I've created a companion workbook that goes with this study. You can download it and print off all the questions. This way, you can write out your answers and keep them neat and organized.

Get your Miracles: Faith in Action workbook from my website here.

<https://www.dennis-stevenson.com/faith-miracles/>

God bless you as you read on.

SESSION 1 - LAUGHTER IS NOT THE BEST MEDICINE



GENESIS 18:1-15; 21:1-2

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD?"



Let's take a moment to get to know Sarah. Her family came from Northeast Mesopotamia, a luxurious region of agriculture and civilization. When she married Abraham, she had no idea what was in store for her. Instead of settling down and taking over the family business, he had a dream from God that led him away from his hometown to wander all over the Canaanite frontier.

Sarah was a desert rose. She was so beautiful that on two separate occasions, her husband lied about his relationship to her lest powerful warlords kill him to marry her. Yet despite this beauty, she had no set home or place to call her own.

But Sarah had no children. Undoubtedly, she had tried. In those days, being barren was a source of deep cultural shame. It wasn't something she could just shrug off. Her serving women would know it, visiting women would know it, and most of all she knew it.

To make matters worse, her husband had another divine dream promising him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the sky and the grains of sand at the beach. Where did this leave her? Without a single heir, that promise could not come true, and it did not seem that she was able to have a child.

The situation got so bad, Sarah offered up one of her serving women as a surrogate. She sent another woman to her husband's bed in pursuit of the heir God had promised. And it worked. Hagar got pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. There was nothing wrong with her husband. The problem had to be with her.

Imagine what it must have been like seeing young Ishmael growing up in her household. He would have been a daily reminder of her failure to be the woman and the wife she wanted to be. Still, she put up with it. She endured the shame and the disappointment and the knowledge that she had failed.

To top it all off, this passage tells us that the "way of women" had stopped with Sarah. With these changes in her body, she would have known that she was beyond her child-bearing years. Sarah even described herself as "worn out". If we do the math, we calculate that Sarah was almost 90 years old at this point.

What kind of images do these words bring up for you? How much value do you find in anything that is worn out?

Here is where we find Sarah just before this miracle occurred: worn out, ashamed, beyond hope. The good news is that in less than a year, all this would change.

When the visitors came to their encampment, Sarah's husband did what culture dictated. He honored them with hospitality in the form of a nice meal. Sarah helped prepare it. There was no fast food available in those days, so everything had to be made from scratch. This was what hospitality entailed and the men seemed content to wait for the meal to be prepared.

Moses, as he was writing out this story, gave us a little bit of extra insight. He tells us about one of the three men by referring to him as LORD. If you look at the Hebrew word used there, the word is Jehovah. Moses is telling us that Abraham and Sarah are making dinner for God in bodily form. I would go a little farther to say that this is probably a pre-incarnate Jesus who had come for dinner.

We don't know if Abraham and Sarah knew right away that this wasn't a normal visitor. Nothing about what they say or do suggests that they did. It seems that they are responding with hospitality as they would to anyone else.

For her part, Sarah had no idea that by the end of the meal, she would be the recipient of her own prophecy. Everything was going to change, but she was completely unaware of it. She was going to get her heart's desire when she least expected it.

It all began to change when the men asked where Sarah was. This was an odd request. In that patriarchal culture, the man was the face of the family and the women took a supporting role. But here were the guests inquiring after Sarah by name!

It's amazing in this passage that not only is Sarah called out by name by the LORD twice, but we

have no record that her husband's name was spoken by the men. The three men seem especially focused on Sarah. The passage is most definitely all about her.

Abraham's response is simple and factual. He told them that Sarah was in the tent right over there. This is where she had been when Abraham asked her to make bread. This is near where he had been sitting when the men arrived. We get the sense that this is where she would normally be found.

Sarah was in the tent, but she was also very interested in what was going on outside. We read that she was "listening at the door." This may have been her normal practice, or she might have had a sense that these men had special significance.

The next statement seems to be directed to Abraham but intended for Sarah's ears. "Next year we will come back, and you will have a son." Certainly, this had some impact for Abraham, but in many ways, it would have meant so much more to Sarah.

At this point, Sarah laughed. I imagine this as a soft chuckle meant only for herself. I think of it as quiet and personal. In it, I hear all the pent-up shame and frustration and disappointment that had grown over the years. Rather than facing all that pain head-on, Sarah allowed herself a little laugh as if to say, "what a joke!"

Sarah had been hosting long enough that she knew what she could and couldn't do behind the door of her tent. Laughing out loud at her guests wasn't one of those things that one did. I don't think she laughed in such a way that her guests would hear it.

