

The Bread Of Life

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Date: 05 February 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, today we are continuing our study on John's Gospel and we are currently in chapter 6. We're going to look at part of the passage that Neil read for us, but we can read again at verse 35. 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. Our title today is The Bread of Life.

And last week, as we said, we looked at the two famous miracles that occur at the start of this chapter, when Jesus fed the 5,000 through the multiplication of bread and fish, and then he came walking on the water to meet his disciples as they struggled in their boat in the midst of a storm. These miracles, like all the miracles recorded to us in the Gospels, are signs. They're pointing us to think about who Jesus is. And as we saw last week, the two miracles at the start of this chapter, they speak of the incredible way that Jesus gives us both satisfaction and safety. He meets our deepest needs in terms of our hunger, our spiritual hunger, and he makes us secure and safe through everything that he has done. In the aftermath of those miracles, though, a discussion arose between Jesus and the crowd, which is a pattern that we're going to see, that we're going to keep seeing through this kind of middle section of John's Gospel. And that's not surprising when you think about what's just happened. But one of the wonderful things about John's Gospel is that it gives us a record of these lengthy discussions that take place. And that means that we can see the kind of questions that people were asking, the issues that arose, and the things that they were thinking as they tried to get their heads around everything that was going on. And you see an interesting pattern that for some people, they are starting to realize just who Jesus is. But for other people, especially for the religious leaders, the things that Jesus was saying and doing are becoming more and more offensive. This week and next week, we're going to look at this big long section from 22 to the end of the chapter, which records a long and fascinating discussion between Jesus and the religious leaders and the crowds. And it all centers on the great declaration that Jesus makes in verse 35 when he says, I am the bread of life. Now, as you may know, this is the first of what's known as seven great I am sayings in John's Gospel. Jesus declares, I am the bread of life. And then later on, he says, I'm the light of the world, the door, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and the life and the true vine. Now, that would be a study in and of itself. We could just look at them over seven weeks. But we're just going to look at them as they come up as we make our way through

John's Gospel. What I want to just highlight just now is that all of these statements are just pointing us to who Jesus is. They are teaching us what he's come to do. And they are drawing us all to put our faith in him. John gives us the first of these. Oops, I just scored it out there. I didn't mean to do that. I am the bread of life. Now, this is a very, very rich statement. And in this passage is actually a very, very full passage.

It's just bursting with amazing theology. So much so that I actually always find this quite a hard passage to preach on because I don't know what to leave out. And there's so much that we could look at in John chapter six. And I also, although I find it hard to preach on, I also love preaching on this passage, partly because I just love bread.

[3 : 54] And when Jesus talks about bread, it resonates with me. I don't know if you've ever been to a nice fancy restaurant and you're sitting reading the menu and they come with this basket of magnificent bread. If I had my way, I would throw the menu away and say, I'll just have that basket for my dinner because I love, love bread. And the passage in many ways is like that. There's loads of amazing bread for us to chew on and think about together.

Sometimes though, it can be hard to take it all in. And if you were listening to the reading and thinking, oh man, I'm struggling to just keep all of this together in my mind. If you are feeling like that, then don't in any way feel bad and don't be surprised because it is a very, very dense chapter

in lots of ways. And it can be hard to take it all in. And I think that when that happens, for any passage of the Bible, if you're reading and thinking, man, there's a lot here, the best thing to do to start with is to keep things simple.

And that's something that we mustn't forget. We look at these great I am statements. They're very, very rich statements, but they are also simple statements. And we want to make sure that we don't overcomplicate things. And so here, when we look at this phrase, Jesus saying, I am the bread of life, it's telling us that Jesus is saying, if we want to understand who he is, then we should think about bread. So if we want to understand who Jesus is and what he's come to do, we should think about bread. And that's a helpful place to start.

So you think, okay, bread, well, bread is something that we need every day. Now, we maybe don't recognize that so much today because we've got so many alternatives to bread. But I'm sure every one of us can recognize the fact that for many generations of human history, bread is just a staple aspect of day to day nourishment. We need it in order to survive.

And so even if you're not a bread eater, and for some of you, I know that you can't even eat bread, but it just want you to think of bread in terms of just the basic food that you need to survive every day. It's something that we need. Bread is also something that we have access to. So bread is not the food of the elite. It's not caviar or fancy stuff like that. It's just something that everybody can get unless, of course, something majorly is wrong. But in normal circumstances, bread is available. Bread is something that we actually have to eat. We have to receive it. It's not doing us, it's not giving us any nourishment if it's in the cupboard. We've got to take it. We've got to receive it. We shouldn't refuse it. And bread is satisfying. It takes away our hunger. It gives us energy and nourishment.

