

“I Am the Bread of Life” | John 6

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I had a very exciting but also thought-provoking experience this week. I went to the NFL season opener in Philadelphia. The Eagles versus the Cowboys!

I’m an avid Eagles fan, and the city was in a frenzy for the Thursday night game against our rival. Seventy-thousand packed the stadium for the pre-game banner ceremony, where we celebrated last year’s Super Bowl win and the new banner, “2024 World Champions.”

Local R&B legends, Boyz II Men, came out to sing the national anthem, and when we came to “the rockets’ red glare,” our live mascot, Lincoln the Bald Eagle soared across the field. The joining of a city’s pride in its team, championship fervor, the national anthem, and now a soaring bald eagle, gave rise to a swell of hoorahs and cheers like I’ve never experienced. I found myself thinking, “for a city, this is as good as it could get.” As the home team went on to win, we were served that night a meal we’d been hungering for for a long time.

But that’s not the thought-provoking experience that I want to tell you about. It’s a feeling that arose in me while walking to the train station the next morning: *that really is as good as it gets for a city, and yet the people walking to work this morning, the people walking with me to the train—even me—we are still so hungry.*

Have you ever had an experience like this? You finally get something you’ve wanted for a long time. Acceptance into your dream school. The job you’ve worked for. Maybe marriage? Maybe a first child? Maybe the car or house you’ve worked for. And then you find yourself noticing that you’re not as satisfied as you expected. You’re still hungry.

People have long puzzled over the seemingly insatiable appetites of humans—our longings for meaning, purpose, power, love. In his book, *The City of God*, Augustine argued the entire city of Rome was organized about distorted longing for power and glory—but power never satisfies. Sigmund Freud saw deep biological drives beneath our strained desires. Victor Frankl thought the “will to meaning” fueled us.

We spend our days devouring—media, relationships, work, school, tasks—, but deep contentment and satisfaction allude us. Things are only compounded when we consider a mortal creature’s longing for immortality.

This fall we turn to seven sayings of Jesus that seem to address these hard-to-please appetites. Seven times in the Gospel of John, Jesus says “I Am” then follows it with a rich metaphor. I am the Bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the way, the truth and the life. To read these is to sense our darkness, lostness, emptiness, addressed. To respond to them is to hear an invitation to “abundant life” (Jn 10:10).

We begin in John 6, where after feeding five-thousand people bread from just five loaves, Jesus refers to himself as “the bread of life.” And then promises, “whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn 6:35). I want to focus on three elements of this rich passage: **(1) The True Bread. (2) The Hungry but Confused People. (3) The Faith that not only thinks but Feeds.**

I. The True Bread

Like most scenes in John’s Gospel, John 6 finds people wondering about who Jesus is. He is referred to in at least ten different ways:

Prophet (6:14), king (6:15), Rabbi (6:25), Son of Man (6:27, 52, 62), Sir (6:34), Son (6:40), Jesus, son of Joseph (6:41), He who is from God (6:46), Lord (6:68), the Holy One of God (6:69).

Hearing some of these titles today is like hearing someone talk about a movie we haven’t seen—we aren’t sure what they mean. In brief, the Jewish people at that time were expecting God to send a figure called *Messiah*, anointed one, a savior.

Some thought the person would be a great prophet like Moses. Jesus’ miraculous provision of bread brought Moses to mind—who prayed for Israel in the wilderness in Exodus and God then provided bread for them from heaven. Moses had spoken of another prophet to come (Deut 18:15-18), and we hear the people claiming in verse 14,

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the **Prophet** who is to come into the world!” (6:14).

They also hoped the Messiah would be a king like David, hence verse 15,

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him **king**, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself (Jn 6:14-15).

Amidst this curiosity about Jesus’ identity, I want to draw attention to how Jesus describes himself in this passage. It comes to the fore as he dialogues with the people about the meaning of the miracle of bread.

³² 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. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” (Jn 6:32-34).

They people think this is about getting more physical bread. And it is now that Jesus says something startling:

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. (6:35).

What does Jesus mean by using this metaphor to describe himself? Two things we should note. **First, Jesus is revealing his divinity—He is God with us.** He is the bread that has “come down from heaven” (6:38), establishing that he is more than a mere prophet or human king. And this offends:

⁴¹ The Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² 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’?” (Jn 6:41-42)

Jesus is not *merely* born of Mary. Jesus is from God, and Jesus is God, as the opening of John’s Gospel states:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:1, 14).

