

Women's Bible Study Fall 2011

Who Do YOU Say I Am? *A study of the names and character of Christ.*

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I am the Bread of Life: John 6:24-58

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Our daughter Emily has been going through old photographs recently, and I am happy to say that finally, thanks to her efforts, our children have baby albums that extend beyond the first three months of life. I'm not much of a photo album person, judging by the boxes of loose photos that she found in the basement. Seeing some of these pictures after many years brings back lots of memories. And there are some photographs which are so evocative of a certain time, or incident, or place that they speak volumes to me.

One of these is a picture of Nick and Emily on the beach during one of our family holidays in England. In that photo I see their great relationship. I see the ocean, which reminds me of all our holidays in England. I recall my delight in the friendship between these two siblings. And I see the goofiness that causes the two of them at ages 17 and 15 to run down the beach holding hands and skipping. The one photo becomes shorthand for a whole world of memories and feelings.

Photos can become symbols or markers for abstract ideas. We come to such a symbol, a simple picture that contains a world of ideas, in today's passage.

So please turn with me to John 6, v. 24 - 58, as we look at Jesus' statement "I am the Bread of Life."

However, before we look at what happens in John 6:24-58, it's helpful know what's just been going on. At the beginning of chapter 6, Jesus feeds 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. Because everyone's suddenly interested in this man who performs miracles, the crowds are starting to follow him everywhere. But Jesus, knowing that the people want a political and military hero, slips away by himself. (v. 15)

The disciples get into a single boat and head across the lake from Galilee to Capernaum. In the night, Jesus comes walking to them on the water. The next day, the crowd realizes that Jesus has given them the slip and that only one boat – without Jesus - left from Galilee. This takes us to John 6:24 – one day after the feeding of the 5,000 and just a few hours after the disciples have witnessed Jesus walking on the water.

Let's start with

I. What Happened In This Passage?

Through this passage we'll look at the crowd's actions, then Jesus' response.

So the first thing that happens is that

- **The people sought Jesus.**

“Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. When they found him on

the other side of the lake, they asked him, ‘Rabbi, when did you get here?’” (John 6:24-25)

Inquiring minds wanted to know! They could not figure out how he got from Galilee to Capernaum without anyone seeing him. And, as usual, they wanted something from him - food.

In response to their question,

- **Jesus offered belief.**

“Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. 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 God the Father has placed his seal of approval.’

Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’” (John 6:26-29)

Notice how Jesus is able to get right to the heart of their motivation – they don’t want *him*. They want what he can *produce* - bread, like they got yesterday. They have an earthbound point of view. They got bread once, so they want it again. They have completely missed the point of the loaves and fishes, that they had witnessed a miraculous provision of God.

How often does that happen with us? An unexpected check or gift of money arrives, and we think, “What a great coincidence! Just when I needed it!” We get a reprieve in our schedule that provides us with breathing space and we think, “What luck!” Like the crowd, we fail to see the holy all around us. So let’s look for divine provision in every day. We should have more than an earthbound outlook. Sometimes bread is more than just...bread.

But instead of material food, Jesus offers them eternal food.

He also tells them what kind of work it takes to reach God – to believe in the one he has sent. We often try to work our way to God. But...

The one work that God desires from us is faith.

The only thing we can “do” for God is to believe in what he has already done for us.

We can’t get to God by being good, by serving him, even by loving him. We get to God by faith in his Son Jesus Christ. And faith IS work, although it’s not what we think of when we try to do good works that will make God approve of us. Those are useless. But faith in God’s Son takes us right to the presence of God.

Next,

- **The people looked for a sign.**

“So they asked him, ‘What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” (John 6:30-31)

There was a longstanding Jewish belief that when Messiah came, he would bring manna again to show that he was genuine. In this way the Messiah would show that he was at least as great as Moses, who offered the people bread in the desert. But again, the crowd's got it wrong and don't understand that within the past 24 hours Jesus has fed 5,000 people and walked on water – miraculous signs, if only they would recognize the divine. So in response to their request for a miracle,

- **Jesus offered truth.**

“Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who 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.’” (John 6:32-33)

The manna didn't come from Moses...it came from God. Manna was the heavenly food that drifted down from the sky every night, covering the ground and sustaining the Jewish people for forty years as they wandered in the desert in the Exodus. Without it, they would have starved.

Jesus says, you've got it backwards. Manna was just for a time, when the Jews were being rescued from their slavery in Egypt, and it delivered the people by providing food for their physical bodies. But manna was just a symbol, a forerunner, of the true bread that would come down from heaven in the form of Jesus Christ. This bread would deliver the people from slavery to sin by providing food for their souls.