[6 : 49] And a fresh loaf of bread out of the oven. Oh, man, I can smell it almost. It's so good. So these are all true of bread. These things are also true of Jesus. And that's what I want us to think about today. The fact that the bread of life is something that we need.

The bread of life is available. The bread of life has got to be received. The bread of life is so satisfying. So we'll go through them together one by one, starting off thinking about how Jesus is saying that as the bread of life, he is needed. Conversation begins with Jesus challenging the crowd as to why they're following him. You can see that in these verses here. They've seen the miracle. They've been well fed. They come to him because they just want more of the same. Jesus responds, though, by majorly raising the stakes in terms of what they're thinking and talking about. Jesus says the thing that matters is not your next meal. What matters is eternal life. And that's really what is starting to get them to think about. He's making them stop and think about eternity, about what really matters.

And so that prompts the crowd to ask, well, what should we do? What do we need to do to be doing the works of God? And you have this wonderful reply from Jesus. This is the work of God that you believe in him who he has sent. But that just prompts another question from the crowd. They're like, okay, well, prove it. What sign do you do? How do we know that you are who you say you are? And because they're thinking about food and because they're thinking about bread in their minds, they go back to one of the most important and most famous incidents in the Old Testament, which is the provision of manna in the wilderness.

And so you may remember that when the Israelites were taken out of Egypt, they crossed through the Red Sea, they were then in the desert, they had nothing to eat. See, this massive crowd of hundreds of thousands of people, they've had the kind of joy of escaping slavery in Egypt, miraculous deliverance through the Red Sea. They then come to the wilderness and they're like, we're going to starve to death. We've got nothing to eat here. And they actually grumble against God, against Moses. And they're like, we should have stayed where we were. And you read about the amazing provision that God makes for them in Exodus that in the morning, there was a flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. And they said, what is it? And Moses said, it's the bread that the Lord has given. And they named it manna. And so that was, that was one of the big, big miracles in the Old Testament.

That's what happened way back then in the good old days. That's the kind of thing God used to do for us. You know, that's, you know, when we're thinking about bread, that's the big thing we need to be thinking about. Jesus responds by saying that was just a shadow.

[9 : 53] That was just a shadow of the true bread that the Father is sending. And this is what he talks about in the next verses, 32 to 35. And so Jesus is telling them that actually that was just a

shadow. What really matters is what's right in front of them now. And so the crowd says, well, please give it to us. Give us this bread. And he says, it's me. I am the bread of life. Now there's two very important things that's been taught here that I just want to highlight briefly. First is that this is another example, as we were saying, of where we see that something massive in the Old Testament is actually just a shadow of the full reality that is being fulfilled in Jesus. This is something that John has done already. So you go back to chapter two, and you see that this is explained to us in terms of the temple. The temple was this magnificent building in Jerusalem, this magnificent part of Israel's history. And yet Jesus saying that's just a shadow. It's all been fulfilled in me. Same thing here with the manna, one of the most important miracles in their history.

And yet it's just a shadow. And in fact, that's highlighted by Jesus later on in 48 to 49, because he said, your father ate that manna, but they still died. Yes, it kept him alive.

For a while, but it didn't give them eternal life. It was just a shadow. Jesus is the true sustenance, the true bread. He's the one who gives eternal life. And that's just a very helpful thing for us to remember when we're trying to understand how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together. The Old Testament stuff that you see as magnificent as it was, it was never enough and it was never meant to be, because it's only ever intended to be a shadow of the Savior that they really need. So that's one thing we see.

The second thing that we see in that this is the even more important one is that that all of this is telling us that Jesus as the bread of life has come for a particular type of people. He's come for those who are hungry. He's come for those who are in need.

The miracle of the manna was in the context of imminent starvation. The feeding of the 5,000 was in the context of a crowd who hadn't eaten and needed something to eat if they were going to be able to get back home again. People need bread to survive. We need food if we're going to live. And the point that Jesus is making is that when it comes to eternal life we desperately need the bread that he's going to give us. We desperately need him.

