JESUS, THE BREAD OF LIFE

John 6:14–71

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.’”

In this passage there are a lot of important teachings. People deteriorate into trying to make use Jesus. Jesus teaches we should be pursuing not material goals but spiritual goals. Many stop following because they don’t get what they want and don’t want to accept what he’s saying. Jesus shows us how to deal with such rejection, and Peter shows us what it means to be a true disciple. We see elements both of God’s sovereign will and choosing and of people’s free choice. People have even used this passage to advocate both for and against taking communion. But the main point here is who Jesus is and what he came to do. Jesus is the bread of life. He came not to give us what we think we need, but to give his flesh for the life of the world. He earnestly invites us to come to him and believe in him so that we’ll never be hungry or thirsty again. Through studying this passage may God help us truly experience Jesus as our bread of life. May God help us to always feed on him so that our souls may be full of his life.

Look at verse 14. In Deuteronomy God promised that one day he would send a prophet like Moses. It pointed to the Messiah’s coming. Some people mistakenly thought John the Baptist was this Prophet. But then Jesus came. As Moses worked miracles, fed the people manna in the desert and became their deliverer, so Jesus healed and fed them, so they began to see him as the Prophet like Moses. But it was a limited understanding of Jesus. Look at verse 15. Jesus could see what they would do. At this Passover they intended to make him a political messiah. With their own will they wanted to force it. But Jesus wouldn’t be manipulated. He withdrew again to a mountain by himself, to pray. He’d just performed a great miracle, feeding 5,000 men with 5 loaves and 2 fish, but they didn’t understand. Even his disciples’ understanding was feeble. He looked popular, but it was a crisis in his ministry. So he came to God alone.

Look at verses 16–18. Jesus’ disciples went without him down to the lake and set out for Capernaum, a town up on the northwest shore, where their ministry in Galilee was based. It was a little weird to them that Jesus didn’t come with, but they went ahead anyway. Probably they hoped they could get back to Capernaum in less than an hour and get some sleep. But it was not to be. That night a strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. It was hard to make any headway and was taking them forever to get home. Look at verse 19. The other Gospels tell us that it was about 3 in the morning. In the dark, exhausted and desperate, and seeing Jesus walk on the water, the disciples were frightened. Read verse 20. Jesus’ words, “It is I” are like what God said in Exodus 3:14, “I AM WHO I AM.” In John’s Gospel Jesus frequently uses this expression, "I am." At this moment Jesus was vividly revealing that he's God himself. He wanted them to see that he isn’t a bread-maker or political leader, but God Incarnate. Verse 21 says that once they let him into the boat, what had been so difficult for them became easy; they immediately reached shore.

Next, we see the crowd he’d fed the previous day. Look at verses 22–24. They were desperately searching for Jesus. They couldn’t figure out where he’d gone. Finally they guessed they’d see him again in Capernaum, so they went there. Look at verse 25. They sound so nice and polite, so interested in Jesus, even ready to learn from him. But Jesus didn’t think so. Read verses 26–27. He rebuked them for following him to get food instead of to learn from him. Jesus can be brutally honest. When we’re hungry it’s hard to do anything—even to think properly. The same is true when we’re broke. We think we’ve got to focus on money—getting it and holding it. Many are giving their hearts to moneymaking. Frankly, in light of Jesus’ words here they should repent. All material things are slowly perishing, spoiling and fading away. As human beings we shouldn’t be slaves of such things. We shouldn’t be scrounging around all the time only for food that spoils, and in the end, die anyway. What a meaningless existence! But when he said, “Do not work for food that spoils,” he wasn’t saying we should all quit our jobs, go back to nature and become hippies. We have to be financially responsible, support ourselves, pay our debts and have something to share. Jesus merely meant we shouldn’t make moneymaking our priority; we should make following Jesus our priority. How did they respond? Look at verse 28. They tried to turn this into a debate about the works God wanted them to do. It was a very Jewish idea. People still think God wants them to do some good works, and if they do, they'll be okay with God. What did Jesus say? Read verse 29. What God really wants from us is not good works, but faith. God really wants us believe in Jesus, the one he has sent. We can be doing many things, but if we don’t believe in Jesus, all of it is useless. In the same way, we can be trying to help people in many ways, but if we don’t help them believe in Jesus, we haven’t really helped them. Here, the word “believe” is the verb form. Believing isn’t abstract, or mere mental assent; believing is active trusting. How did the people respond this time? Look at verses 30–31. They were so clever. They suggested Jesus do another miracle of making bread so that they could believe him. They weren’t even listening to what he was saying. Still, he went on to help them. Read verses 32–33. He took the attention off Moses and pointed to God himself. He took the attention off physical bread and pointed to the bread God gives, the bread that gives life to the world. And how did they respond? Look at verse 34. Again, all they could think of was getting bread out of Jesus. They tried to depend on him financially forever. They were pathetic.

