

The Bread of Life

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[0:00] Well, welcome everybody. We're going to be looking at this passage over the next three weeks.

! I say we, I actually won't be here next week and probably the week after.! It's going to be up to Aaron to make sure it all makes sense, but I've got the first one. It's obviously intended as a single discussion, starting and ending with this bread metaphor and its references to manna, but there's a great deal in it.

So it's worth spending more than one week over it, and I think that's, Phil thought that would be a good idea, and I was a bit sceptical at first, but when I got into it I thought, yes, he's quite right, it is worth spending more than one week over it.

So, but what I want to do this morning is perhaps something slightly unusual. When we come to a passage like this, it's very easy to, well, to make one of two mistakes.

I'm sure you can make lots of mistakes, but just two that you could commonly make. One is to think, well, this is all right for people 2,000 years ago, but people just don't think like this anymore.

[1:12] It's just not relevant to us in the 21st century. On the other hand, we can, as Christians, sometimes uncritically import our 21st modernist and postmodern ideas into the text, and I think that's a particular danger that the church, people who claim to be evangelicals even, are going through at this time, that they read postmodern ideas of what it means to be human.

Into the text here. So, what I want to do is perhaps try and persuade you, not, I mean, I will go to refer to the text, obviously, but rather than just a simple exposition of the text, to try and persuade you that this text deals with exactly issues that we face today in the 21st century.

So I hope I'll be able to do that. If not, we'll have to see how it goes, which is what I aim to do.

Because the discussion is dressed up in homely language at first sight.

It deals with issues like food and work and religious ritual and family. Yet throughout, if you look at it closely, you see that Jesus is actually drawing attention, directing attention away from the mundane and everyday.

He invites his listeners to look beyond the obvious. To think about what life is really about. And indeed, what it really means to be human.

[2:48] And as I said, that's not a fading of the ancient world only. Much of the confusion in the West today is due to the same fault. Have you noticed how people try to give simple answers to complex questions?

We get politics by slogan and soundbite. Yet you come and ask an apparently simple question, what is a woman? And nowadays you can't get a straight answer.

At least not one that seems to make sense. To use an old-fashioned term, there's no wisdom to be found. People just seem to have stopped thinking.

And seem to want to stop other people thinking as well. So I'd just like to give you a few thoughts around this and hope it will prepare us for the more theological discussion that Aaron is going to be dealing with in the section next week.

Middle bit next week. So, what's the context here? The crowd in our passage were looking for a free meal, weren't they? Verse 26. It talks about them in verse 28.

[4:00] So it presumably means much the same people. But maybe the thoughtful members of the crowd who were a bit more willing to engage in a discussion rather than the mob rule which was threatened in verse 15 when the crowd just threatened to make Jesus king by force.

So this is a discussion of sorts at least. And as I said, the discussion is about, if you like, the purpose of life.

But at root, there's an even deeper issue. When we ask about the purpose of life or how we look at life, we mean, of course, the purpose of human life. If we were going to ask what's the purpose of life for a snail, we might come up with a different answer.

We are really asking a question about, in other words, we are asking a question about identity. What does it mean to be human at all? And if people were confused about that in Jesus' time, they're even more confused today.

Identity politics is on everyone's lips and mind. But how it actually works, what it actually means, is a source of great confusion.

[5:13] So it's worth taking a little time, that's what I aim to do, to map Jesus' teaching, if you like, onto current thinking on this question of what is human.

So, we'll see how it works. So when does this story really start? I suppose modern Western thought, the story starts at the period of history, which was known as the Enlightenment, somewhat misleadingly, some of us may think.

That's what it's called. And that was in the 17th and 18th century. Now, obviously, I can't trace 400 years of history this morning, but just pick up a couple of threads.

This phrase, a man being half angel and half ape, seems to be quite commonly quoted, so I thought it was interesting to have a look and see where it came from.

And it actually comes from an essay by William Hawkins, an essay on genius, which was published in the revised edition in 1781.

