

Women's Spring Tea
May 2019

Manna in the desert

When I was asked to give this talk a few months ago, I wasn't sure how to process what we had just been through in Peru. We had made the painful decision to come back and didn't know if we would be returning to another field or if our time in missions was on an indefinite pause. I was nervous about what I would say. As I prepared this talk, I was able to look at our story in missions with a magnifying glass and was able to listen to what the Lord has taught me through this last year. I also want to say that this is not meant to present my story in a tidy little package, but rather to show you the process I am in of growth and understanding. If I were asked to give this talk in 5 years or even one year later, it would likely be different because I will be different as the Lord continues to help me grow and change and be more like Him.

To say I was reluctant to go into missions is an understatement. In high school, I had decided that I was not called to missions, or to be a pastor's wife – you have to be able to play the piano to be a pastor's wife. When I met Nathaniel at Covenant College, and we were on our first date, I asked him, "what is your major" and he said, "Biblical studies," which was a red flag, and then I said "well, what do you want to do with that major" and he said, "I want to be a missionary pastor to Peru!" My heart sank. After our date, which had gone really well, my friends asked how it went and the first thing out of my mouth was, "I don't want to move to Peru!"

As we fell in love, the Lord used Nathaniel's passion for missions and passion to reach the lost to become my passion and together we were called to missions. After we got married, everything about our lives was with the goal of getting to the mission field. We chose the seminary around opportunities to minister to Hispanics and we interned at a Hispanic church plant and took in Hispanic foster kids until Jeremiah was born. After seminary, we moved to Chattanooga so we could be near MTW and go through 18 months of support raising the necessary trainings to be given the green light to go to Peru.

While we were preparing for Peru, I started to struggle with my old friend, anxiety. Someone once told us that being on the mission field is like pouring miracle grow on your sins and struggles, so at the urging of MTW, I decided to get some counseling before moving overseas. I remember sitting on a couch, 6 months pregnant with Gabriella and sharing with my counselor some of my deepest fears about that something bad could happen to my family. My counselor very simply and profoundly said, "well, God's grace is not with you in that future moment yet."

I am currently working on a counseling degree, and one of my professors Ed Welch recently taught on this theme of grace by comparing it to Manna in the Desert.

Manna Illustration

Imagine being an Israelite the first day the manna fell. There you are in the middle of the desert and all you see is sand and heat and weariness. You can't figure out how you are going to eat, all you know is that God has said to trust him. Then, one morning, you wake up and there is this weird, sticky stuff all over the ground, and it is food. People around you are yelling for joy and scrambling for buckets and calling out to each other, what do we do with this stuff!? You all grab as much as you can and even though your bellies were full and happy, you probably continued to grab more just in case.

But, just as you found out that manna doesn't keep well overnight, you also wake up to another shocking day, the MANNA IS BACK! You scramble to get a bucket! You start a mom's group passing around recipe ideas for how to make manna taste good and tricks to get your kids to eat it. This stuff is strange, and it's not what you would have chosen, but it is sweet, and it is enough.

After a week, you are still amazed, after a month you more used to it, and after a year of daily manna, you don't even think about if it is going to be there in the morning, you just send your 10 year old son out to collect it while you heat up the oven.

Every single day, just enough manna came down, and the Israelites knew to expect that it was going to be there every single day. It was not that they were complacent or ungrateful for the food, it was that they had learned to trust God. They knew their Father's heart was moved to care for them because He had shown them every single day that he would provide just enough for them for that day.

Grace is like manna. We cannot hoard it or store it or use just a little bit one day, so we can keep it for the next time there is a crisis. But there will always be enough. We cannot understand it, but we are promised it.

In April 2012, when it was finally time for us to board a plane to Bogota, Colombia, so I could go to language school and Nathaniel could do an apprenticeship program with MTW, we had a two-year-old and 10-month-old and we were nervous but eager to get our ministry started.

