

I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE

John 6:30-36

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35).

In Matthew’s Gospel, the conclusion to Jesus’ Galilean ministry took place outside the city of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus brought his disciples to that center of pagan worship and asked them, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt. 16:13). The disciples went through the various rumors they had heard: “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Mt. 16:14). This led to Jesus’ real question: “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15). Peter’s answer forms the turning point in Matthew’s Gospel, known as the Great Confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16).

That episode occurred shortly after the events of John 6, and corresponds with the purpose of John’s Gospel. The most important question anyone can face is Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?”

John’s Gospel does not record that episode, but provides answers to the question through his famous “I am” statements, the first of which occurs in John 6:35. These seven

statements are worth remembering for two reasons. First, Jesus identifies himself with an expression that is awkward in the Greek language, but which makes an important point. In Greek, one may say “I am” with one of two words, *ego* – the pronoun for “I” – or *eimi* – the verb “I am”. But Jesus makes a point of using both of them, which is a redundant way of speaking. He says not “ego” or “eimi,” but “ego eimi” or “I, I am”.

“Ego eimi” deliberately restates the words given to Moses at the burning bush. Moses had just been commissioned as Israel’s redeemer. When he asked for God’s name to tell to the people, the voice from the bush replied, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3:14). The Hebrew for this name is “Jehovah,” or “Yahweh.” But in the Septuagint – the Greek Old Testament widely used in Jesus’ day – it was translated as “ego eimi.” By applying this holy name to himself, Jesus staked an unmistakable claim to his deity.

The “I am” sayings are also important because they vividly summarize Jesus’ saving mission: “I am the bread of life” (Jn. 6:35); “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12); “I am the door” (Jn. 10:7); “I am the good shepherd” (Jn. 10:11); “I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn. 11:25); “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6); and “I am the true vine” (Jn. 15:1). To believe and prayerfully reflect on these sayings is to be nurtured into a deep, trusting faith in Christ.

SEEING, BUT NOT BELIEVING

Powerful as Jesus' teaching about himself was, most people reacted in unbelief. A remarkable instance of this took place in the aftermath of his miraculous feeding. Jesus had rebuked the crowd for seeking only material blessings and urged them, "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" (Jn. 6:27). The people therefore asked what they should do and Jesus taught them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn. 6:29).

Having witnessed this miracle and having been called to faith by Jesus in person, it is remarkable that the crowd responded by demanding another sign: "So they said to him, 'Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?'" (Jn. 6:30).

It would be hard to imagine a more vivid testimonial to the depravity of the human heart than this. Even after Jesus replies with the first of his "I am" sayings he ends up complaining, "I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe" (Jn. 6:36). How are we to account for this astonishing unbelief?

According to the Bible, people do not believe because of the spiritual inability arising from their sinful condition. Paul explains, "The natural person does not accept the things

of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Here, man’s inability is ascribed to spiritual deadness. In another place, Paul says, “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot” (Rom. 8:7). Here, unbelief is explained by man’s rebellious hostility to God and his ways. Until born again, all people are spiritually dead and hostile to God.

The second of these is on display in John 6. They asked for a sign not because the miraculous feeding was insufficiently revealing. They asked because they didn’t like what Jesus was saying; their demand for another sign was just a way of putting him off. Jesus had called on them to change their attitude. Since they did not want to do that, they sought to justify their unbelief. How often this happens today! People spend their entire lives in a world that manifestly displays the glory of God. And they receive testimonies both from Christians and the Bible sufficient to persuade them about any other matter. Yet they respond to the gospel with one objection after another.

At its root, man’s unwillingness to accept Jesus is really a moral inability. People love their sin, they love their pride, and they especially love their own lordship over their lives. Like fallen Lucifer in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, they hard-heartedly declare, “Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav’n.”¹ Cornelius Van Til states the truth about both this crowd and the persistent skeptic today: “These men are sinners. They have ‘an axe to

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I.263.

grind.’ They want to suppress the truth in unrighteousness. They will employ their reason for that purpose.”² Determined to be their own god, their own savior, and their own lord, they find reason after reason to reject Jesus Christ.

This unbelieving crowd proves that the adage, “Seeing is believing,” is not true. They had seen proof positive of Christ’s deity, but still would not believe. The reality is that when it comes to spiritual matters, we need to reverse the principle: we must believe in order to see. This is as important to the believer as the unbeliever. How many Christians doubt God’s loving care whenever a trial comes, despite having seen abundant proofs of his faithfulness. Like the unbelieving crowd, we demand for God to give a sign, despite knowing that he has sent his own Son to die for our sin and innumerable other mercies. “O you of little faith!” Jesus often told his disciples. If we will believe his Word and trust him at all times, our eyes will be open to see the sovereign hands that uphold us in every affliction.

