

QUAIL JERKY AND THE ILLUSION OF ABUNDANCE A Devotional Meditation from Beha'alotcha (In Your Going Up)

Numbers 8:1-12:16; Zechariah 2:10-4:7; Daniel 3:12-18; Philippians 4:12-13

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Desert Quail (Gambel's Quail), illustration from The Birds of California, William Leon Dawson, (Los Angeles: South Moulton Company, 1923). Biodiversity Heritage Library, [via Flickr](#).

In the spring of 2001, the Almighty challenged me to decide whether I was serious about my professed faith. He asked that I choose either the Kingdom commission He offered, or the respectable mediocrity of my socially acceptable Christian lifestyle. I accepted His offer even though I had little idea of the cost for my family and me. The promise of a Kingdom commission came with a promise of intensive preparation through some arduous struggles.

Some years into this process, my wife and I remained frustrated at our financial situation. My income as a military officer serving in the Pentagon during wartime was the highest we had ever seen, yet we continued to live paycheck to paycheck thanks to the cost of living in Washington, DC. This situation motivated me to cry out to God frequently. One day, I realized that, even though we remained debt-ridden, our family always enjoyed enough to eat, lived in a sturdy house in a peaceful neighborhood, and had the resources to educate our daughters. That's how the Holy Spirit helped me understand that the provision of God was always there for us, just as He promised. It was years later that we retired our last debt. Even today we are not financially independent, yet our experience of our Heavenly Father's providence gives height and depth and breadth to the faith we previously professed only with our mouths.

There is a fine line between complaining, and a legitimate expression of concern. The legitimate expression is the cry to God saying, "If You don't come through, we perish." That's the kind of outcry born of faith, knowing that there is no other Providence than the Creator Himself. The other type of expression comes from less lofty motives. That kind of outcry says, "I desire Your provision in this specific way because that's what I'm used to, and You promised to give me whatever I ask."

Do you hear the difference? The cry of faith is the one that leaves the Creator free to respond, or not, as He chooses. The cry of self is the one that demands the Creator respond in a way we find acceptable.

Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego had learned this lesson by the time King Nebuchadnezzar demanded they worship the idol he had made. Their mastery of this lesson is evident in what they said to the king:

O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to answer you concerning this matter. If it is so, our God whom we serve is able to save us from the furnace of blazing fire and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. Yet even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image that you set up.

Daniel 3:16-18 TLV

That's the kind of faith grounded in the Creator Himself, not in what the Creator provides. Why else would these three Hebrew men cling to their God even in exile in a hostile land? Their answer to the king, and their willingness to endure the heat of Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, are far more than expressions of faith; they are markers of identity. Of all the Hebrews in Babylon, the only ones who stand out are these three and their colleague Daniel. Perhaps it's because the other Hebrews pinned their identity on what their God could do for them rather than Who He is.

That's what a previous generation of Hebrews did in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land:

The people were murmuring in the ears of *ADONAI* about hardship, and when *ADONAI* heard, His anger burned. The fire of *ADONAI* blazed among them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses, so Moses prayed to *ADONAI* and the fire died out. The name of that place was thus called Taberah because fire from *ADONAI* had burned among them.

The grumblers among them began to have cravings, so *Bnei-Yisrael* [the children of Israel] began to wail repeatedly, saying, "If we could just eat some meat! We remember the fish that we used to eat in Egypt, for free—the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic! But now we have no appetite. We never see anything but this manna."

Numbers 11:1-6 TLV

The Provider of Israel was so angry at this that He took quick action, just like a parent takes quick action when a young child demands to stay up all night. Let the child do so, but then require him to get up at the normal time and go to school as usual. That teaches the child the consequences of his actions, and hopefully a bit of wisdom about what choices to make in the future.

That same principal was in operation when God responded to the Hebrews' demand by sending flocks of quail into the camp. There was so much that they would have been able to eat quail meat for a whole month. The daily portion of manna was the equivalent of one quart per person, but when the quail arrived, everyone gathered at least ten times that amount.

What were they going to do with that many dead birds? Maybe they were going to make quail jerky and put it aside for emergencies – after they had a feast and stuffed themselves with so much roasted, fried, boiled, and grilled quail that they wouldn't be able to move for a day or two. Of course, being so uncomfortable in their digestion, they wouldn't be able to respond when the Cloud of God's glory lifted off the Tabernacle and the camp of Israel set out on the march. What choice would they make then – stumble along after the Cloud as best they could, or stay in place until they felt better, and then catch up to the camp?

We like to think we would make the right choice, but we would probably be the ones crying out the loudest for something other than God's manna. Nothing reveals the true spirit of a person better than hardship – even if it's the perceived hardship of not having the tasty treats we prefer even though there is solid nutrition right in front of us. Ultimately, our complaint is not that we lack anything, but that we have no control over what is provided.

It's that craving for control that arouses the anger of Providence. That's why fire swept through the camp, killing many and depriving many more of their tents, possessions, and livestock. That's also why thousands died in the very act of eating the quail He provided in response to their demands to set the agenda for the nation. When the tests became too hard, they revealed the sad truth: what they really wanted wasn't deliverance from Egypt, but deliverance from any control that kept them from being gods of their own little realms.

Are we any different? No, not really. At least our Hebrew ancestors had the excuse of living in a barren desert. We have abundance, even in an age of manufactured crises designed to keep us dependent on anything but the One Who created us out of the dust and promised to meet our daily needs. In truth, though, it's really an illusion of abundance. We can't really have whatever we want, even if circumstances align for a season in such a way that the leeks, onions, and watermelons of Egypt mask the bitter taste of exile. The sooner we break through the illusion, the better. That's when we will learn what Paul learned:

I know what it is to live with humble means, and I know what it is to live in prosperity. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of contentment—both to be filled and to go hungry, to have abundance and to suffer need. I can do all things through Messiah who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:12-13 TLV