One afternoon, I was coming home from language school, by myself, when I was followed off the bus, stalked and cornered by two men with a knife who demanded my phone. The whole incident was probably 30 seconds long, but I was forever changed. A few days later, we read that a young man was stabbed to death for his cell phone a few blocks away from where my robbery happened. I felt a little like Adam and Eve who once they had sinned their eyes were open to sin. Once I got robbed, my eyes were open to danger, and I started down a path of intense fear and anxiety. I started to worry about my two little children who went to the same park every day with our nanny. I thought we were being watched as an American family with resources for a ransom. I was never going to take a public bus again, but taxis were also now terrifying to me. Nathaniel ended up buying us a cheap car just so he could drive us around the city. From then on, I never left the house alone again while we lived in Colombia.

After that incident, a series of strange and life-threatening things started to happen to us. One night, the gas stove accidentally got left on, exposing us to toxic air the whole night we slept in our 600 sq. ft, poorly ventilated apartment. Miraculously, we all woke up that morning. When we went to the hospital, the doctors couldn't believe we had lived through that night and told us stories of entire families being wiped out by similar incidents but lived in houses significantly larger than ours. Our kids had a few close calls with traffic incidents while in the care of the nanny while I was in language school. When it was time to deliver Simeon, our third child, he and I both almost died from a freak prolapsed cord and I had to have an emergency c-section while under general anesthesia.

Believe it or not, I could go on with other strange and scary things that happened to us in Colombia. We were under spiritual attack, something I think most reformed missionaries hesitate to say, but once you have lived through it, you are very aware of just how real it is. We arrived to Colombia in April 2012 wide-eyed and excited to serve the Lord overseas, and when it was time for us to leave and move to Peru in December 2013, we were already weary and beaten down. When I look at the potential danger that all of us were in, I see how the Lord withheld the devastation. He did not let the very worst thing happen to any of us, and in spite of what the Enemy tried to do, God was our great protector in those potentially devastating moments.

When I think back to that time, I see the manna that God gave us in the terrifying moments to handle situations well and to continue moving forward. If you had sat me down before we left the US and had told me everything that would happen to us on the mission field and everything that we would experience, both good and bad, I don't think I could have boarded that plane the first time. But God's manna, or grace wasn't with me in the future yet. It was with me in an amazing way when we were in the middle of each trial, and he gave us the grace to continue moving forward as missionaries.

Many of us carry life verses in our hearts- verses that speak to us in a special way. When I think back on missions to Peru, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 moves my heart to praise God for what he did with us on the mission field.

*⁷ I a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**" Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (ESV)*

After the robbery, I was left weak in my anxiety and fear. I was limited in what I was willing to do outside my home. I would not talk to strangers, I would not leave the house alone, I would not take public transportation. As I worked to build my life around safety, I also limited the radius of the ministry that I personally was able to have. On top of that, I was raising three kids

under the age of three and I would have been exhausted and overwhelmed even if we were still living in the US.

Moving to Peru was my reset and fresh start. I was so hopeful when we moved to Peru that all of that anxiety and fear would magically go away.

When you fly into Arequipa, you fly over miles and miles of arid, mountainous terrain. All of the sudden, there is a mountain and a whole city planted in the middle of the desert. As a team, we often wondered why the settlers decided to land there, in the middle of a desert that gets 4 inches of rain a year. By nature of where Arequipa is situated geographically, also leaves this city largely isolated from other parts of Peru so at times it can feel like an emotional and spiritual desert as well.

Yet, as a team, we pressed on. I knew I was still suffering from PTSD, but I tried to keep going. I realized when I had several almost comical moments of literally running the other direction from probably really nice people who were just trying to talk to me or approach me that I was still not okay. I became intensely aware of my surroundings and lived with a constant adrenaline rush whenever we were out of the house. I was continually on high alert which eventually had physical consequences. I was now not only weak in spirit, but also weak physically.

Yet, those weak moments are when God's mana was more than sufficient and when I remember having some of the sweetest moments in ministry.

One afternoon, I had just come home from the doctor to get to the bottom of this physical weakness I was going through. I had just burst into tears in her office, unfortunately confirming her diagnosis that my symptoms were stress related and I had in my hand a prescription for anti-anxiety medication. When we got back to our house, a young woman from our church was in crisis and standing at our door and desperately needed counseling. That evening I was making up the guest bed, so she could get away from her abusive husband. I remember pouring so much into this woman the 10 days she stayed with us. We had conversations late, late into the night about her marriage and about her spiritual walk. I remember my kids asking me to help with their school work and feeling like I was failing them because I still had this grief-stricken woman sitting at my table who needed so much attention.

