

Five Kernels of Corn

Joshua 4:4-8; Isaiah 41:8-10; Micah 6:8; 4:2

By Doug Sterrett

Sometimes we are prone to skip over portions of Scripture, thinking that they have little or no application to us today—that certain stories are simply there to help us picture the events surrounding an ancient people in an ancient time. Joshua 4:4-8 is one of these stories as it depicts the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River by the people of Israel. Following God’s instruction they picked up twelve stones from the river bed to set up a memorial to help them remember what God had done for them. Listen:

⁴ So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵ and said to them, “Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ ⁷ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.”

⁸ So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down.

Likewise I have given each of you five kernels of corn this morning. As you hold them in your hand I want you to remember what God has done for you and your nation and give thanks for what you have today. Listen while I tell the true story of how God miraculously provided for His people as our nation was founded.

The Pilgrims landed in November 1620. The voyage across the Atlantic had taken about seven weeks. They had been on either the *Mayflower* or the old *Speedwell* (which had to turn back) since July 22. They had been storm tossed the whole way—102 passengers crowded between the decks of a pitching, damp, smelly, inferno—constantly weakened by seasickness. It seemed as if Satan would wipe them out before they could plant the good news of the Gospel in America, but God forged them into a company, bound together by a covenant and through the hardship of the stormy voyage.

That winter, almost half of them died. In part the death rate stemmed from general weakness and scurvy following the voyage, but many died from starvation and illness. Finally, March came—a New England spring. Soon they were planting twenty acres of corn as well as vegetables. They built more permanent homes, fished and hunted, and several explored the New England coast. By harvest time they had enough food to see them through the winter.

They were so grateful to God for His provisions that they planned a feast of Thanksgiving and invited their new friend, the Indian chief, Massasoit, to join them. He arrived a day early with ninety of his people. Suddenly, the Pilgrims worried that their winter supplies might not hold out if they had to feed all these people. But after prayer they trusted God and the Indians brought five dressed deer and a dozen wild turkeys and other food. It became a joyous occasion with shooting contests, foot races and wrestling matches. It was so much fun that Massasoit stayed for three days. Through it all God sustained them and they entered their second year with plenty of food—they thought. Then a ship arrived and dropped off thirty-five more colonists. They brought no food, clothing or other supplies. Suddenly, the colony had to go on half rations. They prayed, but that winter they were finally reduced to a daily ration of five kernels of corn. Miraculously, no one starved to death.

The second summer they again planted their corn, but the people were listless in doing so. The leaders felt they would need twice as much to see them through. Their solution was to allot each family a plot of land. They could have whatever they were able to grow for their private use. Free enterprise had entered America. The colonists were reenergized, planting and tending their very own land. Then a new threat arose as the dry spell that had started between plantings became a terrible drought. It went on for twelve weeks.

Prayerfully, they examined their own condition before God and held a day of fasting and prayer. They focused on getting rid of the self trust and pride they had fallen into as they planted their own crops. They had allowed themselves to think they could do it alone. The result of their fasting and prayer was phenomenal. A gentle rain blew in that same day and softly fell for fourteen days. Not only did this save their crops but the Indians were amazed and admired the goodness of God toward them. The native Americans had never observed such a response to prayer. [Marshall & McDowell, p. 142-3]

When the harvest time ended this second autumn they declared another day of Thanksgiving and Massasoit brought over 120 of his people. The first course? It was five kernels of corn on an empty plate, almost like the Jewish Passover, lest anyone should forget God's provision.

Look at the five grains in your hand. Are you so committed to God that you would be willing to subsist on five grains of corn a day and simply trust Him for your provision? [Marshall & McDowell, p. 143]

Put yourself in the shoes of a Pilgrim for a moment. You have just been given your daily ration of five kernels of corn. You are hungry, anxious for the winter to pass. Your children are crying for more. You have entered the blockhouse to worship and pray. The words of Isaiah 41:8-10 New Revised Standard Version are read from the pulpit. Would you trust God?

**But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham my friend;
You whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners,
Saying to you, “You are my servant.
I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
Fear not, for I am with you.
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.**

The Pilgrims trusted Him and He provided for and strengthened them. Few other colonies held the degree of trust represented by your five kernels of corn.

Another five kernel period came upon America some 160 years later, following the end of the Revolutionary War, as the new republic began to inscribe its money with “in God we trust.” God through war and hardship had forged the thirteen Colonies together. Now, exuberant over their victory, some felt they were finally free to become, “a city on a hill”—a new Jerusalem. The truth is, however, that our country began to slide away from the Covenant way and entered a period of spiritual decline. The nation was on short rations, five kernels of spiritual corn a day. Some began to understand that God had delivered America in spite of her national traits, not because of them and selfishness returned with a roar. States refused to pay their share of the war debt. Massachusetts paid more than Pennsylvania, New York, Virginia and Maryland combined though she had only thirteen percent of the total population. Disputes arose and as the Constitutional Convention began it was a stormy affair held together only by the dignity of Washington’s presence and demeanor. He was God’s man in the right place at the right time. [Marshall & Manuel, p. 341] Finally, as the spiritual drought was about to break up the Constitutional Convention, Ben Franklin rose and spoke:

“In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor.... And have we now forgotten this powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance?

“I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: “that God governs in the affairs of man.” And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?

“We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings that except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. I firmly believe this. I also believe that, without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel; we shall be divided by our little, partial local interests; our projects will be confounded; and we ourselves shall become a reproach and a byword down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter, from this unfortunate

instance, despair of establishing government by human wisdom and leave it to chance, war, or conquest.

"I therefore beg leave to move that, henceforth, prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven and its blessing on our deliberation be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business." [Marshall & Manuel, pp. 342-3]

Following the speech there was a silent and sober reflection in the convention that became a turning point. Nearly all of the delegates were believers of some sort and from that moment on they got down to the serious business of crafting a new constitution. Like the gentle rain following the Pilgrims day of prayer, the diligence which fell upon the convention resulted in the Constitution of the United States of America, complete with a Bill of Rights. As it grew, its harvest was the preservation of the union. It was given by the hand of God.

Today, we are again experiencing spiritual drought in America. We have been diverted from our true purpose by the very wealth and plenty God has given us to manage. It is time for each of us to hold out those five kernels of corn in our sweaty palms, to remember what they represent, and to remember that He who gives can also take away unless we live up to our side of the covenant. Let us, this morning, search our souls and examine our relationship with our Lord. Let us turn away from the self-love and self-interest that has gripped us and in the spirit of the Pilgrims and the Constitutional delegates make a commitment to give ourselves to God in trust. Let us pray each day for: (Micah 6:8 NIV)

**He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.**

Micah 4:2

**"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.**

Bibliography:

1. Beliles, Mark A. & McDowell, Stephen K., America's Providential History, Charlottesville, VA: Providence Foundation, 1989.
2. Bradford, William, Of Plimoth Plantation, Wright and Potter edition. Quoted in: Marshall & Manuel.
3. Marshall, Peter & Manuel, David, The Light and the Glory, Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1977.

File: 6-Is41-8-10 Five Kernels of Corn. Preached: WSPC, Thanksgiving Eve Nov. 24, 2004.