Jesus is God in the flesh.

To speak of Jesus with soaring titles like “prophet” (as Muslims still do), or “wise teacher” (as some philosophers and modern people do), or “a most famous historical figure” (as some historians do), and go no further, is not to compliment him. It is to damn with faint praise.

And we must posture ourselves when reading the Gospels to listen accordingly. This is not just another teacher talking—this is our Lord, our maker, our author.¹

You listen differently when you are around an author. In graduate school I often was part of small seminars where we’d read books and discuss them. Sometimes we’d reach out to the author, and they’d join us for a discussion. You act differently, listen differently, when before an author.

Second, by referring to himself as the Bread of Life, Jesus is telling us that underlying all our appetites, is **our hunger for God**. As God in the flesh, Jesus comes not merely to give bread, but to be bread. It is as Augustine notes in the opening of his *Confessions*, God made us for himself, and our hearts are unsatisfied until they find satisfaction in Him.²

The True Bread is God in the flesh. God with us. And God for us.

¹ “He was in the beginning with God.” ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (Jn 1:2-3).

² The exact language is, “you made us for yourself and our hearts find no rest until they rest in you.” Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1.1.1.

This brings us to our next point, which is about the people—they are hungry, but also confused.

II. The Hungry and Confused People

John 6 is sweeping in its inclusion of people. Jesus deals with everyone from the lone boy with bread and fish (6:9), to the *entire world* in his comments in 6:51, “bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” He is addressing *all people, including you and me*.

And he is saying at least two things about all of us: we are *hungry*, but we are *confused*.

Hungry, in that this whole passage is about bread and eating. Confused, in that this entire chapter is also marked by the people who neither understand the source of the bread they have eaten, the identity of the man speaking to them, or the true nature of their hunger.

The people are hungry for physical provision—for literal bread. They are hungry for leadership—for Jesus to be a prophet. They are hungry for political liberation—for Jesus to be king. But they don’t yet grasp that they have a hunger that no physical food nor human prophet nor king, can satisfy.

Misunderstanding about Jesus and the depth of humanity’s needs runs throughout the gospel.

The religious leader Nicodemus has no idea what Jesus meant when Jesus told him, “...unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3).

The Samaritan woman at the well didn’t understand that the living water Jesus offered was himself.

And now in John 6, the crowds cannot grasp what Jesus means by saying they need better bread, and better leadership, than what was given in Moses’ day. But Jesus could not be blunter than his words in verse 49,

Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died (Jn 6:49).

In other words, people need more than physical bread and earthly kings. They need more than superficial salvation; they need a more radical spiritual transformation.

A few things to notice now, on this point about the hungry but confused people.

First, it can be very hard to discern what our real needs and wants are. We can spend our lives chasing things that we think will finally fix us, make us whole, save us—only to find that we misdiagnosed our problem, that we needed something more. Like a sick person who loses their appetites, our spiritual condition stunts our *sense of God hunger*. We don’t necessarily feel the weight of our sins, nor the weight of God’s judgment if they are not taken away. We mistake our

hunger for God as hunger for other things. We must let Jesus guide us here. He is telling us that we need more than physical provisions, we need God.

Second, it is to notice the extent God goes to feed us—despite our sinfulness and ignorance. To be our bread, Jesus doesn't merely give us things—he gives us himself. But this requires dying for us: “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51). This refers to the cross. And notice the language in this passage about God's work in drawing us to Jesus, Jesus' work in keeping us, and the Spirit's work in nurturing spiritual life:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out (6:37); No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” (6:44). It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all” (6:63).

Salvation is by grace. God is at work to feed us the bread of life—he *comes to us, draws us to Himself, suffers on a Cross for us, sends his Spirit to awaken and nurture us*. God is for the hungry man or woman, even in his or her spiritual confusion. He holds forth to us Bread.

And this brings us to our third and final point, where we ask how we eat this bread. Here we focus on having a “faith that feeds.”

III. The Faith That Not Only Thinks but Feeds.

How we eat this bread starts to emerge in verses 27 and 29:

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. (Jn 6:27).... “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (Jn 6:29).

