

“The Bread of Life”

The Twenty-Second in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 6:35-48; Isaiah 54:1-17

It must have been an amazing scene that day in the synagogue in Capernaum. The people want to make Jesus king because he gave them bread to eat in the wilderness—just like Moses gave the Israelites manna in the desert. But Jesus is now speaking of a living bread which endures to eternal life. The crowds who have been following him relentlessly want that bread that does not spoil. Jesus speaks of himself as though he were YHWH, declaring “I am the bread of life.” Yet, when Jesus speaks of striving for this bread, the people want to know what work it is that God requires of them so that Jesus will give them more of this bread. When Jesus tells the people this bread is received by faith alone, they demand more of this bread to eat. When Jesus corrects them, and tells them again that he is the living bread who has come down from heaven, those who wanted to make him king, now begin to grumble and complain about his words. What is Jesus’ response to their lack of faith? He begins teach about total inability, irresistible grace, and predestination.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of John, and we are currently going through Jesus’ “bread of life” discourse in John 6. As I mentioned several weeks ago, ideally, we should go through this entire chapter in one sermon because there is a logical progression of events, and the theological points Jesus makes build one upon the other. Unfortunately, this would take us a couple of hours to do so, especially if we wish to do the passage justice, so, I’ve broken up the chapter into six sermons. Again I ask that you read through the entire chapter several times during this series so as not to miss the forest for the trees.

To summarize the ground we have covered so far, recall that the chapter opens (vv. 1-15) with Jesus miraculously feeding over five thousand people in the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus’ actions clearly demonstrate that he is a New Moses who can feed the people of God in the wilderness. After withdrawing because the crowds wanted to make Jesus king (vv. 16-25), he then walked across the Sea in the midst of a storm, and then calmed the Sea, before proceeding with his disciples by boat to Capernaum. The next morning, the crowds (who had been searching for Jesus all night), were quite surprised to find Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum, where he gives the “bread of life” discourse in response to the questions put to him about how it was that he made his way to Capernaum so quickly, and without anyone seeing him. Jesus knows the people’s hearts, and he knows they are seeking him from self-centered and short-sighted motives, far more indicative of unbelief and superstition than of true faith.

The so-called “bread of life” discourse which is found in verses 26-58, is one of the most significant teaching discourses in all of the New Testament. Jesus tells those gathered in the synagogue who want to make him king that they are only following him because their bellies are full. Lacking faith, the large number of people present (which includes his own disciples) do not look beyond the signs (the loaves and the fish) to see the reality—Jesus is a New Moses who is leading the people in a New Exodus from the wilderness of this present evil age, to an age of eternal life and deliverance from the guilt and power of sin. The people are awed by the fact that Jesus is a miracle worker who can cast out demons and heal the sick, and whom, they have just learned, can feed them in the wilderness just as God did the Israelites. Many of them believe that Jesus might be the prophet foretold by Moses.

As the “bread of life” discourse opens, Jesus does not answer the crowd’s question about when and how he arrived in Capernaum. Instead, in verses, 26-27 he tells them, “*truly, truly, I say to you, you are*

seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves,” before warning them, *“do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.”* Instead of answering their impertinent questions, Jesus tells those following his every move that they have missed the whole point of his messianic mission. They care nothing about Jesus’ person and work—other than how Jesus can be of benefit to them. The people may be in awe of the fact that Jesus can perform miracles, but they care nothing about what the miracles actually indicate—that he has come to save them from their sin.

Speaking sternly, Jesus warns the people not to work for food which can perish (i.e., the bread he just gave them, which, like the manna God gave to the Israelites in the wilderness will spoil quickly if not eaten), but instead to seek that food which leads to eternal life. The bread of which Jesus is speaking will not spoil, but will endure (or lead) unto eternal life. Identifying himself as the Son of Man (the eternal figure of Daniel 7:13 ff.) Jesus tells those assembled in the synagogue that YHWH has set his seal (approval) upon Jesus. The miraculous signs Jesus has performed throughout the Galilean region are proof that he has been sent by God—the miracles and signs are his divine credentials, so to speak.

Jesus’ comments provoke the assembled crowd because they amount to claims to deity. Many in the crowd are fixated upon what they must do (i.e., the “works which God requires”) so as to get this bread which does not perish. They have missed completely the fact that Jesus has promised to give them the bread from heaven. In verse 28, they ask him, *“What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”* The question betrays how badly Jesus has been misunderstood. Our Lord is offering these people eternal life. Instead, they want bread that does not perish. They want full bellies and relief from suffering. They do not understand that what Jesus is offering them is so much better than bread which doesn’t spoil, and which only satisfies their pangs of hunger until the next meal. Even worse, all they can think of is “the works must we do” to get this bread. Tell us, Jesus. Be specific. What “works” must we do to get this bread? They have been catechized by self-righteous Pharisees and, sadly, it shows.

