JESUS THE BREAD OF LIFE

John 6:25–71

Key Verse: 6:35

“Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’”

Are you satisfied? We try to be self-sufficient. We don’t want to appear too desperate. But most of us are longing for something inwardly. It could be just for our favorite food, or for a break from life’s many demands. Honestly, we might be longing for lots of money, for real friends, or for some other kind of success. Each day we go from one good thing to the next, hoping to find some satisfaction, but it often lasts only briefly, and we find ourselves hungry and thirsty again. In today’s passage Jesus promises us something. He says if we come to him and believe in him, we’ll never be hungry or thirsty again. What a promise! What does he mean? He says he can do this for us because he’s the bread of life. We want to learn today how we can experience real satisfaction in him. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

Look at verse 25. Who are these people? They’re the great crowd that came to Jesus on the opposite side of the lake the previous day (1). After Jesus fed them, they wanted to come and make him king by force, so Jesus withdrew to a mountain by himself (14,15). The next morning they were frantically searching for him and his disciples (22–24). Now they arrive by boat in Capernaum, where they find him and ask, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” They had no idea what had happened overnight. Jesus had done an even greater miracle; he had walked across the rough waters of the Sea of Galilee to help his disciples. He’d been training them to have God’s heart for needy people, and now he was training them to have faith in God in the midst of a storm. But the crowd had no idea about any of this. They just wanted Jesus to help them with what they thought they needed.

What does Jesus say to them? Look at verse 26. It’s a rebuke. When they first came to Jesus, it says it was because of the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick (1). Maybe some of them were hoping he would heal their sick family member or friend. Maybe others were just intrigued by his miraculous signs and were wondering what it all meant. But after he gave them food, they were following him now just so that he would feed them again. It tells us that in our journey of faith, our motives can deteriorate. We can start off well, but degenerate into just trying to use church for our own benefit.

Jesus saw something deeper going on. What was it? Look at verse 27. He saw they were working “for food that spoils.” Food can be a lot of work. We have to work for the money to buy it, then to work to preserve it, prepare it, cook it, and finally, to clean up and save it. It can spoil at any step along the way. Sometimes having too much food spoils *us*. We become obese or just ungrateful. Sometimes it’s the poor, hungry people who’re the most sincere. But Jesus is saying here that focusing our lives on food is a bad direction. Even if we have the best food in the best portions all our lives, we die in the end anyway. Working only for food, the Bible says, is part of the curse that came as a result of sin (Ge3:17–19). Of course, food is good. We all need it to survive. When God created the Garden of Eden it had trees that were good for food. But God created human beings for more than just food. Food here is also symbolic for anything that we think will satisfy us. It could be success, or love, or money, but just like food, it all spoils.

So what should we focus our lives on? Jesus says we should be working “for food that endures to eternal life.” It’s kind of hard to understand. Don’t we receive eternal life as a gift from God through faith in Jesus? But here Jesus says we should “work” for it. What does he mean? He could mean to make it our priority, what we “seek first” (Mt6:33), what we really struggle and strive for every day. We can easily treat our Christian faith as one of many good things in life. But faith in Jesus can’t be like a hobby or a side interest; it’s got to be at the core of who we are and what we’re pursuing in life practically. We can think faith in Jesus is so simple and easy, but really it’s not. To grow in genuine faith in him requires a struggle. Why is it such a struggle, something we have to “work for”? Because, like this crowd, we can so easily have the wrong motives. We can have fixed ideas of what we think we want or need. We can get so distracted. To really have faith in Jesus, we’ve got to struggle to dig deeper, deeper into God’s word, and deeper into our own hearts. And verse 27 says that only Jesus can give us what endures, eternal life, because on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval. It’s like he has the USDA label; he’s safe, and he’s quality.

How does the crowd respond? Look at verse 28. It seems they’re asking a good question. They want to do what God requires; we all should want that. But what does God require of us? Lots of activities? Keeping religious rituals? Hard work? Sacrifice? Sincerity? What does Jesus say? Read verse 29. It seems counter-intuitive. How can “work” be simply believing? Clearly, to believe in the one he has sent doesn’t mean to just have head knowledge about Jesus or to agree mentally with orthodox doctrine. To believe in him means to change what we really trust in, from trusting in ourselves, or in other things or people, to really trusting in Jesus himself. Colossians 2:6,7 says, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” Really believing in Jesus means living our lives in him, rooted, built up, strengthened and overflowing. Ephesians 4:13 says, “…until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Real faith means knowing Jesus personally, becoming mature, and growing in his fullness in our character. It doesn’t happen easily or automatically; it requires a daily commitment, struggle, and the support network of a believing community. God’s work is not just collecting lots of people to a ministry, but helping individual people grow in authentic faith. It may seem small, but it’s truly great.

