

The Bread of Life

John 6

John Breon

A crowd has gathered around Jesus. It gets late and the people need to eat. Jesus asks the disciples where they could buy enough food for all these people. Philip realizes that eight months' wages couldn't buy enough for every one to have even a bite. Then Andrew brings to Jesus a young boy who has five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus takes them, gives thanks for them, and gives them to the crowd. Everyone has enough to eat, the disciples gather up the leftovers, and the crowd tries to force Jesus to be their king.

But Jesus sends the disciples across the lake in a boat while he gets away from the crowd and goes to a mountain by himself. Later that night, he comes walking on the water to the disciples. They choose to receive him into the boat and immediately they arrive at their destination on the other side of the lake.

The next morning the crowd realizes that Jesus and the disciples are nowhere to be found, so they go to Capernaum on the other side of the lake. There they find Jesus and ask, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus knew why they were looking for him. Verse 2 says they followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed. Here, in verse 26 they're looking for him, not because of signs, but because they ate the loaves and had their fill.

The crowd had intended to make Jesus king by force (v 15). They wanted a Messiah who would be a liberator like Moses to help them achieve fulfillment of their dreams. They wanted another Moses who could feed them as with the manna—someone to meet their physical needs.

Jesus saw their motivation for following him. He knew their excitement over signs and wonders. He saw that they wanted someone who could satisfy their desires for fulfillment. They wanted another picnic, but he wanted to give himself—the Bread of Life. Jesus is greater than Moses. He is the true bread from heaven.

Why do we follow Jesus? What's our motivation? Sensationalism, getting needs met, personal fulfillment, "it's the thing to do," fear, guilt—any of these alone is an inadequate motive. We can't follow Jesus on our terms. We can't use Jesus to fulfill our dreams.

No one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws or attracts them (v 44). God's grace has the priority in salvation. God takes the first step toward us. We have no claim to our wise decision in salvation. We can't take pride in our wisdom. The only reason we can choose to follow Jesus is because God enables us by grace. What's the basis for your relationship with God? Anything other than God's grace is inadequate.

At the same time, Jesus does invite everyone who's hungry, everyone who's thirsty to come to him, to receive the life he offers.

But we can't come to Jesus with our agenda of what we'll do for him or give to him. He will have all we have to give. God takes us any way he can get us, for whatever reason we come. But God won't rest and won't allow us to rest until God has all there is of us. Part of being a disciple is refining our motives until we follow and love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

C. S. Lewis said he'd rather keep taking aspirin for a toothache than go to the dentist. He said a dentist isn't content to fix the tooth that hurts, but starts fiddling with all kinds of other teeth too. You give dentists an inch and they'll take a mile. Something similar is true of God. God moves through whatever opening we give him and then he begins to claim more and more of our commitment and love (see *Mere Christianity*, 171).

We also can't come to Jesus with an agenda of what we expect him to do for us. Jesus not only expects us to give all to him, he gives all that he is for us and to us. "Flesh and blood" in this chapter refers to the whole person. Following Jesus just because he meets needs is an inadequate motive because we don't expect enough. God wants to do more than we can ask or imagine. He offers us all he has to give. He invites us to share life with him.

When we come to Jesus, when we give all that we are for all that he is, we find that the *Bread of Life Saves*.

Jesus says to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Now, he's not speaking literally here. He means for us to take his life into ourselves as we believe in him and receive him. It's in the reality of Jesus' humanity that salvation and eternal life are made available to us. "This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (v 51). And he will give his life on the cross. The Bread of Heaven gives his life to the world by dying for it.

In giving his life *for us*, Jesus gives life *to us*. We receive it, we take it into ourselves by putting our faith and trust in him. Salvation is forgiveness, a new start, power for living, abundant and eternal life, now and forever.

I mentioned last week that we heard Peter Belinni recently at a district Holy Spirit seminar. He's an ordained United Methodist pastor with a PhD who teaches at a seminary in Ohio. But he grew up in the Little Italy section of Cleveland and in his early life was tied to organized crime. As a young man, he ran bars and nightclubs. One night, in one of his bars, he says everything went dark. Not literally; this was some kind of vision. All he could see was darkness. Then a light was shining on him. He saw this light and he heard a voice—in his mind, not out loud. God was telling him that God is real. He got out of there and went home. He wondered if he was going crazy. At some point, it was revealed to him that not only is God real, but the devil is also real. He was scared and worried that he was losing it. Then he heard—again, in his mind—that Jesus is Lord and that Pete needed to receive him. Pete says the Lord called him out of that bar and into his kingdom.

That sort of thing is outside my experience, but I like stories like that where God makes himself known and makes the offer of salvation to someone. Maybe someone you're praying for needs an encounter like that. However the word gets to us, we can know that salvation is real and God offers it to us to receive by faith.