I don't know if any of you have ever started a new medication, but the side effects can be a little overwhelming and intense especially those first few days. I remember counseling this woman at breakfast one morning and hitting a wall of room-spinning exhaustion because this new medication had kicked in and I couldn't even keep my eyes open.

I remember feeling like this poor woman needed to be entertained to keep her mind off of hard things, so we spent a lot of time in my kitchen, me teaching her how to bake American treats and a somewhat successful attempt at making homemade lotion. I remember feeling like my life and ministry was all about triage – care for the greatest need first. I had other women

come to my house seeking counsel about this situation because they were also emotionally affected by this couple's marriage crisis. Nathaniel was meeting with the angry and unpredictable husband and was genuinely afraid for his life. Ministry is almost always messy, and the further we got into this couple's story, the more that sadness and sin was revealed. We were emotionally and physically spent.

As I retell this story, I have no idea how we made it through that week and a half and the months that followed. Except I do have an idea. ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*** God graciously met us in our weakness and gave us the manna to continue to serve him, even though our hearts, minds, and bodies were breaking from exhaustion, the weight of other's sins, fear and an illness. God was even gracious to let me minister from my own home. He literally placed a need at my front door and I did not have to leave my area of comfort to still continue to minister. That intense week led to a whole counseling ministry that I was able to do right out of my home that lasted for several years and led me to start getting my degree in counseling.

Another area of weakness in my ministry was my Spanish. If you were my Spanish teacher in high school, you could have predicted that I would have struggled in this area.

I tried so hard, but my goodness, every single verb has so many ways that you can and should conjugate it and I just got confused all the time. Most of the time people were gracious, although I know I made a lot of people laugh. A lot.

My favorite Spanish humble was when I was talking to the principal of my kid's school about their Spanish. She asked if we spoke Spanish in the home. Thinking she would be pleased with my answer I told her yes, we tried to whenever possible. With a very warm smile, she said to me, "please stop. Your Spanish is confusing them, and they are developing some very bad habits."

When ministering in another language, it is hard to feel like you can properly express yourself. It's hard to feel like you are really known, or that you will really have an effect on people, especially spiritually. We tell ourselves that just living out an honorable, Christian life will speak for itself, but I know that I personally did not always live an outward life that would have automatically led people to the Lord.

When I started to feel like I would never be able to make a good, Peruvian friend, the Lord brought, again, right to my door, Maria. Arequipa is a hard city to make friends in, especially if you were raised elsewhere. One late night in October, the Catholic church held a processional for the Saint of Miracles that passed down our street. We didn't know what was happening, but all of the sudden fireworks were being shot off next door and candles were lining the streets, trumpets were blaring and then a whole crowd of people gathered outside our door to watch 30 men slowly march a 4,000lb idol down the street. When the crowd dissipated, a woman

from across the street came over so our sons could play together. We conversed, in Spanish, and found out that we had a lot in common, except for our faith.

That began one of the sweetest friendships I've ever had, that carried me through my time in Peru. My sweet neighbor, Maria, her husband and son were at our house almost every weekend, for the whole weekend, until they were reassigned back to Lima for work. Maria continued to come back for visits, this time with her new baby Gabriella, named after our daughter. She spent Christmas and other holidays with us. We walked her through a painful divorce, and she helped me when I was just so overwhelmed with a new culture. Whenever we were in Lima, they would clear their whole schedule just to spend time with us. When I called to tell her, we were likely leaving Peru for good, she bought a ticket the next day to come and help me pack. She's been that kind of friend. And the Lord was gracious enough to give me a friend who genuinely loved me, in spite of my Spanish, in spite of my weakness, my anxieties and fears and cultural mess ups. She was always the most patient, loving person who didn't make me feel dumb for saying the wrong thing in Spanish or make me feel small for not understanding Peruvian culture. She would just smile and help me. She knew us and saw the real us, and God's grace was still sufficient in that weakness to allow us to minister to her through painful times in her life as well. I never imagined that the Lord would bring us to Peru where I would be ministered to so well by a non-Christian. That was manna from the Lord.