[6:32] There was an earlier edition. And it contains on the first page these lines. Nor varies more our present outward shape, this man half angel and the next half ape, than do the mental powers, what odds we find behind a blank's and a Newton's mind.

So there are several, when I looked this up, I thought there were several interesting points about this quote, actually, that you might not immediately think of. The first is that the blank name is actually in the original.

It's not been added later by the CIA or something. They haven't redacted it. It was actually in the original text. Presumably you could get sued even in the 18th century.

So we never know whether he had a particular person in mind or not, but here he didn't say so. And the second interesting point is, if you read it closely, this reference to being half angel and half ape actually refers to differences of physical appearance, which is not the way we use it nowadays. But on the other hand, he was using that to illustrate differences of spiritual and mental state. So the modern usage to discuss this ambiguity of human nature is perhaps not entirely unjustified.

[7:52] Certainly people have used this phrase after that to discuss this sort of issue. And one other interesting point is that it was actually written some 78 years before Darwin published Origin of Species.

Again, people think that this phrase arose out of Darwin's Origin of Species, but it didn't. Even before that, this was 78 years before, people were asking the question, what is a human?

An angel or an ape? Or something else? And people have been asking that question ever since. There's another quote.

It's often used along similar lines. Often attributed to Dale Carnegie, but when I looked it up, as far as I could do some quick Google research, I didn't spend ages on it, suggests it was actually written by Francis Langridge in 1896, but quoted by Dale Carnegie in the early 20th century.

And it says that these two lines occur. Two men look out through the self-same bars. One sees the mud and one the stars. And presumably, of course, the poet is inviting you to look at the stars.

[9:17] Just think a little bit about it. Actually, either view is an oversimplification, isn't it? If you focus on this mud, you think that the stars are just an illusion, not relevant to everyday life.

But on the other hand, if you focus on the stars, you're liable to get stuck in the mud. So what does our passage here, what are the attitudes we find in our passage here, of attitudes to what it means to be human and what life is about?

As I've noted, the discussion is rather less literary, but actually betrays similar attitudes. You could probably get various approaches to identity out of this passage, but I've just suggested there are three that we could look at.

The first one is that you are what you eat. This is what we found in verses 26 and 27. What are you going to eat? What are you going to feed yourself with?

In verses 28 and 29, we find a slightly different slant. And it says, you are what you do. What are the works we must do to please God, or indeed, how can we identify ourselves by the things that we do?

[10:48] And then, of course, the criticism in verse 42 that's made of Jesus himself. He says, hang on, people say, hang on, this is the carpenter's son. How can he say he comes down from heaven?

Which, again, if you think about it, is an early version of that man being half ape and half angel. Of course, he was the carpenter's son. We knew his mother and brothers, that's true.

But does that contradict the fact that he came down, he could describe himself as the bread of heaven? And, of course, each of these points does capture some truth.

They're not entirely wrong. But all are oversimplifications. So it's worth having a look at each one separately, I think. So the first answer to what life is about is essentially that you are what you eat. If you like, this is a biological, the materialist answer. Of course, what you eat is important if you want to stay healthy.

[11:59] What you feed your body matters. But as Jesus points out, you're soon going to get hungry again. This crowd had had a free dinner. Now they were after a free breakfast.

They were hungry already. It was only the next morning. And Jesus points out that their ancestors had received food in the desert in verse 31.

And yet, they died. Not immediately. They kept them alive for a while. But not for long. Not in the scheme of things. Jesus had fed the 5,000.

But the crowd had failed to see the significance of the sign. Verse 26 says, Jesus answered, I tell you the truth. You're looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.

What they were interested in was the food. They'd seen the food all right, but they'd misread the sign. Essentially, they were materialists, naturalists.

[13:08] Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. It's difficult to argue against that position if you concentrate on the biology and if you limit human life to the life of an animal.

If you think of yourself as a clever ape, you ask, well, what's important to apes? What's important to apes? The food and reproduction, just as Darwin said they should be. Food and reproduction are what matters in the survival of species.

