

Who is Jesus?

Messages from the Gospel of John

Message 8

The Bread of Life

John 6:22-40

Introduction

Have you seen the new book, *Jesus the Greatest Ad Man?* It's a more popular version of the recent book, *Advertising Strategies of Jesus: How to Beat the Pagans in the Marketplace*, published by True Faith Publishers. These people are taking seriously the command to take dominion over all the earth, and have applied Biblical principles to the advertising world. They have found that Jesus took practically the whole market for messianic ministries during His lifetime by using radically new methods, such as feeding 5,000 people at a time, performing incredible feats of healing, telling gripping parables, and most astonishing of all, raising the dead. One of His key strategies was to frequently reinvent Himself. He started off as the Word, then He became the Lamb of God, then the Living Water, the Bread, the Door, the Shepherd, etc. No doubt, Jesus was unequalled as a promoter. Too bad He spoiled it all by getting Himself killed. The application from all of this is that RUF should change its image every month or so. Next month we are going to adopt a new name: The Sheep. I figure we will really start to pack them in if we market ourselves the way Jesus did.

I hope by now you can see I am being facetious. But isn't it amazing to you that there are so many names for Jesus in John's gospel? If it is not a mere advertising gimmick, what is the reason for so many names? It's to reveal different aspects of Jesus' character and ministry, and to explain and persuade us that He is God come in human flesh to save us. Tonight we are going to examine the name Jesus uses in chapter 6: the Bread of Life.

The Bread of Life

Did you mother ever make fresh bread? If you have ever come into the kitchen as a loaf of bread was baking, you know there is nothing in the world so enticing as the smell of bread. Then if you wait around until it comes out of the oven, you can cut a slice and spread butter over it while it is still warm, and the butter soaks into it, and there is nothing like it in the world. We bake the communion bread for our church, so every Sunday morning we rise to this delicious smell, and it exercises our discipline to wait until the service to get a piece. One of my best memories of bread was during my trip to Morocco. There the women would rise early and knead the dough. About mid-morning they would form it into round, disk-like loaves and take it to the stone ovens, which were scattered all over the city. Moroccan bread is a little chewy, but still soft, and has a distinctive taste. It is just right for eating with jam or soaking up the juice of a meat dish.

So why did Jesus call Himself the Bread of Life? What is it about bread that reveals Jesus to us? Well, as we have seen, bread is delicious and wholesome. It represents the best things about home and family. Some of us may not like wonderful treats like pumpkin pie, or salmon, or crepes – but everyone loves fresh bread. And Jesus is like that. Jesus is the best thing in life. Jesus is a joy and pleasure for everyone who knows Him.

But there is more to it than wholesomeness – much more. For in most of the world for most of history, bread is the primary food. Certainly this is true of the Mediterranean world in which Jesus lived and to which John wrote his gospel. Most people had never heard of pumpkin pie or salmon, and they didn't speak French, so they knew nothing of crepes. For most people, food consisted of bread every day, with some extras, depending upon their prosperity at the moment. So if bread were missing, they would go hungry. If they lacked bread for very long, they would starve. This is why we pray in the Lord's Prayer,

“Give us this day our daily bread.” People needed bread every day to survive. And this is why Jesus called Himself the Bread. You need bread every day to survive, and you need Jesus every day to survive.

Bread from Heaven

But Jesus is not just any ordinary bread. As this passage unfolded, the people made a foolish and unreasonable request. They asked Jesus to give them a sign that He was from God. They pointed out that their greatest prophet, Moses, had given them manna to eat in the desert. This authenticated Moses’ ministry and gave them reason to believe in him. They are referring here to the time after Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt on the way to the land of Canaan. They had to travel through a vast desert, and it was greatly complicated by the millions of people making the trip. There was nothing to eat along the way and the people soon got hungry. They complained loudly about their plight, and God responded by providing a miracle – manna, a whitish bread-like substance which appeared on the ground every morning. The people of Jesus’ day looked back and saw this as a sign that Moses had been sent by God. Would Jesus also give them a sign to prove He was sent from God?