What happened next is a miracle on its own. The guests heard Sarah laugh. Either that or they could tell what was happening in her heart. They knew that she had just called their prophecy a joke. And just so she would know they knew, they asked Abraham why she laughed at them and thought she was too old.

They had no business knowing what was going on in her heart! How dare they go into that place of shame and pain and failure, and then speak it aloud in polite company? This was her secret, private burden to carry every day until she died. What else did they know?

What else could they do?

Indeed, by speaking her disbelief aloud, Jehovah showed His power. He showed that He knew more and could do more than Sarah ever dreamed possible. In that one moment, Sarah's shame was exposed, God's power was revealed, and she was given hope.

Hope. Yes, if He knew her deepest secrets and fears, then perhaps He could take away her shame. If he had the power at this moment, perhaps he could overcome her old and worn-out body to give her a child.

This entire package was wrapped in fear. If indeed this man was so powerful that he could know her thoughts, how would he respond to her disrespectful laugh? Would she be punished? Would

He change His mind? To cover her mistake, she denied that she had done such a terrible thing as laugh at the crazy prophecy. But her objections were not accepted and the man, Jehovah in human form, informed her that indeed she did laugh, and He knew it.

We find a happy ending to this story in Genesis 21.

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.

Sarah received a miracle. She had her baby. When she had given up hope, when she had determined it would not happen, God made it so.

I imagine that as she went in to her husband, she did so with a very different spirit. Rather than desperately hoping but fearing failure, I think Sarah felt confident that this was the time and it was going to happen. The LORD had spoken and had displayed His power in her life. Surely, He was able to do this.

To commemorate the power of God in this situation, Abraham named the boy Isaac. The name itself means “laughter.” It was a poignant reminder to Sarah of who God was and what He was capable of. Not only was He with her to revive her worn-out body and give her fertility, but he was able to see into her heart and touch her hopes and dreams and change her bitterness into joy.

IN OUR LIVES TODAY

Sarah’s great miracle does not mean that God will always give us what we desire. That’s not a clear reading of this passage. God acted in this situation because He had already promised a child. Sarah’s desire for a baby was complimentary to His overall goal. But her circumstances were different than ours today.

I think this miracle draws attention to our hearts. Sarah had allowed bitterness and disappointment to take root in her heart. She looked at her circumstances and how she was not getting what she wanted. Her perspective seems reasonable as we look at it today. But the result of that approach was a heart that laughed at God’s promise to do a work in her life.

We all have areas of our lives that are like Sarah’s. Perhaps it’s something that we want or think we deserve. Maybe it’s something we’ve worked toward for a very long time. When we don’t get it, we are responsible for our reaction. It’s clear to see from Sarah’s story here that she let bitterness and frustration take root because of her unmet expectations.

This miracle certainly was a biological miracle. As an older woman, past childbearing age, Sarah had a baby. But we see also, and I believe, more importantly, the ways that our heart shapes our attitude and approach to God. When we allow our hearts to be turned, we laugh at God’s involvement in our lives and push away the good things He does offer us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & CONSIDERATION

1. The gospel is God's power to change hearts and lives. How does this miracle point to the power of the gospel in our lives today?
2. Is there an area in your life where you have allowed your heart to turn to bitterness and disappointment? Where would you laugh at God if He spoke to you today?
3. Sarah did everything she could on her own to give Abraham his heir, all the way up to giving him her servant as a surrogate. No one could fault her external dedication. Where do you excel in dedication while your heart is crushed on the inside?
4. At some point, Sarah must have realized that she didn't have a baby because God did not allow it. Her infertility wasn't about her. Transitioning this responsibility to God would have relieved a tremendous burden. What outcome are you blaming on yourself that you can now release to God?
5. In this miracle, God placed Sarah front and center. Even though she was in the tent, He was speaking to her. In what areas do you feel like God has passed you by and you don't matter? How can the example of Sarah change that perception?
6. How do you think Sarah would have related to her baby differently for having waited so long to have a child? How is this a gift and how is it a burden?

SESSION 2 - BREAD FROM HEAVEN



EXODUS 16

In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.'"



Odds are, you know the rough details of the story of manna. The children of Israel had escaped from Egypt and were wandering in the wilderness. They were hungry and had nothing to eat (because that's what wilderness is like!). So God provided this mystery bread to them.

If that's what you know, you're right on – but you're missing so much more of this story. That is indeed the rough outline of what happened, but there are nuggets to be gained from looking deeper.

Just to give you some context, the children of Israel had been out of Egypt for about forty-five days at this point. Verse one sets the timeline on the fifteenth day of the second month since they had left Egypt. It had only been a month and a half since they had celebrated first Passover, miraculously crossed the Red Sea, seen the army of Egypt destroyed, and tasted the miraculously sweet water at the springs of Mara.