What did Jesus say? He gave these stubbornly enslaved people some of the most gracious promises in the Bible. Read verse 35. Jesus is compassionate not only for physically hungry people, but also for those whose souls are starving. In our country there are not so many desperately hungry people, but there are so many people starving for love, for affirmation and significance, for inner peace. They gorge themselves on this or that relationship, entertainment, shopping, reading, or pursuing achievements, but they’re always left with the same nagging void within, like an empty gut. Even those with a good job, beautiful family and home fall into inexplicable and debilitating depression and start taking medication. They’re downcast, disturbed, sorrowful, weary and insecure, and they can’t understand what’s wrong. But the real problem isn’t neurological; their souls are starving. No amount of material things, even no person in this world, can satisfy us, because our souls were made for a personal relationship with God. Once, when David was in the desert of Judah, he wrote, “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you in a dry and parched land where there is no water” (Ps63:1). Another psalmist wrote, “My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (Ps84:2). And still another psalmist wrote, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Ps42:1–2)

Read verse 35 again. Here Jesus compares himself to a freshly baked, warm loaf of bread served up for all hungry people. When we take and eat of him, it's really satisfying. But what does it mean that he’s the “bread of life”? Well, he’s going to explain in the ensuing verses. But in one important sense, it means he’s the one who gives the words of eternal life (68). When we come and listen, his words speak to our souls deeply. His words awaken our souls, refresh our souls, strengthen our souls (Ps19:7; 23:3; 57:8; 119:28). Jesus understood that we have a soul and said elsewhere, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt4:4; cf. Dt8:3). The psalmist described these words, “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb” (Ps19:10). Jesus’ words are the very words of God; they are full of the Spirit and life (63). When we hear and accept his word, we have life, eternal life (5:24). In this world we’ll have trouble (16:33). But he promises us in the kingdom of God, “Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst” (Rev7:16a). It all starts when we “come” to him and “believe” in him. But we can’t do this only by going to church or taking communion. We can truly come to Jesus and believe in him when we start feeding on his word. Jesus invites us, “Come!” It’s like the prophecy of 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). Jesus is the bread of life for everyone.

After giving this gracious invitation, he turned to the crowd and rebuked them again. Read verse 36. He knew their unbelief was blocking them from experiencing true satisfaction of soul in him. It must’ve been so discouraging; these people had the privilege of actually seeing Jesus in person, but still they didn’t believe. Despite this, he wasn’t discouraged. Read verse 37. Jesus believed the Father himself would “give” him some people who *would* believe in him. These people would come in many shapes and sizes and with various problems, but Jesus isn’t picky; he never drives true believers away. Why not? Read verses 38–40. Here Jesus shows himself to be very obedient to the Father, and also, a really good shepherd. He takes care of those who come to him in faith all the way to the end, until he raises them up at the last day. The Jews didn’t like that Jesus said he came down from heaven (38a,41). They saw him from a human point of view because they knew his father and mother (42). They couldn’t get past their human thinking about him. So he rebuked them again for grumbling among themselves (43). And he explained how anyone comes to him. Read verses 44–45. Jesus co-works with the Father: The Father draws people to Jesus, and Jesus cares for and raises them up at the last day. Here, the word “draws” is important. In Greek the word means to attract or pull as if by some magnetic force. Jesus quotes Isaiah 54 and says that God draws us by “teaching” us. God teaches us in many ways—through events, through people, through life experiences, through nature, and mainly through the work of his Spirit, who’s always trying to lead and guide us to Jesus. But God doesn’t force us; he woos us like a lover. Actually, he’s trying to woo everyone to come to Jesus. But only some are willing to hear, listen and respond.

Some of the Jews thought they knew Scripture better than anyone; though they heard Jesus’ life-giving words, they weren’t learning anything because they looked down on him. So Jesus said, “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father” (46). Then he gave an even more brokenhearted invitation. Read verses 47–50. Jesus was speaking truth. He truly is the bread of life. Eternal life in him is real. Physical bread only leads to death. But Jesus is the living bread who helps a person to truly never die. Then he gets really specific. Read verse 51. At Passover, Jews ate a lamb that was sacrificed. But Jesus would become the true Lamb of God (1:29b) when he gave his own flesh on the cross. When we eat his flesh, he promises that we will live forever. The Jews really didn’t like this (52). In fact, most people don’t. It sounds like primitive cannibalism. But Jesus insisted. Read verses 53–58. Jesus used such graphic language partly to smash their fixed idea that he should give them more bread, and mainly to explain further what it really means that he is the bread of life. We can’t just look at a loaf of bread; we have to take and eat it for it to actually sustain our lives. Likewise, we personally have to “take and eat” what Jesus did for us on the cross. It means to personally accept that Jesus gave himself for *me*, that he died and shed his blood to forgive *my* sins. In Christian life we have to come to Jesus’ cross regularly and meditate on what he did for us deeply, in our daily devotional life, in our hymn singing, in our Bible study, in our communion, in our celebrating Easter every year. In verses 54–57 there are some great promises for those who do. Jesus says that when we eat his flesh and drink his blood, we have eternal life now, and, he’ll raise us up at the last day. When we eat his flesh and drink his blood, we’ll remain in him, and he in us. When we feed on him, we’ll live because of him.

In the last part, many disciples desert Jesus. They want Jesus on *their* terms, not on his. But in the midst of desertion, Simon Peter makes a beautiful confession of faith: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (68–69). Peter had many weaknesses, but because he loved Jesus’ words, he had hope. At the end, Jesus rebukes Judas Iscariot. Outwardly he was one of the Twelve. But inwardly he had the same problem as the crowd: he was hoping to use Jesus for some material gain and wasn’t really accepting his words.

So today Jesus is saying to us, “I am the bread of life.” May God help us to come to him and believe in him so that our souls can find deep satisfaction.