But Jesus had already given them a sign! The previous day He had fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two small fish. And they were in the desert! Isn’t this miracle enough? Isn’t this practically identical to what Moses did? Of course this was a sign, and it was not only foolish and unreasonable to ask for more, it was wickedly ungrateful. However, Jesus took the occasion to teach the people the true significance of Moses’ act, and of His.

Verses 32 and 33 are an example of that extremely dense reasoning that is so typical of the apostle John. John’s writings have a simple vocabulary and grammar, but are packed with meaning. Let’s unpack the logical steps in this verse.

- 1) Moses gave the Israelites manna in the desert.
- 2) But the manna ultimately came from God. Moses was simply the delivery man.
- 3) Thus the manna was really bread from heaven.
- 4) Furthermore, God also gives true bread from heaven.
- 5) This bread is a person who comes down from heaven.
- 6) This person gives life to the world.

Jesus is doing several things here. First he acknowledged that Moses performed a miracle in feeding the Israelites in the desert. This implies that He had already given these people a sign by feeding them like Moses. Second, He pointed out that their focus on Moses was all wrong. Moses did not have any magical powers. It was God who fed them then – and it will be God who feeds them now. Third, He showed them that their fixation on wheat bread was off-base. Bread alone will not sustain them. They need more than bread to stay alive. They need a person who comes from heaven with divine life, with life-giving power. Unless they have that person, they will die.

What is not said here, but was surely on everyone’s mind, was the outcome of the manna meal. Manna was indeed bread from heaven. Psalm 68 calls it angels’ food. It was a wonderful, divine gift. It was God’s good provision to the hungry Israelites as they wandered in the desert. But everyone who ate it died! Good as the manna was, it was inadequate to meet the people’s deepest need. It satisfied their hunger, it gave them strength and energy, but it did not give them what they need most. It did not give them life. Everyone who ate it died.

Jesus shows us that the manna never was supposed to be the answer to the Israelites’ needs. The manna indeed was a sign – a sign of their need for life from heaven, and a signal to look for the one who could provide it. The manna was a picture of Jesus. Like the manna, Jesus came from heaven to feed the people. However, while the manna was a sign, Jesus was the real thing! Jesus not only satisfied their hunger,

He came giving life itself. Just to make the point more clearly, Jesus goes on to say that if you have the life He gives, you will never hunger or thirst, and in verse 40 He says that this life is everlasting.

Have you noticed that almost every week we talk about life? By now you should see that life is one of the all-time major themes of John's gospel. So are you getting bored with this topic? Are you wishing that I would talk about something new, or at least different, for a change? Well, I am just speaking from text at hand. The important question is why does John keep coming back to this topic page after page? Obviously it is important – probably a lot more important than we think.

Since we began these studies in John, has your outlook on life changed? Remember, we said the very first week that life is a divine quality. It is not something we can possess on our own. It is something that God pumps into the universe continually. Have you grown more humble and thankful since that first week? Do you wake each day more astonished at the miracle of life? Do you begin your day praising God for sustaining the universe and giving you another day to live? Furthermore, are you more conscious of your need for the eternal life that comes only from Christ?

Scriptures teach us that we all are born dead. Ephesians chapter 2 says, “And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins...But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ”. This is a sober truth which we tend to ignore. Think about this. This means that your unbelieving roommate is dead spiritually. The guy you sit next to in class, the girl who shares your lab bench, your basketball buddies, your friends down the hall – all these, if they do not know Christ, are spiritually dead. They may be good people. They may be nice friends. But they have no spiritual life in them – and the day will come when God withdraws life from their bodies and they will pass into eternal death in hell. This campus is filled with walking corpses, the living dead. And you, if you do not get life from Jesus, will perish, too. When you walk to class, is your heart burdened for those walking with you? Are you aware that they are dead, and do you desire that they have life, too? Is the message getting through to you? Nothing is so important in life as life, and only those who know Jesus have it.

Getting Eternal Life

If this is true, if nothing is more important than real, true life – then how do you get this life? People try all sorts of methods to get eternal life. The most common is to work for it. This seems reasonable, if not obvious. Most things in life require effort. If you are going to get good grades, or get money, or get friends, you have to work at it. Even if you do not engage in legitimate work, even if you get money by stealing, you are still expending effort to achieve your goals. Everything in life is this way, so it seems natural to think that religion would work the same way. And in fact, every religion in the world is based on the premise that you must perform some good deeds to be accepted by the gods – every religion except Christianity. The root problem with mankind is not bad morals, but spiritual death. That is why no amount of good deeds can buy you acceptance with God. Good deeds cannot bring life from death.