So,

- **The people asked for bread.**

“Sir,’ they said, ‘from now on give us this bread.’” (John 6:34)

They wanted the bread, but they had no understanding of what it was or what it did. I'm reminded of the way that the hobbit Pippin treated the elvish waybread, lembas. One bite could sustain a person for days. But Pippin, a greedy young hobbit who didn't recognize that lembas was special, immediately ate several pieces – enough food for weeks. The crowd thought that Jesus would give them more bread like he did yesterday, only that this bread will fill them up so they'd never be hungry.

But instead,

- **Jesus offered the bread of life.**

“Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me, will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.’” (John 6:35-40)

Finally, the truth is out. We're not talking about physical bread with magical qualities here. We are talking about the One who can sustain us in all ways.

When we explain something abstract to a child, we relate it to something they recognize. For example, we might say that germs are like little bugs that live on our skin and so we need to wash our hands with soap. While this might give an imaginative kid the creeps, it at least gives them a picture that they can relate to. This is what Jesus did for the crowd – he explained a complex idea by using a word they could all relate to – bread.

You see, bread was the universal food. Poor folk couldn't afford meat, but anyone could live on bread and water. To this day, every culture has its form of bread, whether it is made from wheat, like our bread, or corn, like a tortilla, or teff, like the Ethiopian bread injira. Bread, truly, is for everyone.

So how will Jesus, the bread of life, sustain us? By gathering together all that the Father has given him, and keeping them to eternity. Jesus knows that all people have both physical hunger and spiritual hunger. We might not understand what we're hungry for, spiritually, but we do eventually find out that physical gratification cannot take care of spiritual hunger.

What are the signs of spiritual hunger? One sign is shame – we regret past choices. It might be anxiety – we can't cope. It might be emptiness – we wish we could feel strongly about something. All these could have spiritual hunger as their root. And for spiritual hunger, you need Living Bread.

But as before, the crowd did not get what he was talking about. And so

- **The people grumbled.**

“At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They said, ‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’” (John 6:41-42)

This seemed like a reasonable objection. After all, some of these folk would have grown up with Jesus in Nazareth. He was just another local guy to them, so what's all this nonsense about heavenly bread? They saw his mother Mary pregnant like any other woman. How could Jesus claim to be from heaven?

But Jesus doesn't answer their objections. Instead he gets to the point, as

- **Jesus offered the way to God.**

“ Stop grumbling among yourselves,’ Jesus answered. ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen The Father. I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. **I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread**

that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” (John 6:43-51)

Jesus is still addressing everyone, but his remarks only resonate with some. He explains why in v. 44. You see, no one comes to Jesus **unless God the Father draws him**. The reason that every single one of us feels a tug towards Christ is that God is drawing us. Is he drawing us kicking and screaming, completely against our will? Of course not. He is not forcing us to do anything we don't already desire to do. But at the same time there is this mysterious thread of God's love that keeps pulling us closer and closer to him. In the Greek, the word for "drawing" implies resistance to the power which draws. It's the word used for drawing a heavy net of fish to the shore in John 21. It's the word used in Acts when Paul and Silas are dragged before the authorities.

In my life I felt this first as the desire to say, Lord Jesus, come into my life. But that was just the first step. After that I felt a strong pull to read the Bible. To discuss the scriptures. To read theology. To be able to explain things. These desires came from God drawing me closer to himself. In your life it might feel different. You might have only the faintest curiosity about Jesus, and you might have come to this Bible study just because your friend asked you to come. But if you keep returning, that is an indication that God is tugging on your heart and will eventually draw you closer.

CS Lewis was once interviewed by an American journalist who kept asking him how he had made his decision for Christ. Lewis refused to use that term. He hadn't 'made a decision', he said. God had closed in on him and he couldn't escape (though at the time he badly wanted to.) The closest he would get to using the language of decision was to say 'I was decided upon.' (NT Wright, *John for Everyone*, pg 82.)

Manna was wonderful, and it kept the Israelites alive for a time. But eventually they reached Canaan, and the manna stopped. And, in time, all those people died. The first manna pointed the way to the true manna which would come down from heaven in the form of Jesus, who said, "I am the bread of life."

You can imagine this was a pretty controversial statement. So,

- **The people disagreed.**

“Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’” (John 6:52)

Like any group of more than one person, there were multiple opinions. It's the same today. Some people think that Jesus was a good man. Others think that he was a son of God, not THE Son of God. We all want to believe what we believe, and no one likes to be told they're wrong. But truth cannot be changed simply because we don't like it. There is a world beyond this world where all of us will recognize that Jesus Christ is King.

