

The Bread of Life

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Date: 18 December 2016

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[0 : 00] We're actually going to be spending a few weeks on this chapter. We've really been kind of going through the chapters pretty quickly through the Gospel of John.

Because John, as you may have noticed, really hammers home his main point, which is Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. So really, every message I preach, I could have said that over and over again, and it would have been correct. That's what John is trying to get at.

But this chapter, there's a lot in there. So I'm going to go up to 35, verse 35 today, and then preach from a shorter section of the same passage on Christmas Eve as an evangelistic sermon.

We're told people who are going to come to visit on Christmas Eve. And then we'll cover the rest of the chapter from 36 to 71 next Sunday, this coming Sunday.

But before I start, let me pray for us. God, as we sang earlier, we say again, speak, O Lord.

[1 : 07] We want to be people who are governed not by our own ideas, not by the whims and the shifting directions of the culture, but by your word.

So speak, O Lord. We are listening. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Sigmund Freud, the renowned psychologist and atheist, once accused people of creating God in their own image.

He said, no, God did not create man in his own image. No, rather, men, they created God in their own image. But to his credit, that's partially true, because that's what we, in fact, do oftentimes.

We try to create God in our own image. We try to put him in our own box and use him for our own purposes, rather than submitting to him and being governed by him as our Lord and King.

[2 : 16] And that's exactly what's going on here in this passage as these men who have been following Jesus, they try to peg Jesus down, put him in a box of their own making, and Jesus is unwilling to yield to that.

And he consistently defies their expectations, as we will see throughout this passage. And what Jesus teaches us instead is that he is the bread of eternal life, who alone can satisfy our true hunger and thirst.

We believe that we have hunger and thirst that we want to satisfy for ourselves, but Jesus reveals a deeper hunger and thirst. And he says that he is the one who alone can satisfy it as the bread of eternal life.

And to do that, John gives us three vignettes, kind of portraits of Jesus, who he is, his identity. First one is in the first 14 verses. It tells us that Jesus is the prophet like Moses.

And the second is from verses 16 to 21. It tells us that Jesus is the I am. And then third and finally, it tells us in verses 22 to 34 that Jesus is the bread of life.

[3 : 25] And we'll see after, we just talked about how Jesus healed an invalid of 38 years. So after having done that, there was a confrontation that ensued between him and the Jewish leaders about the Sabbath.

And so Jesus moves on to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. And read with me here in verse 2. It says, If you've been with us for the series in John so far, you know that coming because the signs is a dangerous thing.

So people here are not coming and having realized the significance of the signs, the identity of Jesus that it points to. Rather, they've come to see a spectacle, to see a show.

They're coming to follow the signs in and of themselves and not to see and to know Jesus as he is.

And as this crowd comes to him, Jesus sees an opportunity, a teaching opportunity.

And he asks one of his disciples, Philip, in verse 5, Where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat? Not because he actually intended to buy bread from somewhere, but as it says in verse 5 or verse 6, in order to test them, it says.

[4 : 39] Jesus wanted to test his disciples. And Philip answers in the most predictable way. He says, Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.

And one denarius is a day's wage for a common worker during that time. So this is, if you were to calculate it, to contextualize it to our time, the amount of money that they're saying they need to feed just these people just a little bit of food is about \$30,000.

And so, of course, people don't normally carry \$30,000 just in their wallets. So they don't have that. So Philip's shocked. There's no way you could buy enough bread to feed these people. And not only is there no place that sells that much bread, even if there was such a place, we would not be able to afford it.

So what are you talking about, Jesus? And at this point, another disciple interjects. In verse 9, Andrew, there is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they for so many?

You could hear the tinge of despair at the end of his sentence. He said, well, there is a boy here who's got some food and he's willing to share it with us. But that might be enough for Jesus and his disciples, perhaps if they share it, just a little bit of food.

[5 : 52] But what is that for so many? And Jesus is not daunted. He tells the crowd to sit down. And verse 10, it tells us that there were 5,000 men.

And that there's a distinction there between men and people in general. And all the Gospels that record this miracle make the same distinction. And here, because Jesus says in verse 10, have the people sit down.

That includes women and children. But later, it notes in the same verse, the men sat down about 5,000 in number. So that shows that they only counted the men, as was customary at the time, especially large gatherings, to make it easier to count.

For convenience sake, they count only the men. So if there are 5,000 men, considering that most were probably married, they married early, and many of them had children. And they had more children back then than they do now in Cambridge in particular.

So if you were to kind of guess how many people were there, it's probably over 20,000 people. It's not a small gathering. It's a large crowd. And Jesus is telling them to sit down and then he prays for the, prays, thanks God for the food and then begins to distribute the food.