That's a lot of amazing God-work in a relatively short period. You might think that the people were still in the honeymoon phase of their liberation.

You would be wrong.

Forty-five days and an amazing string of miracles later, the children of Israel are muttering and complaining. On the one hand, they had a good point. There wasn't a lot of food and they were hungry. They'd been walking through some inhospitable territory and they didn't have much to eat.

Humanly looking at their bellies, they had a legitimate reason to be upset. Their fleshly assessment of the situation was, "We were better off in Egypt because at least we had good eats there. Out here, we're going to starve to death."

How short-sighted is that?

God had provided a miraculous escape and had already shown provision to them. Undrinkable water became drinkable. That's a great showing! You might think they were waiting on God for the next miracle of provision. They weren't.

The text says that they were grumbling at Moses and Aaron. But the buck didn't stop with Moses. He knew that they were ultimately upset at God. They were only taking out their frustrations on him and his brother because they were convenient.

The people didn't have a direct line to God. They had to work through Moses and Aaron to talk to God. So what we're seeing here is a classic case of shooting the messenger.

God knew what was going on. In verse 4, He spoke to Moses and said that He would do something. He would take care of the need that the people were so concerned about. God said He would "rain down bread from heaven" on the people.

He knew they were hungry and that there wasn't a lot of food around. He knew that they had legitimate needs that were beyond their ability to satisfy. God wasn't going to tell them to suck it up and tough it out. No, He was going to do something for them.

It's important to note here that God initiated this miracle despite the people's bad attitude. They had a real need but they were grumbling about it. God chose not to focus on their grouching, but on their rumbly tummies.

God put His grace on display. Grace means getting something that you don't deserve. Based on their attitudes, people didn't deserve gracious treatment. They were ungrateful and displayed a lack of faith. God would have been entirely within His rights to sit back and say, "I'll wait until their attitude improves." He could have said, "I'll wait until they turn to me and ask me nicely to provide some food."

If God had done any of those things, we would have looked at the situation and said, "Yep, that makes good sense." Nobody wants to repay bad attitudes with kindness.

But God had a different plan. He was a first-mover and knew what the people needed. He was ready to answer that need in an over-the-top kind of way.

God was in the need-meeting business. He knew the people were in a place that wouldn't support them with food. He also knew that they would need support as long as they were in this wilderness – not just one meal. So He put His plan into play.

Moses called the shot. He gathered the children of Israel together for a talk that day. Based on what God had told him, he explained to the gathered crowd what was going to happen. That very night they would see the hand of God in action. The next day God's graciousness would be on display for them.

What happened next was three miracles in very rapid succession.

First, the glory of God appeared in a cloud. This was a visible demonstration of God's presence with them and His power. We know from Exodus 13, that God led His people out from Egypt with "a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night." This lasted for at least several days, through the crossing of the Red Sea. Now we see God using this familiar symbol of His presence to communicate to His people.

Everyone there would have immediately remembered the desperate trek from Egypt to the seemingly impossible location trapped up against the Red Sea. They would have known that it was all part of God's plan to lead them to safety and destroy the Egyptian army. Seeing this sign of God's presence would have communicated a powerful message of both God's presence and His provision.

God's glory in the cloud was just the start. That evening God caused a flock of quail to land in the camp. The parallel passage in Numbers 11 says that the flock of quail was so large that it stretched a day's journey on both sides of the camp of the Israelites. They collected enough quail to eat for a month from this single flock.

The final element in this trio of miracles was manna. This was something new that the children of Israel had never seen before. The word manna means "what is it?" They didn't know. Today we might call it the "thingamajig" or the "doodad" or "hoozey". Think about the words you use to refer to things you don't understand. That's exactly what the Israelites were thinking.

Manna covered the ground in the morning. The Bible says that when the dew went away, the manna was left. After a while, when the sun had come up, it went away. So there was a window of time for everyone to go outside and gather "their daily bread." Literally.

When the people saw this, they must have run to Moses for instruction. Moses had to explain to them what to do with the manna on the ground. Gather it up, he said, about "an omer" per person. That translates to about two quarts (two liters) per person. That was the amount that was needed.

Nobody in the camp understood what was going on. Moses was giving instructions, but to some extent, they didn't make sense. He told them to only gather enough for one day. I'll bet many people thought that was a short-sighted instruction. Instead of following it, they would have hoarded it. Perhaps they gathered as much as they could store.

The next day, all the stored and hoarded manna rotted and stank and was full of worms. This was a clear message from God that they could not rely upon their gathering skills to provide for tomorrow.