That's what God created the apes to do. That's how God made the apes. Now, some of you may be too young to remember this, but I remember when it came out.

1967, if you'd like to cast your minds back to them. Desmond Morris, who was an evolutionary biologist and behaviorist, wrote a book called *The Naked Ape*, which purported to explain human behavior in terms of evolutionary biology.

And to the old-fashioned humanist as to the crowd in Jesus' day, life basically is just biology. But the fact remains that this answer and this description only gets you so far, as people pointed out at the time when the book came out.

[14:38] It does explain some aspects of human behavior, but probably not the most important ones. What it doesn't do, for instance, is explain why people would want to write a book on the subject.

I think I'm on fairly safe ground, I haven't done any research, but I think I'm on fairly safe ground to explain that no chimpanzee ever wrote a book on evolutionary biology.

I think I'm fairly safe in saying that no gorilla ever went on television to argue that God is a delusion. The fact is that people have an inbuilt desire for truth.

They want to know, and they want to know not just for evolutionary advantage, but because people think that understanding matters. In practice, whatever they might say, people do not just believe in survival of the fittest.

If they did, the world would be a very different place. But people do insist that there need to be things like truth and justice and compassion. These things matter.

[16:01] So ask the question, why did Maurice write *The Naked Ape*? Because he wanted to increase our chances of survival.

It's difficult to see how writing that book would have increased our chances of survival as a species. Or was it because he actually wanted to increase and spread knowledge?

He wanted to convince us that his thesis was true, even though in the context, the book, truth has very little meaning. confusion. The current confusion in the West is because up to a point people believe the biologists.

But in the materialistic universe, how can the human spirit be preserved? Dualism was born. born. In a year after Morris wrote *The Naked Ape*, Christian writer Francis Schaeffer wrote a book called *Escape from Reason*.

And he pointed out how the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, which was claimed, was actually an escape from reason and led to all the things that really make humans human being taken out of the realm of the reasonable and the rational.

[17:33] And the result is this is a view called dualism, if you want to know the technical term. And it leads in the end to a destruction of the rational and to confusion.

And that's exactly what we found. His words turned out to be prophetic. So how did the world try to answer this problem?

People saw the trap. They said we can't just explain human life in terms of biology. It just doesn't make any sense. We must preserve the human spirit somehow.

But to sort of try and condense 150 years of history into a few lines, which is probably a bit over ambitious, but I'll try.

Here were some of the answers that were given. There were a group of philosophers who called themselves existentialists. how can we make our own truth?

[18:45] Well, the existentialists said that to act is to exist. And for a while this idea was fashionable. But the problem is action itself generates no moral imperative.

I'm standing by the side of a road and see a busy road and an old lady is trying to get across. What do I do? I have two options, I suppose.

Well, I have three options. One is to do nothing, but that would not be acting. So I have two options to action. I can help her across the road, or I can push her under the bus that's coming.

Both those are actions. Both will authenticate your existence. There's no particular reason to say that one is better than the other. And a few existentialists actually came close to, almost came close to saying that when Sartre, who was the prophet of existentialism, then became a communist, people thought he betrayed the faith.

Because communism does have moral categories. But you can see that this didn't quite work, so postmoderns have taken it further.

[20:01] We have to have truth, and we have to have moral truth. truth. But the only way we can have moral truth is by pure assertion. And that's what we get nowadays, basically.

And it's my truth. I see this as true. But the problem with that, of course, is that your truth might contradict my truth.

truth. So how can we come to a consensus on what is actually true? And of course what we find nowadays is that we can't, not by process of reason anyway.

So actual debate is suppressed. I can't try and persuade you by rational argument, because I don't really believe in the validity of rational argument.

So I'll have to force you to accept my truth. And since truth is about the way you think, I'm not just going to try and control what you do, I'm going to try and control the way you think.

[21:08] So 1984 has come at last. Maybe not from the East, from Communism as all well thought, but from the Liberal West.

