

40 loaves

Breaking Bread with Our
Father Each Day



Daily Readings
to Renew a
Hungry Spirit

c. d. baker
author of *101 Cups of Water*

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

FORTY LOAVES

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Dear Reader,

Do you ask yourself many questions? I don't mean questions like, "Why can't I resist chocolate ice cream?" I mean probing, sometimes embarrassing questions about how you relate to your faith. Questions like, "Why does God seem silent?" or "Why don't I have much faith?"

Unfortunately, most of us are reluctant to admit we have questions like these. Many of our church communities have led us to believe that certainty and confidence are proof of true spirituality. Bewilderment or—worse yet, doubt—is seen as a sign of weakness.

Besides, questions disturb things.

Maybe questions embarrass some people or threaten them; maybe they seem rebellious, even sinful. Whatever the reasons, many of us feel the need to keep our questions to ourselves. Ironically, we even try keeping them from God.

What a shame.

A German linguist once made the odd observation that the punctuation marks of our lives say something about us. And he was convinced that the question mark was the most meaningful mark of all.

Questions invite authenticity. Questions give us permission to wonder. Questions open the door for wisdom. Asking opens our eyes to ourselves. Asking opens our hearts to the Spirit.

Indeed, someone has said that it's always a more beautiful answer to ask a more beautiful question.

However, I should warn you, questions *do* disturb things. Seeing ourselves more clearly is not always comfortable—but it is always good. Increased self-awareness can refresh our relationships with God and others...and can lead to healthy self-acceptance.

40 Loaves is inspired by Christian strugglers—people wandering through the wilderness of their own souls, not always fitting in, yet asking from and sharing with others those precious bits of bread they find while struggling along the way. It is my hope that, like them, you and I will be nourished with the wisdom that comes from asking and sharing the right questions.

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst’” (John 6:35).

Grace and peace be with you always,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. D. Baker', with a stylized, overlapping flourish.

C. D. Baker

Why do I want Jesus in my life?

I KNOW A WOMAN WHO SPENT years doing all the things the preacher said a good follower of Jesus should do: she obeyed the preacher's rules, she worked hard at believing, she prayed faithfully, and she mailed her checks regularly to the address on the television screen.

But one evening she wrestled with an uncomfortable realization. She found herself staring at a picture of Jesus, only to feel resentment instead of love. It was then that she had to admit to herself that the Jesus she knew exhausted her.

She turned away from the picture, suddenly realizing that she had not wanted Jesus in her life out of love for him. He was too hard to love. Yet she still wanted Jesus in her life. Why?

Then it hit her like a bucket of cold water.

She had wanted Jesus in her life for her sake alone. She wanted material blessings. She wanted to feel righteous and maybe superior to others. She wanted peace and joy. And she wanted Jesus close so he

wouldn't punish her—something of a fire insurance policy to keep her out of hell.

But she didn't really want Jesus.

I wonder why I really want Jesus in my life. Do I really want to take him *by* the hand or just take *from* his hand?

Like the woman above, could it be that the Jesus I know is some cosmic force I fearfully try to manipulate for my benefit? Is that why I focus on his gifts and dodge his anger, all the while avoiding his eyes?

I'm afraid I do sometimes feel this way and, frankly, it's no wonder many of us do.

Many of us have only ever been shown Performance Jesus—a “carrot and stick” Jesus. On the one hand, this Performance Jesus doles out blessings if we toe the line, and on the other, he's ready to strike us hard for disobeying. He's a daunting presence that we need to either appease or avoid.

Most of us know people like that...

We call them abusers.

Do we really want them in our lives? Of course not. In fact, we shouldn't. So why would we want *that* Jesus in our lives? We shouldn't.

Unfortunately, performance Christianity unwittingly presents just that kind of Jesus. Performance Christianity keeps many from seeing Gospel Jesus, and so we don't experience Jesus's love. Without feeling his love, it's hard—actually it's impossible—to love him. So we obey

him out of self-interest and fear but never follow him out of love and gratitude.

But there is good news.