So in response,

- **Jesus offered his life.**

“Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, 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 him 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 him. 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. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.’” (John 6:53-58)

We can trust in this “flesh” of Christ’s because in his full humanity he took on everything that we struggle with. He has experienced it for us and with us. What Jesus means by feeding on his flesh and blood is that he must become so much a part of us that he is literally inside us – not just figuratively, but literally taking up residence inside us. He’s using a word in the Greek that means, more or less, to “munch on” – and to make chewing noises while we’re doing so. To feed on him is to take his promises and chew vigorously on them so that they become part of us, just as bread that is chewed is digested and sustains us.

And then he makes the shocking statement that we must drink his blood. What are we, vampires? Especially since Jews were expressly forbidden to eat blood with their meat, for as Lev. 17:11 tells us, **“For the life of a creature is in the blood.”** But King David used that metaphor of blood for life when, during a siege, three of his mighty men broke through the Philistine lines and got a vial of water from the well at Bethlehem to bring to their commander. David, humbled, poured it out on the ground as a sacrifice, saying **“Should I drink the blood of these men who went at the risk of their lives?” (1 Chron. 11:19)** Blood symbolizes life, and when we take Jesus’ blood and body into ourselves we are, literally, taking his life into our own body.

This is far too visceral for many of us. All this gory stuff - and yet it is *glory* stuff. Jesus Christ seeks to become so much a part of us that he is IN us, and his life pulses through our veins.

That’s a lot to take in. So let’s pause while we digest that and ask ourselves,

II. Why Bread?

Why did Jesus use “bread of life” for one of his great “I AM” statements?

First we see that

▪ Bread Sustains

Bread is the staff of life. Prisoners used to be fed on a diet of bread and water. Sailors in the 18th century often had to survive on hardtack, which is a form of flatbread. Bread makes the difference between starvation and survival, because bread sustains. It keeps us alive.

But it does more than just sustain us.

▪ Bread Nourishes

Bread that is made of natural ingredients where the grain is not overly processed also nourishes us. It doesn’t just keep us alive. It helps us become healthy, providing nutrients and vitamins.

Spiritual bread nourishes us too. Let me put this in terms of something that enriches my life, that makes me stronger and better. Even though I live in the Midwest I long to see mountains. I grew up with them; they have deep roots in my soul and that is why I try to get to the Sierra Nevadas each year, because I can’t get this view in Olmsted County. I guess I could say that the mountains

represent a spiritual hunger for me; they are the place where I am overwhelmed by the grandeur of God and I come away nourished in the beauty of God. Spiritual bread has that effect on us. It doesn't just keep us going. It makes us healthy.

But bread can do more than sustain and nourish.

- **Bread Satisfies**

You see, bread fills us up. And that is why a meal with bread seems more well rounded, more filling. If any of you ever undertook the Atkins diet, which cuts out almost all carbohydrates, you might remember the feeling of being desperately hungry even though you could eat all you want of meat and protein. We crave carbohydrates. Yesterday I bought many loaves of bread for us to eat today along with our study of the Bread of Life. Because it was a warm day, my car smelled like a bakery. It was great! Because even the smell of bread reminds us of how satisfying it is to eat.

So how does the Bread of Life which comes down from heaven compare to material bread?

Jesus sustains. We're told in Colossians 1:17 that "**in him all things hold together**". Jesus, the Bread of Life, is literally sustaining all things because of who he is.

Jesus nourishes. He said "my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink." We all know when we've eaten a real meal, one that was cooked from scratch in a kitchen where the cook really knows her stuff. That's real food, and it cannot stand up to a microwaved dinner. But that delicious meal pales in comparison with the real-ness with which Jesus nourishes us.

Jesus also satisfies. When we have munched our way through life on the Bread of Life, we'll know that whatever happens, Jesus will be with us to help us.

So the question we face now is

III. Why do I need Living Bread?

First,

- **Because material bread isn't enough**

Over the years you've heard me talk about biking a lot. I received my current road bike for my 40th birthday. I'm about to turn 54, and in those fourteen years I've put almost 15,000 miles on it. I figured when John gave me that bike that it would be the last road bike I ever owned. Racing bikes are light and unstable, and I've had a couple of significant falls, include going over the handlebars and breaking my hand. So as I looked into the future I've always figured that at some point, I was going to have to get an upright bike with a tractor seat to accommodate my widening hips, a bike that could be ridden at a sedate eight or ten miles an hour instead of flying down my hill at 40 mph just for the sheer joy of it. I mean, can you imagine me as an 80 year old woman in spandex bike pants in a racing crouch? And my apologies to any of you who are still riding racing bikes at that age! I just couldn't quite see myself doing it.