How do they respond? Look at verses 30,31. Although Jesus has already given clear signs so that they can believe in him, they’re asking for another sign. And they’ve got a specific one in mind: making more food for them. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, God gave them manna each morning as their daily bread. It was like bread from heaven. God was training them to depend on him each day. But now these people are making use of the word of God to manipulate Jesus to get what they want. We may look down on them, but we can be just the same, using the Bible to get what we want. What does Jesus tell them? Look at verses 32,33. They used to focus on Moses; now they want to focus on the man Jesus. But Jesus turns their attention to God himself, and, to “the true bread from heaven.” This is the only bread that “gives life to the world.” They quickly say, “Sir, always give us this bread” (34). They have no spiritual understanding of what he’s talking about.

Read verse 35. It’s the first of seven “I am” statements of Jesus in John’s Gospel. Jesus is “the bread of life.” He’s going to explain what this really means. But for now, let’s think about his promise: “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” He’s not promising a materially comfortable life. Though these people are trying to use him, Jesus can see deeper into them. He sees them with compassion, that their souls need true satisfaction. It reminds us of when he said, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt4:4; cf. Dt8:3). We’re all chasing this or that to satisfy our souls. It makes us look so foolish. But God still invites us. God spoke through his servant Isaiah: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare” (Isa55:1,2). God freely gave us Jesus, the bread of life, who can deeply satisfy our souls. How sad that we ignore him and keep chasing other things of this world!

Look at verse 36. Jesus has fed them, and they’re with him now, but he can see that they don’t really believe in him. It’s discouraging. What does he say? Read verse 37. Jesus was sure God the Father would bring true believers to him. They might not be the people the world wants, but Jesus promises to never drive such people away. We need to follow his example and never drive away those who are sincerely trying to come to Jesus, even though they may be despised by the world (1Co1:28). It takes humility to do that. How could Jesus do it? He’s committed to doing not his own will, but the Father’s will; he’s the good shepherd who never loses those truly seeking him; it’s the Father’s will to raise such people up at the last day (38–40; cf. 44,54; 10:28). Jesus is looking not only at God, at his ability to bring true seekers to him, and at God’s ultimate will, but also at the long term outcome of his ministry.

How did the people respond? They began grumbling, seeing Jesus from a human point of view (41,42). They grumbled because Jesus wasn’t giving them what they wanted. Jesus rebukes their grumbling (43). Then he goes on to explain how anyone can truly come to him. Read verses 44,45. To truly come to Jesus, God the Father has to “draw” us. How does he do that? Jesus says, based on Isaiah’s prophecy, that God is trying to teach us all. It’s through his word, but also through all kinds of people and life experiences. God is trying to show us how empty this world is, how empty we are, and how much he wants to give us. Though God is trying to teach us all, sadly, not everybody is listening. Only some really “hear” God and learn from him. Those who hear God and learn from him are the ones who come to Jesus.

In verses 46–48 Jesus repeats how special he is. He alone has seen the Father. He alone gives eternal life. He alone is the bread of life. In verses 49–51 he goes back to the story of the manna in the wilderness. People ate it, yet they died, whereas if we eat the living bread of Jesus, we live forever. Look at verse 51b. “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” With these words Jesus takes his metaphor “I am the bread of life” to a whole new level. He’s pointing to his cross. Jesus gave his body on the cross to give us life.

The Jews think he’s talking about cannibalism (52). How does Jesus respond? Read verses 53–58. He repeatedly insists that we have to eat his flesh and drink his blood. He’s talking not just about communion but about personally accepting what he did for us on the cross. Jesus, the Holy Son of God, broke his own body and shed his own blood so that our sins could be forgiven. But like eating food, we’ve got to personally accept it and digest it. We’ve got to deeply realize how sinful we are, and that only Jesus’ death can save us. We can put food in front of a starving person, but the person has to actually eat it in order to stay alive. In the same way, each of us has to personally accept Jesus’ body and blood for my own sins; nobody can do it for us. It may be revolting to some, but Jesus says his flesh and blood are real food and drink (55) because they truly satisfy our souls—they give us assurance of forgiveness and of God’s great love for us. Jesus says we need to keep feeding on him to really live (57).

In the last part we see how many of Jesus’ so-called “disciples” in that crowd couldn’t accept his teaching that he’s the bread of life, and so they left. Jesus explained that he wasn’t talking about literal flesh; he said his words “are full of the Spirit and life” (63), but they left anyway. It wasn’t because his teaching was too hard; the deeper reason was he wasn’t giving them what they wanted. In verse 67 Jesus turned to the Twelve and said, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” He was asking not for himself but for them; he wanted them to take this moment to deepen their commitment to him. How did they respond? Read verses 68,69. These men had many weaknesses, but they were following him not to get what they wanted, but because of his words. Because they focused on his words, their faith in Jesus and knowledge of him could mature. At the end Jesus predicts the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve. It tells us that even among his closest followers there was the tendency to not really accept what Jesus taught.

Read verse 35 again. In this world full of so many things that claim to satisfy us, may God help us to newly accept Jesus as our bread of life. May we learn to come to him, believe in him, and feed on him, to eat his flesh and drink his blood, and have real life in our souls.