

Bread of Life

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Date: 19 November 2023

Preacher: John French

[0:00] Morning, everyone. Morning, church. Keep your Bibles open there at John 6, please, and you can also follow along on the St. Paul's app. I don't know if you know Dave Mansfield, but he's written a book about life that's worth living and that lasts forever.

And he says this, Ask an Australian to describe the perfect life, and most of us would throw in lots of sun, water, and our favourite holiday spot. It's no secret that our country has been dubbed the land of the long weekend.

It's not just Aussies. Humanity longs for a better life. This deep yearning is common to us all. We love life and the things that make it worth living.

We want a long life and an abundant life, not quantity without quality. We want both. This single goal determines what subjects we choose at school, what training we undertake, what we save for or spend our money on, the relationships we pursue, what we eat and drink, how we spend our time.

It's universal. We try to control and tighten our grip on life and we'll do anything to add to its length and deepen its quality. But we know life pushes overwhelmingly in one direction.

[1:23] What certainties can we hold onto in life, in a life with so much uncertainty that leads to death? Now, while God created good things to enjoy, choose anything creation has on offer and take it to its limit.

And just like King Solomon, who did just that, you'll find those things meaningless. And you'll sing along with Mick Jagger, I can't get no satisfaction.

We'll always hunger and long for something more. Bernard Levin, the Times journalist, wrote this. People who have all the material comforts they desire, together with such non-material blessings as a happy family, yet lead lives of quiet and at times noisy desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them and that however much food and drink they pour into it, however many motor cars and television sets they stuff it with, however many well-balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it, it aches.

But for a simple singular claim by Jesus, this could be the end of the story. Jesus said, I am the bread of life. To those who recognise there's more to life than having their physical needs met, for those who spiritually hunger, to those who want an abundant life, feed on and believe in Jesus. Jesus, the bread of life, is our focus for today. Now it's a remarkable fact that the Western culture is obsessed with food. We never really go without.

[3:10] And we take this for granted. If there's drought, we have a refrigeration, import anything we need from around the world, in season or out of season. In our food obsession, we even have chefs as celebrities.

But look around the world, where over 3 billion people live on less than \$2.50 a day. And around 80% of the world live on less than \$10 a day.

They can't afford our affluent palate. There's no snack foods or McDonald's treats. They are in those countries, but they're normally for the Westerners travelling there. Their staples are rice, or rice and fish, or yams.

These are the basic daily staples. Food is survival. Famine and drought. If you don't eat, you die. In first century Palestine, where this encounter with Jesus takes place, bread, or bread and fish, were the staples.

I don't think we can understand this story without recognising that. And what about work? Why do we work? It's so we can buy things. We don't think to have enough to eat today.

[4:26] This is not to say that our ideas about food are necessarily morally wrong. But we must see, when we read the Bible, especially a passage such as this, it was first written to a

non-industrialised agricultural society and a relatively poor one at that.

And so the passage itself speaks to us far more clearly when we bear in mind this context. Bread and fish were staples. You work to eat.

Food sustains life, and without it, you starve to death. So it's this framework we need to keep in mind if we understand what Jesus means when he says, I am the bread of life.

I'm the bread of God. John 6, picking up at verse 25. There's been the feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish, followed by Jesus walking across the lake of Galilee, walking on the surface of the water.

And now, when they find Jesus on the other side of the lake, they ask him, Rabbi, when did you get here? And Jesus doesn't respond to the question, but challenges their motives.

[5:34] Verse 26. Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate all the loaves, and you had your fill.

At one level, of course, they did see the sign, they enjoyed the food, but they didn't see what it signified, what it signified. They didn't see its significance.

They didn't see what it pointed to. They only saw it the level of meeting certain physical needs, and they were pleased at the prospect of a Messianic figure who could perhaps someday provide all they wanted, turf out the Romans, and make their life comfortable.

So back in chapter 6, verses 14 and 15, we see that they were in fact prepared to make him king by force, but they didn't envisage anything beyond that point.

So Jesus gives another perspective. Verse 27. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.

[6:39] Don't just work and exist at the level of this perishable world. Play the long game. Be future-focused. But they hear the word work and respond, all right then, what must we do to do the works God requires?

They're really naive, as if they have some intrinsic ability to meet any challenge that God might set them. So Jesus responds in verse 29. The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent.