Faith comes not from seeing but from believing the Word of God. It is through God’s Word that we are born again (I Pet. 1:23), and the result of being born again is that we believe and understand God’s Word. But if we will not believe the Word of Christ, then no amount of signs, evidences, or reasons will ever penetrate our foolish hearts.

² Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1975), 50

THE MANNA FROM HEAVEN

If the crowd would not consider the salvation Jesus offered, then what specifically did they have in mind? They answer: “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (Jn. 6:31).

These were religious unbelievers. They knew their Bibles – or at least they thought they did. And since the miracle of multiplying the loaves so obviously recalled the great miracle of the exodus, when God provided for Israel in the desert by sending manna from heaven, they thought this would be a good way for Jesus to satisfy their doubts. After all, if he was going to claim to be greater than Moses, then he ought to at least do what Moses did. Jesus had fed them only one meal, but Moses fed Israel for forty years!

As with many religious unbelievers today, the problem was that they did not know their Bibles as well as they thought. Jesus answered them, “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” (Jn. 6:32). The book of Exodus reveals that it was not Moses who sent the manna from heaven. Moses was only God’s messenger. When the people had complained about their fears of hunger, God said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day” (Ex. 16:4). This warns us against our tendency to focus on God’s human instruments – famous

preachers and great leaders – instead of realizing that all our blessings come only from God. This also pointed out the difference between Moses and Jesus, who by God’s power had fed the five thousand from his own hands.

If this explanation was not enough, Jesus followed it up with a bold and open claim to his own deity: “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (Jn. 6:33). Not only did Jesus perform the miracle by God’s power, but he adds that God’s great provision for the world’s need was his own coming into the world. Jesus came into the world “down from heaven” – that alone is a bold claim to his deity – and, as bread gives life to the body, Jesus gives “life to the world.”

THE TRUE BREAD

If we ever grow impatient in our witnessing, Jesus’ example helps us to persevere. Not able to think on a higher realm than the material, and unmindful of their greater, spiritual needs, the crowd responded, “Sir, give us this bread always” (Jn. 6:34). We can easily imagine Jesus throwing up his hands and giving up on them, but instead he appealed to them with the first of his great “I am” sayings: “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of

life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35).

Jesus is the “true” bread that the Father gives (6:32). This shows the relationship between the Old Testament signs and the New Testament reality in Christ. The manna given in the exodus was real – it actually fed them – but Jesus was the true fulfillment of what it represented. This is the case with all the Old Testament symbols, or “types,” of Christ. Israel had Moses as a redeemer, but Jesus is the true Redeemer. Jerusalem had a temple, but Jesus is the true temple where God meets with man. John obviously wants us to realize this relationship, because he frequently brings up Old Testament figures that are fulfilled in Christ. The first was Jacob’s ladder, which showed “heaven opened,” with “angels of God ascending and descending” (Jn. 1:51). Jesus is the true stairway to heaven. The second was the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up to save to those dying from snake bites (Jn. 3:14). But it is truly by looking to the cross of Christ that we are saved from the curse of sin. Likewise, God sent manna to care for the peoples’ needs, but Jesus is the true bread that meets our greatest need.

There is another sense in which Jesus is the true bread. Bread speaks of fulfillment and satisfaction, and Jesus is the One who gives these truly. This is one of the greatest lessons we can ever learn in a world that fails to deliver on its promises. An example comes from the life of William Somerset Maugham, one of the greatest writers of the early 20th century. His novel *Of Human Bondage* is a recognized classic, and his play *The Constant*

Wife has received thousands of stagings. He enjoyed incredible popularity, receiving an average of 300 fan letters a week, and he had fabulous wealth. But his wildest dreams of success failed to satisfy him. His nephew, Robin Maugham, visited him shortly before his death in his villa on the Mediterranean Sea, filled with valuable furniture and works of art and served by eleven servants, including a cook who was the envy of all the other millionaires on the Riviera.

Robin was a Christian and had sent his uncle a Bible. When he arrived, he found him reading Jesus' words, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Maugham said, "I must tell you, my dear Robin, that the text used to hang opposite my bed when I was a child... Of course, it's all a lot of bunk. But the thought is quite interesting all the same." But that evening after dinner, Maugham flung himself down onto the sofa: "Oh, Robin, I'm so tired." Burying his face in his hands, he went on, "I've been a failure the whole way through my life." Robin tried to encourage him: "You're the most famous writer alive. Surely that means something?" "I wish I'd never written a single word," he answered. "It's brought me nothing but misery... And now it's too late to change. It's too late..." At that point his face contorted with fear and, staring into space with horror, he shrieked, "Go away! I'm not ready... I'm not dead yet... I'm not dead yet,

I tell you..." Then he began to gasp hysterically. Shortly after Robin's visit, his uncle died.³

Maugham's problem was that he possessed a soul. And none of the bread of this world was suited to feed his soul. But Jesus is the true bread. In the way that bread gathers up the life found in the natural world so that the body that eats it takes in that life, Jesus contains the life of God. He said, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (Jn. 5:26). Therefore, the soul that receives Jesus by faith is fed with the very life of God.