Receiving the salvation Jesus offers gives us meaning, purpose, and true fulfillment. *The Bread of Life Satisfies*.

Notice when Jesus multiplied the loaves: "everyone had as much as they wanted," "when they had all had enough" there were twelve baskets left over (vv. 11-13). Though we can't use Jesus to fulfill our dreams, we find that life in him truly satisfies. We find real fulfillment of our deepest needs

and desires. He fills the emptiness of our lives. He satisfies our aching, hungry hearts. Here's how one woman described this years ago, writing to me after I preached a sermon similar to this one. She mentioned:

...the pain I have been feeling in my struggle against Bulimia/ Anorexia. The control of starving, the loss of control when bingeing, the self-hate of doing both to "feed the hungry heart." It is a hunger that truly can't ever be fed by food, alcohol, drugs, sex, or anything else we try to substitute for God's love. I pray each day that God fills that numb void with his love and compassion. I want so much to let go of my fear so I can stop hiding in my isolation.

There's a great old hymn that speaks of this:

All my life long I had panted for a drink from some cool spring
That I hoped would quench the burning of the thirst I felt within

Feeding on the husks around me till my strength was almost gone
Longed my soul for something better, only still to hunger on

Well of water, ever springing, Bread of life, so rich and free
Untold wealth that never faileth, my Redeemer is to me

Hallelujah! I have found him—whom my soul so long has craved
Jesus satisfies my longings; through his blood I now am saved

("Satisfied," Hymns for the Family of God #100)

When Jesus satisfies our deepest longings, he begins to put right all of our longings. He corrects our misplaced desires. Physical or emotional desires aren't evil in themselves. It's when we make fulfilling them our priority that we have trouble. It's when we try to find in physical or emotional fulfillment what only Jesus can give that our desires get distorted. But when we allow Jesus to meet the deep need of our heart, he starts to straighten out all our desires.

The Bread of Life satisfies because it's real life. Our lives are what they're meant to be when we live in right relationship with God through Jesus. Apart from life with God we have a gnawing hunger inside. We know there must be more, but nothing will fill that emptiness. Only God who made us can fill us in a way that truly satisfies.

And we find that *the Bread of Life Sustains*. We rely on him for our life. Jesus strengthens us and empowers us to do his will. One of the themes of this chapter, and really of the whole Gospel, is the need to persevere. Just beginning to believe in Jesus and just starting to follow him, unless it's sustained, isn't enough. Discipleship means sustaining faith and following Jesus from now on.

Manna illustrates the true bread that sustains. The manna was fresh every day. We're constantly renewed. Life in Christ can be continually fresh and up to date. He gives us strength for every new challenge we face and every task he calls us to do.

Verses 60 and following tell us that many *disciples* left Jesus. They were scandalized by his claims and his demands. They said, "This is a hard teaching." And Jesus asked, "Are you offended (scandalized)?"

"What they wanted, he would not give; what he offered, they would not receive" (F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*). He wouldn't satisfy their curiosity for signs and wonders. He wouldn't be king on their terms. He wouldn't be used by them to achieve fulfillment or simply meet physical needs.

They wanted their immediate surface needs met. Jesus wanted to go deeper than that. They were willing to eat his bread but not to admit that he is the true bread. They couldn't or wouldn't accept who he claimed to be. And so they left.

I had a colleague in ministry. I first knew him when he was coming into the United Methodist Church after being a pastor in another denomination. We served in the same district a time or two and kept in touch a bit. A few years ago, he left the ministry and his marriage and moved to another state. He writes a blog and posts on Facebook about being an atheist. I've tried to understand what led him to where he is now. I've contacted him and asked a little bit about it. He's not real clear about

what happened. It seems he had a lot of sadness and disappointment in his life and he felt like God didn't care, so eventually he came to think God doesn't exist. In one of his posts, he said that people he used to know in the church avoid him. I told him some of the reason is that we're kind of afraid that his doubt, his unbelief will rub off on us. I was only partly kidding.

But I really can't imagine going that way. Even when I have doubts or struggles, I can't imagine life without God. I don't know where else I would go, what else I could do.

After many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer followed him, he turns to the Twelve, his closest followers, and asks, "You don't want to leave too, do you?" Peter speaks up: "Lord, where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe in you. We know you are the Holy One of God."

Peter discovered this about Jesus: There's something here you won't find anywhere else. Jesus can provide what no one else can.

Where else can we go for life, for salvation, for real satisfaction, for strength that sustains? Jesus provides eternal life and he calls us to give ourselves fully to following him and living life with him.

The Father is drawing you right now, attracting you to Jesus where you can find real life. Let him start with you right where you are, with your need. Let him take you through the next step toward giving him your whole heart. Through faith, receive the life of Jesus given for you and now offered to you.