[7 : 02] I mean, can you just picture it with me? This is, it's so easy to just read this because we're familiar with the story, but this is ridiculous. He has this five loaves of bread, two fish, he's breaking it, starts to give it up.

And you could just look at, imagine the disciples' faces just staring at him aghast in disbelief. What are you doing? I mean, this is not going to end well. People are going to be very unhappy at the end of this distribution, right?

And so they're staring on in disbelief and he's not even just giving a little bit. He says that he gave as much as people wanted, says in verse 11. I mean, if you have only a little food, you give them a little bit at a time, but instead, no, just as much as you want, he's giving them out.

And to their amazement, as he does that, somehow, there's always more food to give out. There's more bread. There's more fish. Somewhere in that process, a miracle had occurred and Jesus is able to give food to all the people as much as he wanted.

And not only that, verses 12 to 13, says, when they had eaten their fill, they gathered up and filled 12 baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.

[8 : 15] There was more food left over at the end than there was at the beginning. And it's almost certainly significant that they filled 12 baskets because there's 12 tribes of Israel.

So in filling 12 baskets full with the leftover bread, that Jesus shows that he is the one who can fulfill the need and meet the need of all his people, all of God's people, Israel.

And so we're going to come back to this main point, what the meaning of this miracle is in a second. But before we do that, I want to make two, it's a digression, but two side points that are illustrated here about how Christians have to relate to food and what Jesus does here.

It's interesting. And first is, of course, the familiar practice of thanking God. We thank God for the food. And throughout the Bible, we see more examples of, there is one instance where Jesus blesses the food, but almost every other instance, Jesus rather blesses God for the food.

He thanks God for the food. That's as if he prays. And this is so familiar to many Christians that we don't think it's very radical at all. But if you think about it from the perspective of an unbeliever, it's a

very radical practice.

[9 : 28] to pray and to thank God for your food. Because, I mean, in their mind, they're saying, well, I worked hard to get the money and I used the money to buy the ingredients and I used the ingredients to make the food, so why do I have to thank God for it?

I mean, I did everything that I need to do to thank, why should I thank God for this food? But Christians, so this is a very subversive thing. That's the way we are conditioned to thank in this culture.

But by thanking God before our meals, we are acknowledging that even something as ordinary and customary as everyday food is ultimately from God. We're recognizing that as we pray, as we thank God for it.

It's not a meaningless road exercise. As we do that, we're forming habits that form our affections and understanding of God. And that's the first thing.

And the second thing is that after performing this amazing miracle, John takes care to note that Jesus said, in verse 12, gather up the leftover fragments that nothing may be lost.

[10 : 27] Isn't that interesting? Jesus just multiplied five loaves of bread and he didn't have to pay a dime for it. He'd fed 20,000 people with this. He could do that whenever he wants. Why is he so concerned about gathering up the leftovers?

And it's not because he's preparing for future scarcity. Rather, he's trying to teach a principle of stewardship. The idea of Christian stewardship. Here, that the heart of Christian stewardship is the idea that God ultimately exercises discretionary right over all of creation.

It's his. He's the owner. It belongs to him. Everything we have. And that means we are just managers or stewards of what belongs to God.

So think about it this way. A property manager of a house can't do whatever he wants to do with the house. He can't make whatever renovations he wants with the house because the house doesn't belong to him. He's a manager.

He's not the owner. In the same way, a financial advisor can't do whatever he wants with the money that his clients have given him because that's not his money. But he needs to maximize the profit, the interest for his client.

[11 : 32] He's just a steward, just a manager. In the same way, for us as Christians, we have to recognize that everything we have, every relationship, every hour, minute, we have everything we eat, all that we have is ultimately from God.

He's the owner. We're just stewards. We're managers. And that, it's a simple but profound concept. If we get that right, it radically changes the way we understand and do a lot of things.

For example, if our bodies are given to us by God and they belong ultimately to him, we should neither abuse it nor indulge it. And if all the money that we have has been given to us by God, they belong to him, ultimately we're just stewards, then we neither have the right to be stingy with it when an opportunity to be generous arises.

But we also don't have the right to be spent with, to spend it on whatever we wish. We're just stewards. We manage God's money. In the same way, food, Jesus says here, ultimately belongs to God.

So we should steward, not buying or eating more than we need and not wasting what we have left. That's what Jesus is talking about here. So there might be a pertinent lesson for the kids if you have parents who have kids and keep believing leftovers.

[12 : 47] It's a good way to teach them about stewardship, about God and how he is the owner of all things. But now, getting back to the main point, that's the end of that digression. What's Jesus' multiplication of the bread and fish mean?