Jesus’ answer is not what they expected from someone they thought would make a good king. He sounds nothing like the Rabbis to whom they have grown accustomed. *“Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’”* Jesus tells them that they need not do anything to receive the bread he is offering, except that they be willing to receive it. Those brought up in the religion of second temple Judaism, thought someone entered the covenant through election (being born a Jew), but kept their place in the covenant through human activity (circumcision) and the striving to keep the 613 laws of Moses (as taught them by the Pharisees). Therefore, Jesus’ answer makes little sense to the crowds. He is offering them something so much better than bread which won’t get moldy. But they are thinking about doing, working, and earning—anything but simply receiving eternal life through trusting in Jesus’ person and work to save them from their sin.

Missing Jesus’ main point—the crowds are obviously troubled by Jesus’ use of the Son of Man self-designation and by speaking of God as “his father.” As we read in verse 30, *“so they said to him, ‘Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”* Citing from Psalm 78:24, the crowds want Jesus to prove that he is who he is claiming to be. They have already made the connection between Jesus feeding the five thousand in the wilderness and Moses securing manna for the Israelites in the wilderness—so far so good. But when Jesus makes such claims to deity in the synagogue, he had better prove to the people he is greater than Moses. So, they demand another sign.

Jesus knows their hearts are hard and that they desire to make him king. He knows that if he gives them

another sign as they demand he is only giving in to their sinful desires. Such a sign would only harden their hearts all the more. Therefore, Jesus will not give them the sign they want—the feeding of the five thousand the day before was sufficient. Instead of performing another miracle—like a magician performing his act—Jesus corrects their misunderstanding of the Scripture they have just cited to him. As we read in verses 32-33, “*Jesus then 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.’*” Moses did not give the Israelites bread in the wilderness, YHWH did, and Jesus has YHWH’s seal through the signs and wonders he has already performed in the presence of many of them. Jesus will answer them with words, not another sign.

Jesus tells them plainly that the bread from heaven he promises them is not another tasteless barely loaf or even a wheat cake (enjoyed by the wealthy). The bread of which Jesus is speaking is bread which comes down from heaven. This bread is from God. Therefore it satisfies deeper human needs than hunger. This bread is therefore unlike the bread God gave Israel through the mediation of Moses (the manna in the wilderness), or even like the bread Jesus fed them in the wilderness. The bread of which Jesus is speaking gives life to the whole world—not just to Israel. This bread gives life to the same Gentiles whom the Jews wanted Jesus to drive from the land as reflected in their desire to make him king.

The depth of the crowd’s unbelief is clear in verse 34, as we can see their hostility toward Jesus growing. Like the Samaritan woman at the well (cf. John 4:15) the people listening to Jesus cannot grasp that he is pointing to something so much greater than bread that will not spoil. “*They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’*” Apparently, they do not want to go to the store or cook ever again. Jesus fed them the day before, and he can feed them again. They want this bread which will not spoil.

In response to their selfish whims, Jesus exposes their short-sighted and faithless demand in 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.’*” Using the “I am” formula (*ego emi*) which, as we have seen, is connected to YHWH’s self-revelation as the creator of all things, and redeemer of his people, Jesus identifies the bread of which he has been speaking. As we saw last time, this is not a reference to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but to the need for us to personally trust in Jesus Christ as the only source of eternal life and salvation. Yet, the Lord’s Supper makes perfect sense in light of what Jesus says here, because his words prefigure the sacrament in a profound and obvious way. As one commentator put it, “John 6 is not about the Lord’s Supper, but the Lord’s Supper is about John 6.”

The bread which Jesus offers does not spoil. This bread satisfies the deepest human need—redemption from the guilt and power of sin and restored fellowship with God. When Jesus dares to declare that he is the bread of life of which he has been speaking, his identity should be clear to everyone in the synagogue that day. Jesus is the eternal word clothed in human flesh. He is the Son of God who has been sent by the Father to redeem his people and grant them eternal life through faith (trust) in his person and work. But their hearts are hard and they do not understand. And so in verse 36, Jesus rebukes them. “*But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.*” God incarnate is standing before them, claiming to be this life-giving bread from heaven, and speaking words which grant eternal life and create faith. But the crowds do not want his kind of bread. They want loaves which do not spoil, and think that in that bread which fills their stomachs, they have God’s blessing, just as the Israelites of old did.

While the people are still trying to figure out where they missed Jesus’ point about the bread, in verses 37 and following, Jesus continues to explain his use of the bread metaphor as it relates to his mission. Jesus now introduces God’s sovereign purposes into the discussion—as if the people were not yet angry enough,

Jesus speaks now of predestination, perhaps the most controversial doctrine in all the Bible. *“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”* Jesus has not come to make salvation possible for people who find it within themselves to make “a decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior” (i.e., hypothetical universalism). No, Jesus tells the crowd that he has come to save specific people—those individuals who have given to him by the Father before God created the world. This means that the number of God’s elect is fixed, and that all them will come to faith in Jesus.