Other people thought to ration their manna and not eat the entire omer. Perhaps they wanted to hedge against what might happen the next day and make sure that they weren't left without food if it was just a one-time event. They had the same rude awakening the next day to find rotting manna in their jars.

God's message was clear. Trust Me. Hoarding wasn't a strategy for managing uncertainty. Neither was self-denial. The only way to get from one day to the next was to trust that God would provide manna again the next day.

And He did.

Exodus 16 tells us that God provided manna day in and day out for forty years until they entered into the Promised Land. Only when they were in the "land flowing with milk and honey" did God stop providing daily manna.

There was another faith challenge as well. On Thursday night, Moses gathered the people and told them that Friday was special. It was the day before the Sabbath. In honor of God who rested on the seventh day, they would also rest from their gathering activities. This meant that on Friday only, they were able to gather two omers per person and it wouldn't go bad overnight.

Imagine how this must have seemed to the average Israelite! On Tuesday if you got greedy, you woke up to a stinking gross mess on Wednesday morning. But the same behavior on Friday was rewarded with preservation and a good meal on Saturday, the Sabbath.

God was in control. He set the rules in a way that honored Him. God rested on the seventh day because He had done everything necessary and it was good. No further creation was necessary. His people were to follow that same pattern as an act of devotion toward Him.

At the very beginning of this miracle, God told Moses that embedded in this set of miracles was a test. He wanted to know if the people would follow the rules He put forth. In many ways, they didn't have any choice. If they over-collected during the week, they got a rotting mess. If they under collected on Friday, they went hungry on Saturday. There were nice natural consequences baked into this test.

But the people needed to learn the practicality of how following the law was for their benefit. The manna was a perfect object lesson for them. Using natural consequences it demonstrated the folly

of taking manna into their own hands. Manna was a gift from God, and to be used as He directed. It wasn't an entitlement that they could use however they wanted.

IN OUR LIVES TODAY

The miracle of manna was intended for the Israelites in the wilderness. God had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would give them a land. That promise seemed faint when they were captive in Egypt. But as God led them out, it was His responsibility to see to it that they survived until they arrived in the Promised Land.

In the miracle of the manna, we see how God held to His word. He provided what His people needed so that He could fulfill his promise to them.

This does not necessarily mean that God will always provide food on our tables when we are hungry. All over the world, Christians are going hungry today. God is not a divine catering service to provide meals for everyone who is hungry.

That does not mean that God, as a loving father, does not provide. Many believers can testify to divine provision when it seemed like there was no other way. God is good in this way.

Just as the Israelites were looking forward to the promise of a land, believers today are looking forward to the promise of a future with God. We have no more received this promise than the Israelites had received their Promised Land.

This miracle serves as encouragement to us that God is aware of His promises and will provide what is needed so that we will receive what He has promised. As we look toward our future with Him, we can rely upon the same integrity that saw Him provide sustenance for His people while they lived in the wilderness, waiting to take possession of their land.

In this miracle, we also see God's grace. Even though the people were complaining about God and the circumstance He led them to, God was doing good things for them. He offered them quail and manna. He could have offered water and dry bread. But He gave them something that tasted good, like wafers made with honey.

This is a foreshadowing of the Gospel. Even though we deserved His wrath and justice, He offered mercy and grace, sending His Son to receive the penalty for sin. We, in turn, receive the righteousness that Jesus earned through His perfect life. God is the same across all time. In the wilderness, we see His loving character on display.

Finally, we see the need for obedience. When the gift of manna was given, there were instructions for how to use it. Where instructions were provided, obedience was expected. Everyone who disobeyed the instruction was greeted with hunger or a disgusting mess. There was no tolerance for excuses or rationalization. Obedience was black and white.

Our faithful obedience brings glory and honor to God. Our obedience acknowledges that He knows what He is doing. It places Him in the place of authority for setting the guidelines for our behavior and our conduct. It places us beneath Him as created beings. We have no business telling Him that we know better. We don't.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & CONSIDERATION

1. Where in your life are you most prone to grumble against God? What is the underlying value or ideal that prompts your grumbling?
2. Can you recall a time when your behavior deserved one reaction from God, but He acted toward you in the exact opposite manner? How did you respond to that?
3. In the miracle, God was looking ahead to the needs of 40 years of wilderness wandering, not just the next meal. How do you think that influenced the way He met the need for food?
4. Given God's greater perspective on your life (not just what you are aware of right now), how does that change the way you react when He provides today?
5. Have you ever been tempted to use God's provision for your purposes? How did that work out?
6. Daily manna means that the people had to have faith that God would provide tomorrow. In what ways do you struggle to have faith in God even as He provides for you today?