Why did he perform this miracle? Because a sign by its nature points to something, right? It points to something beyond itself. So what does this sign of Jesus multiplying the bread and the fish point to?

And people, it's the clues in verses 15 and 14 because it says, when people saw the sign that he had done, they said, this is indeed the prophet who was to come into the world.

The prophet who was to come into the world is an allusion to Deuteronomy 18, 15 to 9, which prophesied of and promised a prophet-like Moses.

He said, another prophet arrives who is a prophet-like Moses. And Moses, if you recall, gave Israelites manna, bread from heaven in the wilderness after the Exodus.

[13:50] And in a similar way, Jesus here provides bread for the Israelites in the wilderness. And he leaves 12 baskets full to indicate that his provision is sufficient for all of Israel.

And moreover, the fact that it's mentioned in verse 4 that this happened during the Passover is also making this connection even stronger because Passover was the last event, the last sign that God performed that led to Israel's ultimate exodus and liberation from slavery in Egypt.

And it happens during that time. So people have that in their minds and they see that Jesus is the promised prophet like Moses. And so they're making the correct connection here with biblical prophecy.

However, they take it one step further than they should have because they make the deduction that since Moses let God's people out of slavery in Egypt, then this new Moses that we have here, this new Messiah, should also lead us out of our servitude to the Roman Empire.

And so they have it in their mind. Look, we have 20,000 people here, 5,000 men, perhaps more will gather once we have a cause. That's a sizable, that's a formidable militia.

[15:01] Maybe they could have waged successful guerrilla warfare. Right? So they come to, they put their heads together and say, well, let's force him to be our king. Let's make him our king to lead us into the new exodus out of this servitude to Roman Emperor.

But Jesus doesn't want anything to do with that. Because he's not interested in creating his own earthly kingdom, but rather he has come to announce a spiritual kingdom.

He doesn't want to stage a military rebellion. And so it says in verse 15, perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Suppressed in by a crowd that wants to make him fit their mold and expectations. Jesus withdraws the mountain by himself. That's the first vineyard. Jesus is the prophet like Moses, but not what people expect of him.

And the second vineyard begins in verse 16. Read verses 16 to 21 with me. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum.

[16:10] It was now dark and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. And when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat.

And they were frightened. But he said to them, It is I. Do not be afraid. Then they were glad to take him into the boat. And immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

The Sea of Galilee lies about 600 feet below sea level. And it happened quite frequently that the wind from the Southeastern plains would come and it would just interact and displace the warm, moist air in the lake and that would cause a violent squall.

So that was very common for storms to just suddenly come in the Sea of Galilee. And that's what seems to have happened here to Jesus' disciple. They're caught in one of these. And so in verse 18, the sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.

But as they're struggling with their oars, because in this kind of wind sail is useless, so they're using oars to get out and they're being tossed to and fro by the waves, they see Jesus walking on the sea and coming near their boat.

[17:24] And they are understandably frightened. Because Jesus is doing something that humans are not supposed to do. They're not supposed to walk on water. In the same way, if we're in our room, somebody just suddenly started levitating, we'd be frightened too.

What's going on? Why is that happening? So they're frightened. But Jesus reassures them in verse 20, saying, it is I. Do not be afraid. He's saying, it's me.

Don't worry. But to the people, that's the normal way to say, that's me. It's me, so don't worry about it. But for the people that are reading, the people that John intended this gospel to speak to and to be read by, this is more than a simple phrase, it is I.

Because the phrase for it is I literally is I am. And that's the name of God revealed to Moses at the time of the Exodus.

Again, another Exodus connection in chapter 3, verse 14, where God said to Moses, I am who I am. Say this to the people of Israel. I am has sent me to you.

[18:30] So by connecting Jesus' self-identification with God, with God's self-revelation in Exodus, John's declaring that Jesus is God. He is the Son of God.

He is the great I am. And this is all the more pertinent in this particular miracle because Jesus is walking on the water. If you peruse the Old Testament, there are many prophets who do miracles related to the water.

So Moses parted the Red Sea, Elijah and Elijah both parted the rivers. They part water, but no one walks on water.

In fact, it says in Psalm 77, 19, only God is seen as walking on the water. Water is seen as his path. It says, your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters, yet your footprints were unseen.

Water is frequently seen in the Old Testament as a place of chaos and disorder, and only God was understood to be able to control it, to tame it. And Jesus shows here his mastery over the storm, over the elements, and proclaims that he is the divine I am.

[19 : 39] So we saw that he was the prophet like Moses, and we see here that he is the great I am. And then finally, in the third and climactic vignette, we return to the original sign of the multiplication of the bread.