Those elect individuals whom the Father has given to Jesus (as part of an eternal covenant of redemption made between the members of the Trinity) are those who will hear his words (as Jesus mentioned in John 5:24-29), be given eternal life, and who then will respond in faith. The purpose of his mission, as Jesus sets it out, is not make it possible for people to save themselves with his help, but to actually and effectually save those individuals given him by the Father. These individuals will indeed come to believe in Jesus at God’s appointed time, and in response to Jesus’ summons—through his word which has been proclaimed to them. All those who do come to Jesus in faith (those given to Jesus by the Father), Jesus will not cast out. He will give them eternal life, and take away their deepest hunger and spiritual thirst.

Jesus makes this point again, even more explicitly in verses 38-39. *“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”* It is hard to escape the impact of these words—although many of our contemporaries try their best to do so. Jesus speaks plainly in this “discourse” of what the Reformed speak of as Jesus’ “active obedience.” Jesus’ mission entails perfect obedience to the will of his Father. If we are to be saved by Jesus from the guilt and power of sin, he must die upon the cross to bear in his own body the punishment due us for our own sins. But Jesus must also fulfill all righteousness by obeying the law of Moses and the will of God (perfectly), so that even as he bears our sins while suffering upon the cross, so also his obedience to God’s law is imputed (or reckoned, or credited) to us through faith. Jesus came down from heaven (an affirmation of his pre-existence as the eternal word and Son of God) for the very purpose of saving all those whom God has given him, and then raising all of them from the dead on the last day. And of those given him by the Father, Jesus will lose none. Not one. This is why he came. This is why he is the living bread from heaven, and that all those who feed upon him by faith receive eternal life.

To make sure that no one misses his point that obeying God’s will defines his own messianic mission, Jesus restates what he has just told the crowds, now tying his person, work, and means of salvation together. As Jesus puts it in verse 40, *“for this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”* Those in the audience seeking more signs, or seeking to figure out what work God requires of them so that Jesus will give them more bread that does not spoil, must have been completely baffled. Jesus says that he has come down from heaven—this is a claim to pre-existence, or even deity.

He even calls himself “living bread” which, he says, endures (or leads) to eternal life—Jesus is greater than the manna God gave to Israel. God sent him to do this, and he is completely devoted to obeying his Father’s will, thereby fulfilling his mission as the New Moses leading the true people of God (the true Israel) in a New Exodus. Jesus will freely give eternal life to all those who trust in him (who come to him in faith). Those who do come to him, Jesus promises, he will not cast out, assuring them of salvation. He even guarantees that he will raise them from the dead (from their graves) on the last day (i.e., judgment day) and ensuring that all those who believe in him now will live with God forever.

The Jews listening to this must have been stunned. Jesus has just rewritten their entire history as a nation

and a people as they understood it. He has put himself at the center of God's purposes for Israel. He even made additional declarations which sounded a lot like claims to deity. Jesus made statements about people being given eternal life only through faith in him, as though someone (possibly Gentiles) could be saved apart from personal obedience to the law of Moses. Jesus was clearly teaching that the Father grants salvation through Jesus, and it is he, Jesus says, who will raise the dead on the last day. Who would dare speak like this? Who would make such claims? How dare Jesus claim to be the "bread of life." And this is the man they wanted to make king?

The crowds did not like what they were hearing. According to verses 41-42, a certain level of hostility toward Jesus was now rising in the crowd. "*So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' They said, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?'*" Having made the connection between Jesus and Moses, ironically, the Jews complaining about Jesus' use of the "living bread" metaphor, begin to do exactly what their forefathers did while in the wilderness with Moses—they too grumble and complain. That they are angry means they have been listening carefully. They know Jesus' family—Mary and Joseph, although they do not believe, or are not aware of Jesus' supernatural conception through the power of the Holy Spirit. How dare this man say he comes from heaven. We know his family. We know his hometown. If he came from heaven, this would make him equal to God!

Once again, in verse 43, Jesus rebukes those now openly grumbling by alluding to Israel's own history, something which would have infuriated many of those present all the more. "*Jesus answered them, 'Do not grumble among yourselves.'*" To grumble at Jesus' teaching in the midst of the discourse was disrespectful at best, and positively dangerous at worst. Instead of listening to Jesus and weighing his words in light of the divine seal placed upon him (through his miracles), the Jews are grouching with each other while Jesus is speaking. And like their fathers grumbling about Moses and the manna out in the wilderness of the Sinai, they too are grumbling about how Jesus is claiming to be the living bread who has come from heaven to save his people from their sins. These people will not take "yes" for an answer.