[12 : 51] And that tells you something so magnificent and so important. It tells you that the Gospel, that everything that we've got here contained for us in Scripture, it is not for the people who've got it all. And it's not for the people who are kind of spiritually and theologically elite. And it's not for the people whose lives just fit so perfectly in these wonderfully neat boxes of expectation that we create. And it's not for these people who are just super impressive in God's eyes because none of that exists in God's eyes. None of us can come to God as super impressive, wonderful elite people. There's no such thing. And the Gospel is not for that kind of person. The Gospel is for the hungry, for the needy, for the starving. And I think that's crucial because you might be here today and you know in terms of faith, and this is true whether you're a Christian or whether you have not yet become a Christian or whether you're not sure where you stand, for all of us, in terms of faith, in terms of a relationship with God, all we can see is what we lack. So we think I don't know enough. I don't feel like I'm good enough. I've got a lot of mistakes in my life that I'm ashamed of. I struggle with doubts and questions. There's some things

I'm not sure of, some things I'm skeptical about. I've left Jesus to one side too much in my life. I don't pray enough. I don't read enough. I feel spiritually malnourished.

Jesus is saying that is exactly who this bread is for. So if you feel like, if you feel really guilty because of mistakes you've made in your life, this bread is for you. If you think I've made loads of stupid mistakes and the stuff I wish I hadn't said and done, this bread is for you. If you feel like you don't understand everything, this bread is for you.

If you think I'm worried that in the future I might let God down, this bread is for you.

If you look at other people and think they're far more suited to being a Christian or being a good follower of Jesus than I am, if you feel like that, this bread is for you. If you think I am nervous about what is going to happen when I die, this bread is for you.

[15 : 28] In other words, if you feel hungry for peace and security and joy and hope and all the amazing promises of eternal life, then this is the need. That's the need. That's the hunger that Jesus has come to meet. And honestly, everybody has that hunger. Everybody has that hunger. And I think I can prove that. And the only thing I need to do to prove that is to take people to Dalmore and to stand at gravesides. And you imagine standing at a graveside of your best friend or your mother or father or your sister or brother or God forbid even your child. In that moment, are you satisfied to think, well, they're gone?

Or in that moment, are you hungry for the hope that they're safe? That they're safe with Jesus and that one day you will see them again? Everybody has that hunger. And that's why Jesus raises the stakes and talks about eternal life because this matters more than anything else. This bread of life is needed. Second thing though is that the bread of life is available. That wasn't a very accurate arrow, but I'm going there. As you read through this passage, one of the things that gets emphasized again and again and again is that Jesus has come down from heaven. You see it all through there. I'm not going to read it out, but it's just to show you that it's there. He keeps emphasizing the fact that he has come down from heaven. Now, all of that is emphasizing that because Jesus has come, eternal life is available. And that's what offended the Jews. They didn't like him saying that he had come from the Father. But that's the point that Jesus is trying to make. The bread of life is not being kept secret. It's not reserved for the elite. The bread of life is available. And that's brought out so beautifully in verses 32 and 33. Jesus said to 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 for the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Now, there are some big theological concepts in these two verses.

And these concepts explain what God is doing in order to make eternal life available. These are concepts that we want to know and understand because they're so crucial to the gospel. Jesus speaks about his Father giving the true bread from heaven. That's pointing us to a theological concept called divine initiative. And that's really just self-explanatory. It's emphasizing the fact that the salvation offered in the gospel is initiated by God. And this is one of the most important truths of the gospel. Sin has left our relationship with God ruined. Sin has left humanity broken and alienated from God. You only need to turn on the news to see that that's true. And that situation is our fault because we were given freedom by God that we misused in order to push him away. And so the relationship's broken, everything's mucked up, our fault. And yet when it comes to putting things right, God is the one who takes the initiative. In other words, we have long forgotten about God. He has never forgotten about you. And it all starts with him. That divine initiative prompts what we then would call voluntary condescension. I'm worried I'll spell that wrong. I can never remember if it's S or C in the right order. But anyway, voluntary condescension, the idea of coming down, that is such a cool phrase, such a cool phrase. It's used in the Westminster [20:02] Confession of Faith, which is a summary of theological truth that was written 400 years ago, but it's been a very, very valuable document ever since. And I'll just read the paragraph where it's used. The distance between God and the creature is so great, the difference between us and God is so great. And even though reasonable creatures do we owe obedience to him as their creator, so it's written in older language, but the concepts are clear.