The work we must do is believe in the one God sent. That is what we must do. Jesus is Christ-centered, and he focuses on himself.

What you must do is trust the one God has sent. Jesus is saying, that's me. If you go around making massive claims like that, well, you need some kind of qualification.

So they want to check Jesus' credentials. What miraculous sign will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? And then they actually add, we'll give you a hint.

[7:46] Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert. As it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. In other words, the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 has triggered their memories of another miracle they remembered from the scriptures, the provision by God of manna in the desert every day for 40 years in the wilderness.

They saw Jesus' miracle the day before. Now they'd like to see round two today. It would be a wonderful demonstration of his Messianic qualifications. The crowd's inviting Jesus to repeat his miracle provision of the day before, to validate his claims.

But Jesus won't be drawn to their demands as if God responds to our bidding like a genie in a bottle. Grant me three wishes. Jesus' response, verse 32, I tell you the truth.

It is not Moses who is giving you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. In other words, he wants their eyes off Moses, the human mediator, the one who actually points and focuses to God, the source of all provision.

And so now the provision of bread is from God. It's he who comes down from heaven and gives his life to the world. So the bread from heaven is Jesus himself.

[9:09] He mediates God's life because he himself is the manna from the Old Testament. This explains something of the significance of the feeding of the 5,000. It's not that he provides food.

He is the food. What does that mean? At the purely material level, of course, he provided the food, they were nourished, and they're only thinking on that level.

Now he's insisting that both the manna of the Old Testament and the bread he provided the day before point on another level to himself providing sustenance. He is bread from God.

Jesus himself, truly God, truly man, is the one who mediates life. Jesus as bread nourishes our physical life, so he himself nourishes our spiritual life.

Now this claim is extremely important because it ties in a lot with themes in the Gospel of John and the New Testament. When you and I think of prophecy, we tend to think of a verbal prediction. [10:12] So whether you're talking about someone who does astrology, reads the stars, or a fortune teller at the markets, or a fair, or a sports commentator, those sports bet people, we think of verbal predictions, and then we want that event to be fulfilled to see if actually the prophecy comes true.

But many of the prophecies of the Scripture are cast at another level and this is no coincidence. They're not just verbal. They're signs at a pictorial level and an institutional level so that in the New Testament, in John's Gospel, Jesus claims to be that which the man appoints. He says, the Passover appoints to me. The serpent that was lifted up, it's mentioned in Numbers, that points to me being lifted up on the cross. The vine of God, the good shepherd, all those images, they're me.

And then there's the institutions that Jesus fulfills, the temple, the high priest, the prophet, the king. All of these are signs pointing in one direction toward Jesus himself.

And this gives us a great way of reading the whole Bible. It's Christ-centered. Under the old covenant, Jesus is saying, a millennia and a half ago, so also now under the new covenant, God will provide the manna.

[11:30] And this manna doesn't perish, spoil, or fade because the manna in the desert perished every day and you had to get a new badge. It provides nourishment for eternal life.

This is God's provision and our work is to believe. Turn to him and receive this provision in faith. That's the first thing he says. Then in the second place, Jesus is the one who mediates God's life to us because he does his Father's will.

He's God with us. We pick up from verse 34. So they said, from now on, give us this bread. In other words, they still don't understand that he's talking about himself.

He'll make that clearer shortly. At this point, they think he's still talking about some bread that he'll provide. You did it yesterday. Do it today. Do it tomorrow. Do it the next day.

I won't have to work. Provide it. Keep doing it. We're all for it. You promise it, we'll take it. Then Jesus declared unambiguously, I am the bread of life.

[12:39] No questioning it now. I don't simply provide bread. I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never go thirsty.

Not satisfied in life? Have a deep ache and hunger? Searching? Want a life that's worth living and lasts forever? Jesus said, I am the bread of life.

At the end of the day, this is a metaphor. Jesus is not literally bread, like the gingerbread man. And yet, he is literally the bread provided by God from heaven.

He alone will satisfy our spiritual thirst and hunger. Jesus is the staple for life. If you really believe and trust Jesus, you will discover that he nourishes you and gives you an abundant life now and in the future, eternal life.

Leo Tolstoy, author of War and Peace, wrote a book called A Confession in 1879 in which he tells the story of his hunger for an abundant life.