So I've always assumed that my road biking days are numbered. Recently a gear cable broke, and the bike shop guy gave me some sad news. He told me that my bike was now so old that they no longer make gears for it. He managed to patch it together but he said ominously, "It's just a matter of time before those gears break again, and then I won't be able to fix it." So I went moping off

home, and after brooding about it brought up the subject to John. He said, “Don’t be ridiculous. Just get another road bike. You can probably find that exact one online. Why on earth should you stop doing something that gives you so much pleasure?”

Frankly, I was stunned. It was as if someone had just given me permission to live forever. I can bike as long as I want! In the way I want! But then as I began to reflect, I saw another, deeper truth. My bike had become a sort of “earthly bread”. It’s a material object that gives me great joy. But if I hung it up for good, my life would still be full, and rich, because I have spiritual bread, not just material bread. Jesus gives me a great life even without my bike. How could I be so earthbound as to forget that?

All too often we buy trouble because we are think only in earthly terms. We get desperate about something that hasn’t happened and probably won’t. Fill in the blank: I am worried about my finances. My marriage. My children. My health. We are a people who love to turn to material bread when what we truly need is heavenly bread. Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness (another name for heavenly bread), and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt. 6:33)

A second reason that we need living bread is

- **Because we just can’t resist it**

If you feel the slightest tug towards God, that means that God is starting to pull you closer to him with the cords of love. Remember, “drawing” carries the idea of resistance, and virtually all of us will feel some resistance as we start to feel God knocking on the door of our hearts.

But Jesus draws those the Father has given him, and sometimes they are the most desperately uninterested or antagonistic ones. Maybe until now you’ve been too involved in career or a relationship to notice that God was tugging on you. But you can’t get it out of your mind, and so you try going to church, or to Bible study, and realize that there’s something here you can’t explain – you hear God calling your name.

Imagine that you are exploring in a remote place – a cave, or an abandoned building – and you find a letter from God with your name on it, saying that he had always known you would come to a place where he could reveal himself to you. My brother and I once explored the buildings of an abandoned mine in a very remote place in the Cascades. We peered into a dark shaft and found a snowmobile with my name, Gretchen, etched on the front. “Look,” Ron said, “it’s been waiting for you all this time.” I have an uncommon name, and it gave me quite a turn to see it. But once God reveals himself to us, we realize that he’s been writing our name all over his creation. When that time comes, we’ll recognize who’s been going before us into every dark place in our world. David wrote, **“If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”** (Psalm 139:8)

I know of couples where one party said, “I’m going to marry that person” long before there was any relationship. How lovely to find out that one person was pursued very gradually, from having a few conversations, then to a date, to a relationship and finally to marriage. That isn’t creepy...it’s romantic! In the same way God is the lover of our souls. He courts us gradually, until we realize that what we sought all along can be found in the Living Bread that we just can’t resist.

Finally, we need Living Bread

- **Because Jesus tells us we need it.**

It's really an extraordinary claim to make –unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. No life! What about what I'm experiencing right now? Because without Christ the level of life that we can hope to experience bears no relationship to the true life that we find in him. It's as if we're living chained in a filthy cell with no windows, surviving on crumbs. But when the liberator cuts off our chains, leads us outside to a feast and allows us to go free, we realize that something beyond our imagining was available all along. We just couldn't see it, because we had no idea what life was like outside the cell. So Jesus makes up for our astounding lack of imagination by telling us simply that we need him if we are to experience real life.

Right now the World Cup of Rugby is going on. I can see that you're all aware of this newsworthy fact! Actually, for those of you who don't know what rugby is, it's a sort of cross between football and soccer that's played with no protective pads and a great deal of violence. My husband John adores it, and there's a group of folks in the community, mostly British and South African and New Zealanders, who are equally enthralled with the game. Last weekend was a big game between England and Scotland. A group of guys met to watch it. But what they didn't know is that one of their number already knew the result, because the game is on a delayed broadcast in the U.S.

So the match started. And it was tied right down to the very end, when England suddenly scored and improbably won by six points in the final three minutes. Now the guy who knew the score sat there smirking to himself as he watched the agonies of the England fans who thought they were going to lose the game. You see, there's tremendous power in knowing the outcome. You don't have to sweat it, because you know how things will turn out.

Jesus knows the end of our story, even when we don't. He knows that eventually material bread will not satisfy us. He knows that eventually he will draw us to himself with the cords of love. And he knows that we need the living Bread that comes down from heaven if we are to experience what true life is. We've been asking the question, Who do you say I am? Jesus responds, "I am the living Bread who came down from heaven."

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