The Jesus of the gospel very much wants us to want him in our lives. He understands why we've struggled to love him. He feels our anger with that other Jesus, but he wants to reintroduce himself as he really is.

Gospel Jesus is the only person in the universe who truly loves us as we are.

And he has a gift waiting to pour into our opened hearts. It's called grace.

So let's ask him for the gift...every day. Let's ask him to show us how much he loves us in spite of ourselves. Let's ask him to teach us the gospel daily—to remind us over and over that he loves his children no matter what.

Let's ask him daily to show himself as he really is—a big lover of big sinners.

And when he answers us, we will be changed. No longer will we obey for our own gain, but instead we will simply follow him, and gladly. For each time we feel his love overflowing in our hearts, spilling over into every part of our being and bursting beyond ourselves in love for others, we will love him again, and again, and again (see 1 John 4:19).

Those are the times we will really want Jesus in our lives.

Those are the only times we *can* really want Jesus in our lives.



Food for Thought

When have I used Jesus for my own purposes?
What are the things I expect Jesus to do for me?
Can I honestly say that I *love* Jesus?
How would I describe Jesus to someone else?
Do I really understand how much Jesus loves me...no
matter what?

.....

A PRAYER

*O Lord, how dry I am without Jesus.
How foolish and vain
When I desire anything but him.
For what, without Jesus, can the world
give me?
Let me love all things for the sake of Jesus
But let me love Jesus for his own sake.*

.....

ADAPTED FROM *THE IMITATION OF CHRIST*,
THOMAS À KEMPIS (1380-1471)

.....

Why am I so uncomfortable with doubts?

A young woman I know recently remarked that her life is made miserable by doubts. She said that her unhappiness started when she began to doubt a few points of her church's doctrines. She began to panic. She thought if she doubted a few things, she would soon doubt everything, and that would leave her in a place of disbelief.

I told her I doubted that would happen. She didn't appreciate that.

Another friend doubted her salvation to the point of depression. Her church insisted that "knowing" was to be the source of her assurance.

I invited her to doubt her church. She was too afraid.

I wonder: are doubts the bane of faith or faith's driving edge?

In the examples above, healthy doubts and hard questions could have been doorways for many to know God more deeply. Instead, a desperate need for certainty prevented authentic encounters with God.

Doubts threaten our sense of control, don't they?

As church communities and as individuals we prefer to be sure about things, but doubts have a way of disrupting our confidence—our control. They lead to worry, fear, and insecurity. But here's an idea to consider:

What if our discomfort with doubt is really a symptom of an addiction to control?

Doubts also threaten our foundations. We think we must be absolutely certain about the things we believe. Otherwise, how could we survive? We've come to trust our *knowing*. So, what about this:

What if our discomfort with doubt is a symptom of misplaced faith?

Maybe we should look at doubting a different way. After all, who said doubting must always be a bad thing? Jesus instructed Thomas to “stop doubting and believe” (John 20:27, NIV). Does that mean that all doubt is bad? What if doubt and faith are sometimes related?

Martin Luther observed that the opposite of faith is not doubt or unbelief but rather self-reliance. Healthy doubt can actually drive us to faith by putting us beyond ourselves.

Most of us see doubting Thomas in an unfair light. Few of us want to be like him, do we? But, if we're honest, most of us *are* like him. We do secretly wonder about the things we say we believe. That's reality.

At least Thomas had the courage to admit his doubts.

Did that make him a bad disciple? What did Jesus do when he learned of Thomas's doubts?

Did he rebuke him? No.

Did he shame him? No.

Jesus invited Thomas to explore his doubts...to come close to him and touch him *so that he might believe*.

Healthy, humble doubt simply wants to know Truth (Jesus) better.

So, what if we gave ourselves permission to doubt, at least once, the spiritual ideas we've been taught to believe? Now, I'm not talking about closed-minded cynicism like Zacharias's dismissal of the angel's promise (see Luke 1:18). That earned him a pretty stiff rebuke.