The distance between us and God is so great, even though we owe obedience to him, yet there could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward. In other words, we can never work our way back up to God, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he's been pleased to express by way of covenant. So basically, what's that saying is this, we cannot get back to God, and we cannot fix the relationship with God. And the only way it can be fixed is by voluntary condescension from God. In other words, if God comes down to meet us. And he does that voluntarily. He does it because he wants to establish a relationship with us, what the Bible calls a covenant relationship, where he is our God, we are his people. And that's ultimately culminated in what we call the incarnation, the fact that Jesus has come down from heaven, that he's become one of us, pain's not working, there we are, our incarnation, God himself has come to be one of us. And so that's who

Jesus is, God, the Son, taken on human flesh, become one of us. He's come to stand with us on alongside us. Because of that, I'm running out of room, he can function as a mediator. He can stand between us and God a little bit like the ladder they had for the children. And as a result of all of that, God gives life to the world, which is all an expression of his grace. Now, all of that is, all of these are big theological concepts that sum up what God is doing. And so they're contained in these verses in terms of salvation on God's side. You've got this divine initiative where he takes action, voluntary condescension, where he prepares to come to meet with us, incarnation where that's fulfilled in God himself, becoming a human alongside us. Jesus himself functioning as our mediator, dying in our place, all because God wants to give us salvation according to his grace. On God's side, you've got all these massive theological concepts piecing together a wonderful plan of salvation in order to restore humanity's broken relationship with God. That is God's side of things.

On our side, there is an absolutely magnificent word in these verses, which explain what it involves for us. It's the word whoever. All of that stuff means that whoever comes to him, whoever believes in him will have life. That is such a good word. Such a wonderful word. Doesn't matter where you come from in terms of your background, whatever your background is, it doesn't matter what you come with, whatever baggage you're carrying. The only thing that matters is who you come to, that you come to him. That takes us to our third point, the fact that the bread of life has got to be received. The crowd in verse 34 are saying to Jesus, give us this bread always, they want it. Jesus tells them what to do. In that verse, you can see two key verbs, which is the verbs that I shared with the children.

He says, whoever comes to me shall not hunger, whoever believes in me shall never thirst. These two words lie at the heart of how we receive Jesus. For all of you here, if you are a Christian, this is what you did. If you become a Christian, this is what you do.

[24 : 34] You come and you believe. The word come is so good. It's just a word of invitation. It's not complicated, but it's telling you something amazing. It's telling you that God wants you close to him. When I give you all those massive words like divine initiative, voluntary condescension, incarnation, mediation, and all the other massive theological concepts that we have in the Gospel, why do we have them? We have them because God wants you. He wants you near.

That's such, such a crucial thing. Whether you've been a Christian for years, whether you are pretty certain you're not a Christian, whether you're not sure where you stand, I'm going to put a sentence on the screen that you have got to write on your heart. God does not want, and put your name in there, to stay away from him. He does not want you to stay away from him. He wants you to come. And then believe is the language of trust. And again, that's what we try to bring out with the children. It's just the idea of placing a reliance on him, leaning on God. So Jesus wants you to come close to him and Jesus wants you to lean on him. This is the response that God is looking for. We are to come to Jesus. We are to believe in Jesus. That's why we're saved by faith. Now, it's really important that we don't misunderstand that. That doesn't mean knowing everything, because we don't, none of us know everything.

There's so much that we don't know. It's, you can be saved with so little knowledge. That's such a crucial thing to remember. When I became a Christian 25 years ago, I knew, I knew pretty much nothing, except for the fact that I just knew I needed Jesus. And in the 25 years since, I've learned a lot, but I think I've learned even more how much I just don't know. So it doesn't mean knowing everything. It also doesn't mean never doubting.

Christians aren't people who never have doubts and never have questions. Sometimes you do have doubts. And that's one of the wonderful things about being part of a church family, that we can talk about them and help each other with them. And having faith doesn't mean that you feel strong and confident. It doesn't mean that you come to Jesus and you're saying to him, Lord Jesus, I've got really, really, really strong faith. It doesn't mean that at all. It means Lord Jesus, I feel so weak, but I know that you are strong. And I know that I cannot do it, but I know that you can. The strength of our faith is all because of the object of our faith, the one that we're actually trusting in. All of that means that as we come to Jesus, you come knowing that you can't stand on your own. You know that you're relying on what Jesus has done on the cross. You know that you need him more than anything else. I don't know if this is a helpful illustration or not, but I want you to imagine a wee girl standing at the bottom of the Clesium and you meet her and she says, I'm going up there and you're like, are you sure? How are you going to get up there? And she says, she's taking me and she points to her big sister who's an experienced hill walker and sure enough, up they go. And the two of them go together, but the wee girl is only going to get there because her big sister will show her the way and will encourage her and will hold her hand and might even carry her when she can't do it. And when she gets to the top, it's all because she has trusted her big sister to take her there all the way.