The work we are to do to eat the Bread of Life is summarized by this single term, “**believe.**”

John is unique in the way he describes relating to Jesus. He uses the word “believe” **98** times, and never as a noun, but always a verb. John stresses that “faith” must be more than mental assent (though it is that), but also involve active and committed following of Jesus.

And through John 6, Jesus is sifting the quality of people's faith. It is okay if people are at first drawn to Jesus because of the signs—miracles—he does. But faith merely in miracles does not suffice, nor faith merely in provisions:

² And a large crowd was following [Jesus], because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick” (6:2).... And later, Jesus says to them, “You are seeking me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (6:26).

The faith Jesus is looking for is faith ultimately in *him*—who He is, and what he himself means to us.

This mature faith is further explained with other terms and images. Here in our passage believing in Jesus is further explained by this metaphor of “eating” and “feeding”:

“If anyone **eats** of this bread, he will live forever (51). ... whoever **feeds** on me, he also will live because of me (6:57).

The terms “eat” and “feed” are visceral. As a metaphor coupled with bread, it tells us that faith, or believing, is more than mental assent to ideas and truths.

What then is faith that not only thinks, but feeds on Jesus? Let me suggest a few things as we close.

First, faith that feeds is faith that “receives” Jesus into our souls: Eating carries the sense of taking something inside us. Back in John 1, Jesus uses the word “receive” synonymously with “believe”:

[Jesus] came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 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.

Receiving and eating have a different feel than “believing.” The sense is more relational and speaks of opening one’s soul to Jesus. The soul believes in Jesus, and therefore feeds on him, when it makes the action of opening to him—perhaps in a manner similar to opening your heart to a person as a friend.

Second, faith that feeds is faith that obeys Jesus—taking the actions that align with what he longs for us to do. This is how Jesus describes eating in John 4:

The disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” ³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” (Jn 4:31-34).

There is a sweet type of soul-satisfaction that we feel when we serve others in the name of Jesus, or practice honesty because Jesus calls us to, or steward our money in ways that honor God. This literally *feeds our souls*. We feel nourished and well-fed when we do the will of God.

Third, faith that feeds is faith that chews the cud—meditates on the person and promises of Jesus daily: Just as in the physical realm we must eat regularly, so too in the spiritual. We must regularly, daily, take into our heart truths about Jesus. Do you read your Bible and pray every day? Do you at times put on worship music and worship Jesus Christ? Do you at times just sit

and ponder in our heart a phrase from Scripture, such as Jesus words, “I am with you, always” (Matt 28)? Or are you starving yourself spiritually, even as you gorge yourself with other foods?

C. S. Lewis once said that “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*). If after even the greatest of human events—a marriage, the birth of a child, the accomplishment of a career, the winning of a war, even the hanging of a Super Bowl banner—, we still find ourselves hungry, then it can only mean one thing: we are made for another Bread, and we will never be satisfied unless we feed on Him.

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).

Let us come to him and eat.
Amen.

Small Group Questions

1. The “I Am” sayings in John’s Gospel find Jesus addressing deep human needs and longings. Can you think of a time when after even the greatest of human achievement or excitement you were “still hungry.” Can you share a time when something you longed for didn’t satisfy as much as you expected? How might this prepare you to hear Jesus teaching that He is the Bread of Life?
2. The crowd in John 6 misunderstands both Jesus’ identity and the source of their true hunger—they are hungry but confused. What are some ways that we might misdiagnose our hunger today? What are some ways we might misunderstand who Jesus is today?
3. Along with emphasizing that God gives us the bread of life, this passage calls us to “feed” on that bread. Feeding means believing, receiving, obeying, and regularly being with Jesus. Does this practice of “feeding on the Bread of Life” make sense to you? How might you grow in this practice this week?
4. Jesus comes to “hungry but confused people” with grace—the incarnation, his patience in teaching, the miracles, and finally, the Cross. How does it encourage you to know that God draws us, feeds us, and sustains us (6:44)—even when our faith feels weak or confused? How might this impact how you pray for a friend who does not know Jesus?
5. Like physical eating, spiritual nourishment requires daily feeding. What spiritual practices can help you feed on Christ regularly? How might you work with a friend to grow in this area of “feeding.”