[13:50] He had rejected Christianity as a child. When he left university, he sought to get as much pleasure out of life as he could. He entered the social world of Moscow drinking heavily, living promiscuously, gambling and leading a wild life.

But that did not satisfy him. He became ambitious for money, success, fame and importance. These he achieved. But he was left asking the question, well fine, so what?

To which he had no answer. He searched for meaning in every field of science and philosophy. The only answer he could find to the question, why do I live? was that in the infinity of space and the infinity of time, infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity.

That didn't satisfy. Then he became ambitious for his family. He was married, he had 13 children and he achieved his ambitions and he was surrounded by what appeared to be complete happiness.

And yet one question brought him to the verge of suicide. Is there any many in my life which will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?

[15:01] Eventually he found that the peasant people of Russia had been able to answer these questions through their Christian faith and he came to an understanding of Jesus' teaching. The deep ache and longing we have that Jesus is the bread of life and only Jesus satisfies our spiritual

thirst and hunger offering an abundant life.

So we pick up from verse 40. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I'll raise them up at the last day.

This is it. If you switched off, switch back on. If you've missed something, what Jesus is going on about, he couldn't make it any clearer now. By believing in Jesus, we have eternal life and our spiritual hunger is satisfied.

It's safe to believe because we are trusting in the one who is trustworthy, who is obedient to his Father's will, who will not let us go. Jesus promises, I shall lose none of those my Father has given me but raise them up at the last day.

By believing, Jesus has got you. He won't let you go. How exciting is that? How actually reassuring is that? Well, finally, Jesus is the one who mediates God's life for us because he gives his life on our behalf.

[16 : 29] Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here, here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Here it is. It's me. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world.

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves. How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them.

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven.

[17 : 33] Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever. And what does that mean? Historically, there's been much debate in the church on this topic.

One thing is for certain, Jesus is not saying when you eat the bread and wine, which we're going to celebrate in a moment, it will mystically transubstantiate into actual body and blood.

That teaching completely misses the point. The point is this. In an agricultural society, everyone knows that in order to eat, something else has to die.

Take a hamburger. When you eat a hamburger, a cow has died. And some grain and some stalks and maybe some vegetables that have been picked.

The only thing that we ingest that has not died is the occasional mineral and a bit of salt. Everything we eat, be it flora or fauna, has had to die.

[18 : 39] It's been cut off from its life source. If it doesn't die, we don't eat and we die. It's either our life or the food's life.

That's understood when you live on a farm. It's a little harder when we take it off the shelf where it's nicely packaged. Jesus is pushing the metaphor but he explains it.

I'm here. I am the living bread. The living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this flesh will live forever. This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world.

Do you hear that? It's within the metaphor of bread but it's also in line with the whole lot of other themes that point to the cross. In John's Gospel, chapter 10, Jesus is the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep.

Chapter 11, he's the one who will die so the nation will live. Chapter 12, he's the kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies so that there'll be growth and fruit.

[19 : 42] So here, Jesus is the bread of God. He gives his flesh for the life of the world. He dies that we might live. It points to the cross as clearly as Holy Communion points to the cross.

And so we feed on him not by resorting to cannibalism nor in stepping line with the sacrament that he has commissioned the church. Rather, we feed on him through quite simply believing.

Trusting Jesus died on our behalf, we can live and have an abundant life now and forever. Jesus is the bread of life. Now, some people are daunted, even offended by Jesus' claim.

Even after all the signs Jesus performed, there were some who, while they had seen, they did not believe. Many left because it was a hard teaching. So Jesus turned to the 12 disciples and asked if they would leave.

And Simon Peter sums it up. It's a cracker. 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.
[20 : 58] If you're not a Christian, where else will you go? Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. The search is over. Nothing in this life apart from Jesus will satisfy or sustain your spiritual hunger. You need to come to terms with Jesus as the bread of God. God, raise your heart heavenward in prayer and ask God to feed you with that bread. Receive that bread by faith, this bread that died so that we might live.
And if you're a Christian, it doesn't mean life is always going to be sunshine, lollipops and rainbows. No, but it does mean we need to come back to basics again and again and understand all that we have in Christ Jesus.
Forgiveness and the spirit given, an abundant life now and life still to come when he raises us on that last day. It's ours in the first place because he is the bread who dies, who we receive by faith. His death meant our life. We feed on him by believing and we are sustained until eternal life.