That's the kind of faith that Jesus is looking for. The only difference is that for us, Jesus carries us all the way, not just some of the way. It's all about putting our trust in him.

[28 : 32] And this raises a really important point that I just want to mention in passing that I think is something that we often face today with the people around us. And it's maybe something that you face yourself in your own thinking. We talk about the gospel, we talk about Jesus, we talk about trusting him and you say, okay, I want proof. I want proof that I can believe.

I want proof. And I was chatting to one of my sons a few weeks ago and he was saying, he'd been speaking to a member of staff in school, they were talking about God and she was saying, well, if you can give me scientific proof that God exists, then I would believe.

And that's a very typical answer. We want proof. But what we need to recognize is that proof is always subordinate to belief. Proof is always subordinate to belief. In other words, the validity of proof is always dependent on what you believe. Here's an example. I had a very, very exciting meeting this week. Didn't tell any of you about it. It was so exciting. Let me show you a picture. Went to London, Rishi pulled me up, he says, look, Thomas, I need some help. Come down and have a chat. Let's get it. What, you don't believe me? How is that not proof? Because you don't believe. Because you don't believe that's a genuine photo. And even if it was a genuine photo, you would only regard it as genuine because you believed it was genuine. It's the same with every form of knowledge. If you're doing scientific research, you've got to trust your measuring systems. You've got to trust your methodology in order to reach conclusions. If you're reading the newspaper, you've got to trust that those reports are accurate. If you're looking at a map, you've got to trust that it's telling you something that corresponds to reality. If you have a friendship, you've got to trust that person. Proof is powerless without faith in any part of life. And that's why the Gospel doesn't confront you with the question, where's your proof? And it doesn't spend the whole time saying, here's your proof. The Gospel comes and says, what do you believe?

Do you believe in me? The bread of life has got to be received. And it's not going to do us any good unless we do receive it. We receive him by faith. So we've seen the bread of life's needed. It's available. It's got to be received. Last of all, and this is just a two minute point. The bread of life is so satisfying. And that's because Jesus gives us what we long for. Jesus satisfies our hunger for meaning. You look at the world around you. You look at people. There's got to be meaning and purpose and value in that. Jesus gives us that meaning. Jesus satisfies our hunger for hope. You think about life and you think about death and you think about eternity. And whenever you start thinking about those things, a hunger immediately stirs up in your heart. It's a hunger for hope. Jesus gives us that hope because he died and rose again. Jesus satisfies our hunger for security. You think about what a week can bring for you or for the people that you love. You think about what might happen in the months and years to come. We have a hunger for security.

[32 : 21] Jesus satisfies that hunger because he says, I will keep you safe forever. And above all, Jesus satisfies our hunger for love. You come to Jesus. You discover that he has loved you forever. And this satisfaction is captured so beautifully in the Greek of verse 35. So the New Testament was written in Hebrew. New Testament is written in Greek. And there are some things that are just not conveyed as well in English as they are conveyed in Greek.

They always say, they always say never to show people Greek, but I think stuff that. There is the Greek of verse 35. Now, don't worry if you can't read it. I just want you to see two little words. There's two ways of saying not in Greek. One is to say you and one is to say me. Now that's an M. It looks like a U with a tail and that's an air sound. So in English and me like a sheep. Okay. There's two different ways of saying not. Now as I read through that verse, I want you to listen out for those two words. Did you hear the words? You heard them all and you heard them twice. You heard U, meh and you heard U, meh. Not not not not. Now, this is a really important difference between Greek and English. If I say I am not not going to sit down, that means that I am going to sit down. I think I get that confused. I'm not not going to sit down. I mean, I'm going to sit down. So not not cancels each other out in English. I am not not going to eat my lunch. So that means I'm going to eat my lunch. In Greek, it's different. The two knots don't cancel each other out. The two knots intensify the statement. And so you don't translate it by saying not not. You would translate it by saying absolutely not. And so what Jesus is saying here, he is saying whoever comes to me will absolutely not hunger. And whoever believes in me will absolutely not thirst. And then the last word there is the word never. And so really what it's Jesus is saying, you will absolutely not hunger and you will absolutely not thirst. Never.

Because he wants to feed you. He wants to satisfy you. He wants to hold you. And he will love you. Forever and ever. And he came to die to make that possible. He died on the cross so that he could say to you today, you will not not not absolutely not hunger and not not not absolutely not thirst forever. Because of how much I will love you and care for you and provide for you. That has got to make Jesus worth following this week and for the rest of our lives. Amen. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you are the bread of life. We need you so much and we love you so much. Amen.