So noticing that Jesus and his disciples had gone, they had eaten their fill, and they were talking amongst themselves, and they lost track of Jesus, and they finally follow him, they track him down, and find him, and in verse 25, they say, Rabbi, when did you come here?

So they're wondering, okay, so how long have you been here? When did you leave? And why did you leave? How, well, we've been looking all over for you. They come to Jesus, but Jesus responds to these seekers is surprisingly sharp.

He responds in verse 26, truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

on a superficial reading of the text, you might think that this flies in the face of verse 2, which said that a large crowd was following him because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.

[20 : 47] So verse 2 says they came because of the signs. Verse 26 says that people follow Jesus not because of the signs, but because they had their fill with the loaves. But that's not a formal contradiction because they're essentially saying the same thing, just in different words.

What they're both saying is that people came to be dazzled by and to benefit from the signs in and of themselves without paying any attention to what the signs pointed to, the Christ identity, and who he is.

So it's kind of like people who go to grocery stores just to sample the free food, like they go to free sample food, and they go around and sample all the food, but they're not willing to buy anything that those samples were supposed to point to.

It was the actual product, which is right next to it. So it's kind of like this, these people are coming, they're just sampling the free food, they're coming for the signs, to see the signs, to have wonder and be amazed by the signs, and to eat the things, the benefits that come from the signs, yet they have no interest in who Jesus truly is and claims to be.

The thing that the signs were supposed to point to. And so he says, no, you came here because you ate your fill of the loaves. And then Jesus continues in verse 27.

[22 : 02] Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.

For on him God the Father has set his seal. Jesus is telling people, stop following me around for signs, stop following me around for food, like I'm a cheap crowd pleaser or a magician.

I am the Son of God. I'm the great I am. I'm the promised Messiah, the prophet like Moses. Come to me for the food that endures to eternal life. And we have a knack, don't we, for getting caught up in lesser things and losing sight of the most important things.

Right? Even with things that are not eternal, we lose sight of the most important things. For example, we work so hard for the food that perishes. We work hard to make money so that we can provide for the best possible environment for our children.

Right? But in doing so, because we're so busy, we neglect our children. Right? We sacrifice our health to study hard and to work long hours to ensure a successful career, make a lot of money, and then only to spend that hard on our money to recuperate our health.

[23 : 23] And even if we get to keep our money at the end of our life, we realize it does nothing for dead people. We can't take any of it with us. We idealize and even idolize our boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, family, but only to find that even they can't ultimately fulfill us.

or satisfy our deepest longings. We indulge ourselves in various pleasures, whether it's, you know, overeating or binge-watching on Netflix or drugs or excessive drinking or illicit sexual relations or activities, thinking that more is always better and that with more and more, we could have more and more pleasure, not realizing that the more we do that, we become more desensitized.

In fact, they bring less and less pleasure. We grovel for the approval of people about our appearance, intelligence, or sociability.

And we're devastated by the slightest hint of disrespect, disapproval from those people, not recognizing that their approval is fickle and fleeting and ultimately unfulfilling.

we work so hard, don't we, for the food that perishes. When there's food that endures to eternal life, Christ promises us eternal life, eternal riches, and eternal love and esteem of the triune God who never changes.

[24 : 57] Yet why are we so desperately and frantically working for the food that perishes? And so Jesus wrongly rebuked these people for their materialistic notions of life and the kingdom of God.

But they misunderstand Jesus still further. Jesus told them, instead of working for that, it worked for this, worked for eternal life, but instead of focusing on the goal, the reason why they work, they get back, they focus their entire attention on the work that they're doing themselves.

So verse 28, they say, what must we do to be doing the works of God? There's a naive confidence about their response. They say they have no doubt about their ability to meet any challenge that God sets before them.

Oh, just tell us what he requires. We'll do it. That's their attitude. But Jesus sets them straight in verse 29. This is the work of God that you believe in him whom he has sent.

Eternal life that Christ offers is first and foremost a gift. not a wage. So the quote-unquote work that God requires is simply faith.

[26 : 08] To believe in him whom he has sent. And this is yet another way in which Jesus defies our expectations and refuse to be boxed in by our own imaginations.

He says, we like to be able to earn things. We like to be able to work for things. We like to be able to say, well, I had a part in that. I deserve that. It is my right, my entitlement. But God chooses another way.

He says, no, you simply must believe and depend on me. And I give you this eternal life. And that's a radical reason why God does that.

And a pastor in New York named Kim Keller once told a story in his book about a woman that he talked to. And this woman had not grown up in the church.