Jesus tells us this in verses 27-29.

“Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.”²⁸ Then they said to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.” John 6:27-29

You see, Jesus tells the people not to waste their efforts looking for wheat bread, because it will perish. Instead they should work for the bread which gives eternal life. So then the people naturally say, what is the work which earns eternal life? And Jesus replies saying, nothing! You cannot earn eternal life.

Eternal life comes only through believing.

Paul said the same thing in his letter to the Romans.

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness... Rom 4:1-4

The point here is that you cannot earn eternal life. There is nothing in the world that you or anyone else can do to get eternal life. And if you try to get eternal life through your good deeds, you will die in the attempt.

Another method of gaining eternal life is through the intellect. Some people think that if they hold the right beliefs, they will be saved. They are trusting in knowing correct doctrines about God, man, and reality. Such people are usually found in churches which place great emphasis on sound doctrine, and are quite sure that they alone possess it. Well, we live in an age which so despises truth, I want to be careful criticizing the pursuit of sound doctrine. Most of us care too little to know and believe the truth about God, man, and the universe. But while sound doctrine is indispensable to maturity, it cannot give life.

A third method commonly used to gain eternal life is religious feelings. People hear that Jesus brings peace and joy and love, and they seek eternal life by looking for these feelings. They pray, read the Bible, attend church services, go on retreats, have visions. And while all these are beneficial events, and while it is true that Jesus brings religious feelings – feelings themselves are not the path to eternal life.

Jesus tells us in this passage the one and only way to receive life, eternal life – life that will never end even when your body dies and the universe collapses. Look at verses 35 and 37.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst...All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out." John 6:35,37

You see, the answer is very simple. Come to Jesus. That's it. Look again at these verses. "He who comes to Me shall never hunger." You don't have to sing, or dance, or dress up. You don't have to read the Bible first, or correct your sins. You do not have to do *anything*, but just come to Jesus. Sin is a real problem. God hates sin. But you cannot overcome sin while you are dead in sin. You need to be born again with heavenly life. Then you can overcome sin. But that life you need is found only in Jesus.

It's so simple. Too simple for many people. You would think everyone would come to Jesus to receive this heavenly life, but many do not. Jesus also explained this in this passage. Look at verse 36. "But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe." Many people hear Jesus say, "Come to me and I will give you life. I will heal you, feed you, and love you." Many people hear this and they say, "Nah, He's not telling the truth." They insist on earning an unattainable gift, or they deny the reality of their own spiritual death and ultimate destruction. Don't you be one of them. Don't be so foolish as to accuse Jesus of lying. Believe in Him and receive real life.

How to Come to Jesus

But how do we, here in the 21st century, come to Jesus? The people in this passage could walk right up to Him. Now that Jesus has returned to heaven, what does this mean for us? The answer is over in verse

63. “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” Jesus speaks to you today in a voice as clear and compelling as any you have ever heard. Jesus’ words are right here in this scripture. They are as vibrant as if He should speak in an audible voice while standing right next to you. Later in John’s gospel Jesus explains that He will send His Spirit after He leaves this earth. After Jesus rose from the grave, He spent 40 days with His disciples and then went back to heaven. That is where Jesus is now in the body. But 10 days later Jesus sent His Spirit into the world. The primary work of Jesus’ Spirit now is to take His words and make them come alive for those who hear.

If you would come to Jesus – you or anyone – you must come through His word and Spirit. Pray for Jesus’ to give you His Spirit as you read and hear His word. Then read the Bible. Come to RUF. Go to a church that believes and teaches the Bible. Jesus is not physically in the ink on the pages of your Bible, but He is really present when you open His scriptures. Pray for Jesus to open His word to you, and ask Him to give you that life that never ends.

If you already have come to Jesus, don’t you want to share this news with the dead around you? I hope so. Pray for God to help you introduce others to Jesus so that they might live.

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