I am talking about sincere, yearning doubt like Mary revealed to the angel who foretold her virgin birth (see Luke 1:34). This is not scoffing dismissal; this is the kind of humble doubt *that longs to believe*. This is the kind of doubt we find in Matthew 28 when some of Jesus's disciples came to worship the risen Lord...*while still doubting*.

Humble doubt offered in a spirit of honest suspicion invites the Holy Spirit to teach and to inspire deeper and deeper faith within us. It liberates us to cry, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).



Food for Thought

When do I wrestle with doubts? Do I feel guilty when I do?

What do I think of others who have doubts?

Is it okay to not always be sure?

Is my faith more in my certainties or more in a Jesus of some mystery?

A PRAYER

*While Faith is with me, I am blest;
It turns my darkest night to day;
But while I clasp it to my breast,
I often feel it slide away...
Oh, help me, God! For thou alone
Canst my distracted soul relieve;
Forsake it not: it is thine own,
Though weak, yet longing to believe.*

ANNE BRONTË (1820-1849),
FROM "THE DOUBTER'S PRAYER"

Why can't I overcome sin in my life?

I heard a popular radio preacher say that he had not sinned for three days. I turned to my wife. “Gee. What’s the matter with me? I can’t go sinless for three seconds.”

“Three seconds? You’re being easy on yourself.”

I wasn’t amused. I actually felt guilty. “I guess I need to try harder.”

Guilt?

Try harder?

These are common responses from those of us who limit sin to willful bad behavior—naughty deeds that can be overcome with a little more spiritual horsepower.

But Jesus teaches us what sin *really* looks like by reminding us of sin’s opposite: obedience. Obedience is loving God with *all* our hearts, souls, and minds, and loving our neighbors as ourselves (see Matthew 22:37–40).

Anything less is sin.

Gulp.

This means I'm sinning whenever I fail to love God and others *with everything I am*. And Jesus isn't talking about just doing the "best I can do." He's talking about PERFECTION (see Matthew 5). So with perfection as the standard, how do any of us overcome sin in our lives?

We don't.

So how did the preacher go sinless for three days?

He didn't.

"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

The sad truth is that until the resurrection, we *are* sinners—like the gallery of the faithful in Hebrews 11. That's a gallery of forgiven sinners like us who demonstrated halfheartedness, deceit, disobedience, and pride...as well as faithfulness and righteousness. Think about it:

Noah did the whole naked drunk thing.

Abraham lied about his wife to save his own neck.

Sarah mocked God's promise.

Moses had an anger problem.

We all know about David.

And we don't want to forget about good Peter's denials of Christ in the gospels. I could go on.

So where does this leave us? As struggling sinners in need of constant forgiveness.

But how do we finally overcome sin in our lives? *We* don't.

But some of us keep trying to come up with a plan anyway. In my case, I'm always tempted to redefine sin as something more manageable, like a list of external behaviors that I *can* do...maybe even for three

days. But that eventually messes things up, because an inaccurate understanding of sin leads to inaccurate ideas about the Christian life.

So when that doesn't work out, I begin excusing myself as "only human." But though that may be true, it's really no excuse.

Actually, none of our strategies work—not when God demands perfection.

But there is good news.

Sin has already been overcome *for us by* Christ.

"For *sin shall not be master over you*, for you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14).

Does this mean we are able to NOT ever sin? No.

But it does mean that Christ has rendered our sins powerless to *condemn us*.

Believing that can change the way we live. J. B. Phillips wrote, "I am quite certain that [God] does not want us to waste any time raking over our sins. He wants us to accept His forgiveness and walk forward confidently in His strength."

Okay, fine. But if we're not sinless, can't we at least sin *less*?

Yes. The power to sin less comes from receiving the gospel—the unconditional forgiveness of Christ—over and over again.

Confessing sin is liberating; receiving grace is empowering.

Confession puts the gospel to work. Yet, just like the early church, we seem to forget the good news. Paul wrote, "Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that *the kindness of God leads you to repentance?*" (Romans 2:4).

Asking ourselves why we can't overcome sin is a wonderful question; it means we care.