I can't talk about our time in Peru without mentioning the sweetest part of serving overseas: our teammates Nate and Nikki Bonham. When we left for the field, we expected to serve in a small town in Peru without a team. We didn't love that idea, but we didn't have anyone else to serve with. When we met the Bohams in Bogota, we knew right away that they were our people and we should pursue serving with them. There are two main reasons missionaries leave the field: lack of financial support and trouble with their teammates. While we understand the difficulty of raising support, we never ever experienced trouble with our team. Not only did God's grace shine on us to actually give us teammates, he gave us teammates who were so well-suited for us and who we got along with so well. We raised our children together, celebrating birthdays and holidays and big moments like any family would. We kept short accounts with one another and always knew that we could bring up difficult subjects confident that it would be received in love. God's grace worked through our weakness as human, finite missionaries and gave us sweet fellowship in the middle of a city that would have otherwise been very isolating. We didn't even expect that God would give us that kind of gift when we left for the mission field and we were blown away by just how sweet that manna was.

If you had told me a year ago that we would be in the US now, I wouldn't have believed you. Our ministry in Peru was hard, but we were committed to making it work. We were committed to the commitment to be missionaries. Yet, even in this transition off the field, we have been given manna, grace that we did not expect to receive in the hard places.

For the first few months after we left Peru, I used to get very sad that the difficulties we faced overseas ultimately led us to our burn out and need come home.

As someone who is bent towards anxiety over safety and health, I couldn't understand why God would have had me go through trauma that threatened our safety and health. As a missionary, we worked very hard to stay on the field. We did all the trainings, we went to all the conferences and we even had a counselor who walked us through hard things. In missionary communities, we encourage each other to stick it out through the hard times, to learn how to take care of yourself and to do what it takes to stay on the field. I think we put pressure on ourselves to feel like missions is the ultimate way to serve the Lord and we work so hard to do it well. So why wouldn't God protect me better, so I could serve him longer in missions? Why did all these things happen that led us to burnout and come home?

I shared this with a very wise woman a few months ago and she said to me, "Maybe instead, you should see that the Lord used all of those things to bring you home." In changing around just a few words, my friend showed me that us coming home in 2018 was always Plan A, not the Plan B because we failed. One of the professors at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Al Groves, was given a devastating cancer diagnosis about 10 years ago. When the news came, and he learned that he had only months to live, his response was, "Nothing has changed." In that he meant, my story was always going to be this story, my life was always going to end this way. The Lord has always had this as part of my plan. When I think about us transitioning back to the US, I can also confidently say, "nothing has changed."

What continues to ring clearly in my head is in our weakness, God was glorified as he used us as tools, as weak vessels to bring his word to the people of Peru. He was not looking for the best Spanish speakers, the ones without social anxiety or the ones who could live perfect lives. He used us, not in spite of our weaknesses, but he actually used our weaknesses to help others, because that is when his power is made perfect.

Now we are here, and we are so happy that we get to minister to this church, to you all as our brothers and sisters in Christ. We do not have a perfect story of wild successes and incredible conversions by the hundreds, but we do have a story of grace, of manna in the desert. We know what it is like to live in the daily gift of God's grace and we know what it is like to serve out of weakness. Maybe you are feeling weak in an area of your life. Are you weak physically, emotionally, spiritually? Are you unsure of what God is doing in your life? Does it feel like you do so little for the Lord? Do you feel like others have so much more to offer? Remember these words: ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*** In our weakness, God's grace not only is sufficient, but it is when he chooses to work through us the most.

When God has us in a place of receiving his daily manna, and only enough for each day, we are able to experience the confidence that we are safe in his care. We can be like the Israelites who learned after 1, 10, and 40 years of daily manna in the desert not to be surprised by God's provision for them. Let's learn to live in a way that is not surprised by God's grace, but rather in a way that confidently expects it because we know our Father's heart so well.