Now thought control is all the vogue. You are pressurized into thinking in a particular way, not because it's rationally justified, but because this is the orthodoxy.

People have said quite correctly, this is effectively a new religion. religion. The escape of this was that postmodernism set out to dismantle authority structures and increase tolerance and freedom. That's when it started. That's what the postmodern philosophers were trying to do. They hoped there would increase tolerance and freedom, but it spawned this sort of bastard child of wokeness, which has created the most rigid and judgmental moral code.

The words of the prophet now come with a hashtag, and if you ignore them, you will be controlled or cancelled. I say, you cast your minds back to the 60s, those of you who are old enough to do that, we've come full circle, haven't we?

[22:32] In the 60s, we believed in free speech, even the right to be offensive. I've said this before, but I, among many Christians, actually joined a sitting at our university when the vice-chancellor tried to suppress and prevent an extreme left-wing radical from speaking.

Of course, we totally disagreed with what he was about to say, but as Christians, we wanted to defend his right to say it. now students actually suppress free speech and insist that we must. In the 60s, we believed in free speech, even the right to be offensive. In the 90s, we started deconstructing authority structures altogether. Now we've come to a most rigid authority structure at all, which suppresses free speech and expects trigger warnings on anything even remotely controversial.

As I said, in 1968, a year after the naked ape, Francis Schaeffer wrote *Escape from Reason* and his words have turned out to be prophetic. Still worth reading the book now if you haven't read it and get hold of a copy of it.

Jesus saw this tract 2,000 years ago.

[24:03] In his solution, he set out in a passage. You are what you eat. Well, of course you are what you eat. To stay well, you must eat well. To keep your body healthy, feed it good food.

To keep your spirit healthy, you must feed it good food also. That's what Jesus is saying here. Starve the spirit and the result is death or slavery of that spirit.

Which is exactly what we found in our 21st century world. But all is not lost, Jesus says, because just as God has provided food for our bodies, either by the natural processes of farming or occasionally by means of a miracle, as in a manna from heaven, but either way God has provided this food for our bodies, but he hasn't left our spirits unfed.

Man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. More specifically, he has provided the bread from heaven, Jesus himself.

Eat this food and the result is life, verse 33 tells us. Not just biological life, not just physical life, but spiritual life.

[25:29] And what is less obvious perhaps, but Jesus tells us, is that this food has eternal significance. Not only do you not need to keep it in the freezer to stop it going off, we've got a new freezer over there, and if you want to provide food for Yuko and the baby, as we've said, you need to put it in the freezer probably to stop it going off, it won't last long.

But this food doesn't need to go in the freezer. Verse 27 says, do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life.

And just in case we haven't got the point, Jesus reminds us in verse 35, 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.

But as I say, we can sometimes as Christians read the wrong meaning into some of these passages, and I think it's perhaps just worth entering a caveat here.

Jesus did feed the 5,000. Why did he do that? that was so that they could continue to listen to his teaching. They didn't have to go home, they could stay and continue to listen to his teaching, which they couldn't have done if they hadn't been fed.

[27:03] The crowd was after a free breakfast, but Jesus tells them not to work for food that spoils. We'll come back to the work issue shortly, but note here that the struggle to stay alive can be a distraction from spiritual hunger.

It was for that crowd. The crowd had been listening to him teach, and when hunger intervened, he didn't just tell them to ignore it, he said that's just physical stuff, it's not relevant, you can ignore that. That would be a kind of Eastern religion way of thinking about it. Rather, Jesus fed them so that they could continue to listen. Some Christians have claimed that spending time and effort in feeding those in need is anti-gospel, but it isn't.

We need to help those suffering from poverty and starvation so that they can listen to the gospel.

So don't let anyone ever tell you that caring for the poor is not a priority of Christianity.

It's actually an essential feature, as James understood. Our city mission puts a lot of emphasis on the food bank and quite rightly so.

[28:20] What does James have to say about that? James is always a good word on super spiritualizers. James wrote this, Religion that our God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this.