THE BREAD "OF LIFE"

Jesus said he is the bread "of life." He came "down from heaven and gives life to the world" (Jn. 6:33). Arthur Pink explains, "The Father's provision for a dying world was to send from heaven His only begotten Son."⁴

From this first "I am" statement, we can make several important observations. First, in the same way that our bodies depend on bread, Jesus is *necessary* for the life of our souls. J. C. Ryle comments, "We can manage tolerably well without many things on our table, but

³ Cited from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 201-202.

⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 325

not without bread. So it is with Christ. We must have Christ, or die in our own sins.”⁵ Are you trying to live without Christ? You may satisfy your ego with success. You may satisfy your material needs with money or your desires with pleasure. But you will never satisfy the inescapable needs of your soul without Jesus Christ.

Second, Jesus, like bread, is *suited for everyone*. Caviar is not a food that pleases all. The nursery rhyme says, “Jack Sprat could eat not fat; his wife could eat no lean.” But there is a reason why restaurants serve bread to everyone before they even order from the menu. James Boice applies this truth: “Jesus is for all. He is for you. He is the Savior of the world, and that includes the peasant as well as the king on his throne... He has what you need. What is more, he knows you and he knows how to meet that need.”⁶

Third, just as bread is eaten daily, Jesus is our *daily need*. It is not enough to meet with Jesus one day a week. Jesus taught us to pray, “Give us our daily bread,” and so it is with him. Pink writes, “If the Christian fails to feed on Christ daily... he will be weak and sickly.”⁷

Fourth, just as bread must be chewed and swallowed, Christians must *feed on Jesus by faith*. Jesus especially applied this principle to his Word. He said, “Man shall not live

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 1:370.

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:478

⁷ Pink, 327.

by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt. 4:4). The hearts of children are fed by the kind and loving words of their parents. An army feeds on the brave words of its leaders. A nation feeds on the inspiring speeches of its best politicians. But there is nothing compared to the Word of God to feed the soul of every man, woman, and child. In the same way, a church is well fed and grows spiritually through the bread of God’s Word as it brings us in faith to Jesus Christ.

If we are living in a weak age of the church, the reason is found here. Christians are feeding on the world instead of on the Word. Biblical doctrine is considered irrelevant. Surveys show that a majority of evangelical Christians cannot list the Ten Commandments. Detailed knowledge of the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount, the “I Am’s of Christ,” and the so-called “Romans Road” were staples of earlier generations that won their world for the gospel. If we find that the influence of our lives is weak, that our witness is weak, and that our collective impact on society is weak, it can only be because we are weak through neglecting the bread of God’s Word.

Fifth, Jesus must have thought of the miracle he had just performed. Matthew 14:19 says that after he had given thanks to the Father, he “broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples.” Likewise, Jesus is the bread of life because *he was broken* on the cross for our sins. He made this explicit when he instituted the Lord’s Supper. Paul tells us that he “took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is broken for you’” (I Cor. 11:23-24).

“How,” you may ask, “can Jesus be the bread of life for the world?” The answer is that he died to pay the penalty of our sins, so that through faith in him we might be restored to fellowship with God. He rose from the dead to usher in a new kind of life for those who believe. Then ascending into heaven, he lives even now to send life through the Holy Spirit to those who believe.

COMING TO JESUS

It cannot be an accident that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which means “house of bread.” Those who came to witness his birth were fed in their hearts. This crowd that came to Jesus was likewise fed. This shows that if Jesus is the “bread of life” we must come to him. He said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35).

Jesus combines two “whoever” statements that tell us what it means to come to him. He joins “whoever comes to me” with “whoever believes in me.” We come to Jesus by believing in him. Have you done that? Or do you persist with new demands, just as the crowd asked for yet another sign? If you do not come – if you do not believe – you will hunger until your spirit finally dies.

But look at Jesus' promise: "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall not thirst." This means that in coming to Jesus we will always be watered and fed. We will be weak, but coming to Jesus will make us strong. In turmoil, we will find peace. In grief, we will gain comfort. In confusion, we will see truth. Coming to Jesus is the answer to all our spiritual needs, and Jesus promises always to provide.

Coming to Jesus starts with realizing the hunger of your soul. Do you not realize how unfulfilling life is apart from fellowship with the Son of God? Do you not realize that your need for new experiences, new thrills, and new achievements merely proves that you were made for something higher? God's provision for our highest, eternal needs in Jesus Christ, the true bread whom God has sent into the world.

"Whoever will come" means you. And if you will come to Jesus, you will not need another. You may come to him every day of your life, for unending days in all eternity, and be satisfied again and again. If you come to Jesus, you will say with the Song of Solomon, "He is altogether lovely" (SoS 5:16, KJV). And if you walk with Jesus as a disciple, you will come to realize what Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68).