In verse 44, Jesus reveals why the Jews are complaining about his declaration about coming down from heaven—and once again, Jesus speaks of God's eternal purpose in election. "*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.*" Using the universal negative, "no one" can come, Jesus tells those who thought of themselves as God's chosen people and the apple of YHWH's eye, that they cannot even come to Jesus *unless* God draws them. The implication is obvious—the reason you (i.e., those in the audience) grumble and do not believe in me, Jesus says, is because God has not drawn you. You have not been chosen by God to believe in me, Jesus says. This would come as quite a shock to those who saw themselves as God's elect nation—Jesus says "God must draw them." But didn't God already choose them? Is Jesus saying that we are not chosen by God because we don't believe in him? Yes, that is exactly what Jesus is saying.

In these words of Jesus, we find both the doctrines of total inability and effectual calling. Total inability refers to the fact that people cannot come to Jesus apart from God's grace because their wills are so enslaved to sin they will not choose to trust Jesus unless God enables them to do so. Irresistible grace refers to the fact that all those whom God chooses he also draws through the preaching of the gospel, and that all the elect do in fact come to faith in Jesus. Total inability is taught in John 3:20 when John stated that, "*people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil,*" and again in John's prologue (John 1:12-13). "*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*" In verse 44, Jesus speaks of God "drawing" people to trust in Jesus (irresistible grace) just

as people “draw” water from a well by dropping down a bucket and then haul it in. When the gospel is preached, those given to Jesus by the Father are called (drawn), given eternal life, and then respond to Jesus’ summons to believe in him.

This is as clear a declaration of monergism (that God saves), and as strong a rejection of synergism (God helps us save ourselves), that we find anywhere in the Bible. Despite the claim from many of our contemporaries (who should know better) that these doctrines are the invention of John Calvin, these doctrines are both taught by Jesus in the “bread of life” discourse. And, we should note, Jesus teaches these difficult doctrines to the people crowding into the synagogue in Capernaum precisely because they did not understand the nature of his mission. They grumble about Jesus and they reject his words because they cannot come to him in their own strength, and because they must be drawn to Jesus by the Father (i.e., “called”) in order to trust in him. To paraphrase, Jesus is telling the chosen people of Israel “you cannot save yourselves!” “You will remain in unbelief unless and until God calls you.” He is telling them that they cannot count on Israel’s national election apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ.

In verses 45-46, Jesus now appeals to the same Old Testament text from Isaiah 54:13 which had been the reading in the synagogue for the Passover (and which we read as part of our Old Testament lesson). *“It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father.”* Those whom the Father “draws” are not forced to come, but rather are “taught” by God through the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit. As the prophet Isaiah was given a prophetic image of a restored Jerusalem after the exile, Jesus now says that it is he who has come to “teach” Israel (“illuminate” the sinful human heart) about the Father’s redemptive purposes, which is the means through which the promise to restore Jerusalem will be fulfilled. Those who have been “taught” by God (“called” by Jesus) will come to Jesus, because he (Jesus) is the only one who has seen the Father, because it is he who has come down from heaven. Jesus will explain this work of illumination (being taught by God) in much more detail in the “upper room” discourse beginning in chapter 13.

Jesus puts the matter bluntly to his audience, forcing them to decide whether he is who he says he is, or whether he is a liar, a kook, or a deceiver. There is no longer any middle ground. If the people are still going to follow him, they had better understand who he is. They must decide whether they are with him (by accepting his teaching as from God) or against him. Jesus tells them directly, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.”* Those listening to Jesus must trust that what he has just told them is true, that what he speaks is the word of God and therefore as reliable as are the writings of Moses and the prophets. The people present must believe him when he says that he has come down from heaven to do the will of God, and that he is the living bread upon whom they must feed through faith.

We must be careful not read this sentence as though it says, “whoever wishes to get (receive) eternal life must believe.” Rather, Jesus says that whoever already has eternal (as a present possession) will respond to him through faith—those given to Jesus by the Father will believe the truth of his words no matter how difficult these words may be. Faith in Jesus, is the natural and inevitable consequence of being drawn to him by the Father and being given eternal life through his word. Regeneration precedes faith. Those given to Jesus will be drawn to him by the Father, they will receive eternal life and believe in Jesus, and they will be raised in the resurrection on the last day.

Why must those listening to Jesus that day in the synagogue believe this to be true? Why must we believe this to be true? In verse 48, Jesus tells them and us plainly. *“I am the bread of life.”* Jesus is YHWH clothed in human flesh. Jesus freely gives us that food (his crucified flesh) which leads to

eternal life and which satisfies our deepest needs. Jesus is that living bread from heaven upon whom we must feed by faith, knowing that when we do so, we will never hunger or thirst again. And just as Jesus told those that remarkable day long ago in the synagogue in Capernaum, so now on this Lord's Day, he still says to us, "I am the bread of life."