What, some belief or something? No, religion that our God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Don't spiritualize this spiritual food out of existence. It matters what we do in everyday life and the way we live our lives. What you do matters.

that of course leads us to the next topic.

Another way of looking at what it means to be human is to say it is what we are, what we do. We quite often do this ourselves, don't we? If we are asked who we are, we will often answer in terms of our occupation.

[29:33] We'll say I'm a housewife or I'm a plumber or I'm a philosopher. In a sense, to some extent, we construct our identities in terms of what we do.

To some extent, of course, work does give our life meaning. There's not a complete lack of meaning in this. But the question Jesus raises in verse 27 is really what are you achieving by this?

And the Jews latched onto this point in verse 28. And we're back in the realm of identity politics again. I don't know whether you spotted that. The whole sense that the Jews had, the whole sense of their identity as a nation, was tied up with the law of Moses.

That's where they're coming from here. They say their sense of identity as a nation of the Jews was that we're the people whom Moses brought the law. what they did in respect to the law was not just a matter of how they earned the living, but of course was a matter of how they related to God, as they say themselves in verse 28.

it. But Jesus didn't fit well into this world view, because the trouble is what they were doing was they were saying that the law of Moses was about rules, and so if the law of Moses is about rules, progress consists in finding more and better rules, doesn't it?

[31:02] Which is exactly what they tried to do, of course. But Jesus was offering a different sort of solution. Jesus was offering a person, himself, and that didn't fit into their sense of identity and their world view at all well.

And that's really the meaning of the rest of the argument, which we will be picked up later as we go through the passage. I won't have much to say about it this week, but you'll see it permeates the whole passage.

But the Jews were right in one respect, of course. As we've said, what you do does matter. But what Jesus says is, do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.

On him the Father has placed his seal of approval. It's not that Jesus is telling them not to work.

He's telling them to work for the right objectives. But, hang on a minute, how do we do that?

How can we, well, I know how to eat my fish and chips, but how do I eat the bread from heaven?

Which is the exact question they raise, the Jews raise, of course.

[32:19] How do we do that? Verse 28, we get the bombshell. Jesus answered, the work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent.

Jesus sticks together two categories that we don't usually put together, doesn't he? work and belief. But he says, yes, in a sense it is a work, but the work that you need to do is to believe in the one he has sent.

The key issue is not what you do in the physical realm, just as the key issue with food is not physical food, but spiritual food. The key issue here is not what you do in the physical realm, but where you are in your thinking.

And in your spirit. The Jews couldn't get their heads around this, so they asked for another physical sign to believe, even though they had just seen one. People pointed out, Mark I think pointed out the incongruity of this when he was speaking on the feeding of the 5,000.

Think in those sort of categories, and you're never going to be satisfied, you're never going to be convinced. All the evidence in the world and you're not going to be convinced. So is it possible to believe?

[33:42] Well, that's a good question, but that's the one Aaron will be putting on the thread next week, so let's leave that for now. Instead, let's pick apart what Jesus actually says.

There's a problem actually in Greek that we don't have in English, and none of that is that they don't have separate words in Greek for belief and faith. The same word does for both.

So in English we can say we believe in ghosts perhaps without really having much impact on our everyday life, without it really mattering very much whether you do or not. But that's obviously not what Jesus is meaning here.

He's asking them to change their whole way of looking at life, isn't he? He's saying don't look at life through food, don't look at life through work, change your whole way of looking at life.

He's asking a few tweaks to your lifestyle is not enough. We need a change of mind, a change of identity, a change of direction.

[35:01] And the Bible has a word for this of course, it calls it repentance. That's what repentance means. I mean, it doesn't mean turning away from sin of course, but root, it simply means take a new direction, go in a new direction, change your way of looking at life.

As I said, Greek doesn't have a separate word for belief or faith, but clearly what is meant here is what we in English mean as faith. If we want to please God, faith is where we place our trust, isn't it?