And she had never heard the distinction between the gospel, which is the good news of Jesus Christ, the fact that salvation comes to us by grace through faith, and works righteousness, which teaches that, no, you earn your salvation by working hard and becoming a righteous person in your own strength.

[27 : 10] And when she first heard this distinction, she said she was frightened. And she was scared. And the pastor asked him, well, what's so scary about this?

This is good news. Like, what's wrong? And this is what she said. Well, if I was saved by my good works, then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through.

I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty, and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if I'm a sinner, saved by grace, then there's nothing you cannot ask of me. If we're honest with ourselves, we're wary of and sometimes feel badly about receiving free things from people. Like, oh, no, just take this at least. The reason why is because we don't like feeling indebted.

We don't like feeling like we owe someone something. But God's way is, is by fully, by His grace, He gives us the gift of eternal life, salvation.

[28 : 18] All we have to do is believe in Him and take hold of it in faith. And God does that because then when we do that, God becomes supreme, sovereign, Lord over our lives, and we owe our allegiance to Him in every way, in everything.

He becomes our God and Lord, and that's what He wants for us. That's what we cannot say. That is my right. That is my entitlement. I demand it of you. We cannot say that to God. He gave it to us as a gift.

And the people, and this is the moment when we might roll our eyes and palm our foreheads, in people's response, verses 30 to 31, they respond with this question.

Then what sign do you do that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness.

As it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. So after all of this, we're back to square one. The sign.

[29 : 24] They want more signs. Jesus just performed a sign. He just fed 20,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. In fact, just before that, He healed an invalid of 38 years.

And just before that, He healed a dying son of an official. And just before that, He turned water into wine. In fact, the whole book up to this point, the book of John, has been a book of signs.

The signs that point to Jesus' identity as the Son of God, and yet here they are, like they've seen nothing. They ask for a sign. And Jesus is far more patient than I would have been.

Verse 32 to 33. Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.

For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Then people then ask for this bread.

[30 : 22] And Jesus says in verse 35, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

Jesus does give them another sign. He says, I am the bread of life. And He points to His cross when He's going to give His life, His body broken for us, His blood shed for us, that He is going to be that bread, that bread that sustains us and gives us eternal life, makes us whole again, makes us new again, spiritually.

Again, another way which God defies, Jesus defies our boxes and expectations. No, Jesus is not going to come and just rule over us with an iron fist and rule the nations to submission.

No, He brings us into His kingdom, not with that, but by dying for us, paying the penalty for our sins Himself so that we can be reconciled to God, so that we can be brought into His kingdom willingly and freely out of our love for Him and faith in Him.

And how do we eat this bread? Well, it's not by physical eating, chewing, or drinking, because it says that those who will no longer hunger are not those who eat, but those who come to Jesus, it says.

[31 : 53] Those who will no longer thirst are not those who drink, but it says those who believe in Him. So that's how you know this is a metaphor. Jesus is using the bread as a metaphor.

Jesus is the bread of life. That's the ultimate sign that He offers, and He's pointing to His sacrificial death on the cross. And the way we eat this bread is we come to Him, and we believe in Him.

Like the promise that God had given in Isaiah 55, 1, Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Because Jesus paid for that price. We can come without pay, without charge, without price. And if you are not a believer with us this morning, you don't know, you have not experienced this eternal life that Jesus offers.

You can come to Him this morning. You can come and believe in Him for your salvation. Forsake all your own righteousness and all your own schemes at getting to God and say, No, I need Jesus, and He's the only way.

[33 : 03] Because He's the bread of life. There's no other food. That's the only way. Come to Him. Believe in Him. And if you have already placed your trust in Jesus and your faith in Him, yes, that's a once and for all event that we are saved by grace through faith.

But it's also an everyday event. We come to Him again and again. We believe again and again. And we eat that bread again and again, just like we need sustenance daily.

Yes, we are saved once and for all when we place our faith in Jesus, but we must believe every day. Because the world that we live in, the culture that we're in, the people around us, they challenge us, they wear our faith down, and they tempt us to disbelieve at every point.

So it must be our effort to believe, to come to Him again and again. And we can do that not begrudgingly, but with joy and gratitude because Christ is the Lord, the bread of life who offered Himself for us.

So let's pray together. Amen. God, we are so grateful that you speak to us in a way that we understand very well.

[34 : 39] It's that when we go without food, we go hungry. When we go without food for a while, we die. Amen. And spiritually even more so, Lord.

We are already dead apart from you and we need the bread of life to live. Thank you for giving us this bread in Jesus Christ.

And grant us unflagging faith so that we may persevere to the end for your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.