And if we want to please God, if our aim is to do something pleasing to God, it has to be where we place our ultimate trust. We can have faith, I suppose, in the bus company that the bus is going to turn up, sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't.

But if we want to know how to please God, which is exactly what the Jews were asking, then we need something a bit more serious than that, don't we?

It's a case of where we place our ultimate trust. Now, of course, this presupposes there is a God to trust. And if there is a God, what God precisely would that be?

[36:26] But it turns out the answer to that conundrum is actually in the proposed solution. Believe in Jesus and you will meet with the God who gives life. That's what Jesus tells us in verse 33.

And of course, even that is just an assertion. But if you read John's gospel through, it's exactly what John's trying to persuade us of. He's producing reason, rational arguments as to why that is a sensible thing to do.

And we have to read John's gospel that way. That's exactly what he set out to do. Not to suppress reason in any sense. Not to believe six impossible things before breakfast.

But rather to convince us that faith in Jesus is entirely reasonable. that's his aim. But of course, he would be too foolish to make such a change lightly.

And as I said, that's why John is at such pains to set out his argument carefully. John doesn't just say, close your eyes, hold your breath and believe. He invites us to consider the evidence carefully, and then believe.

[37:40] And again, there's a bit more to be said. The other thing about faith is that it must work itself out in the physical world as we follow Jesus, otherwise we're not really believing it at all.

Again, it's always good to turn to James against the super spiritualizers, and he has a word to say on that as well. James wrote, someone will say, you have faith, I have deeds.

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe there is one God. Good, even the demons believe that, and they shudder.

Later on, he says, wasn't even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Rahab was justified by faith, but Rahab's faith showed her faith in what she did. She acted because she saw that her future lay not with the powerless gods of Jericho, but with the god of Joshua, and so she helped the spies.

[39:04] rise. But there is a third objection that Jews rise, and that's the issue of your back story. They said, isn't this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know, how can he now say, I came down from heaven?

Verse 42. But here I think we need to think a little bit harder. Those first two views of life are still around today, but this one has in some ways less resonance.

In fact, you'll find people in the world who tell you you can be anything you want. But of course they don't do it consistently, I need to point this out.

if you happen to be white, you're somehow cursed with something called unconscious bias. And it seems it's very difficult to get rid of that. And yet, that's even though ethnicity is determined by relatively minor differences of genome and culture.

And yet, sex, on the other hand, is determined by your chromosomes, by your hormones. It affects almost all the physical structures of your body, biological sex. but apparently it's completely irrelevant to what your gender is.

[40:23] You can be anything you want, as long as it fits in with what the world tells you you ought to want. Is this in any sense rational?

It's tempting to go down that rabbit hole now, but that would probably take us another hour or so. And it would take us too far from the text. What this passage shows us is that we need to change our way of thinking.

It also tells us that without hope, help, we can't. And in a sense, that's our topic for the next two weeks. I've just been laying the groundwork for that. For now, let us just sum up what Jesus has to say on the subject of feeding the spirit.

We've noted that it is important to feed the body, but it's even more important to feed the spirit. Of course, we have a spirit that Jesus tells us, we outlast the body. How are we to do that?

Well, Jesus says there's only one way to do it, and it's to put our faith in him. life and spirit come from the Father, so we need to give attention to the one the Father has sent, the one in whom he's put his stamp of approval, verse 27.

[41:46] This is the bread from heaven that endures to eternal life. But, yeah, we do need to be careful this is genuine, not a scam. Anybody can claim to be the bread from heaven.

So we need to pay careful attention to the evidence that John is presenting to us. The signs may help us to believe, but even they will not be fully convincing.

They certainly didn't convince many of the Jews at the time. The Jews have seen a sign, but they will always ask for another. The point here is that only by listening to the words of God in the prophets and the other scriptures can we really come to Jesus.

Verse 45. But he does reassure us that if we come to him, he will not turn us away. Amen. So part two is our next week.

So hopefully we'll look into this in more depth. Thank you.