“Bread: Part Two”

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John 6:35, 41-51

August 11, 2024

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***35Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 41Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” 43Jesus answered them******, “Do not complain among yourselves. 44No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48I am the bread of life. 49Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”***

When we think of Jesus being a radical, we think about overturning money tables in the temple or speaking against those in power. Jesus the miracle worker changing water into wine or calming a stormy sea. Lots of drama. Lots of eyebrow raising.

But for the whole month of August, the topic is bread. How radical or astounding can you be about bread? There’s no drama in bread. Four Sundays in a row, the lectionary text is about bread. Last week we introduced manna, from the Exodus text, the sustenance from heaven that Jesus compared himself to. We talked about what manna might have been exactly, and what it means to rely on daily sustenance or anything for that matter.

Today we return to the statement that Jesus made, when he compared himself to this manna. He said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Next week we will face the fact that eating a person is creepy and what Jesus might have meant. And the final week of August we will consider who will then leave Jesus, as his comments get stranger and stranger.

These last three weeks in August, our scripture texts come from the gospel of John, which is the most spiritual, the most representative, the most metaphorical of all of the gospel narratives. It’s best to take the gospel of John slowly so as not to miss anything. Spending four weeks on bread, ought to be slow enough.

The author of the gospel of John tells the narrative of Jesus’ life in such a way that each message lays the groundwork for the next. For instance, the whole idea of eternal life has been mentioned several times already, most notably the Samarian woman at the well who asks Jesus how she too can have that particular water. The gospel writer also writes the narrative as a fulfillment of much of the ancient promises, for example, by mentioning Moses a lot. All of the story of the Exodus out of the slavery of Egypt centers around Moses as their leader and that entire history is a part of the Jewish heritage. When Jesus directly or indirectly speaks of Moses, the audience knows that Jesus is speaking of a great leader sent by God to lead the Israelites. One important conversation God and Moses had was told in Exodus chapter 3, when Moses was tending his flock and noticed that there was a bush that was burning but not consumed. There God told Moses that God was sending Moses to lead the Israelites. When Moses asked, what name shall I tell them has sent me? **14**God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’ ”

I bring this up now because it tells us of the importance of Jesus saying “I am the bread of life.” Six other times in the gospel of John Jesus also says “I am.” I am the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12), the door (10:7), the good shepherd (10:11, 14), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way the truth and the life (14:6) and the true vine (15:1). All of the I AM statements are related to their own contexts. I AM the bread of life reflects the current context of today’s text.

In biblical Hebrew, the being verb *hayah* conveys not just existence. To state, “There was *(yehiy,* a form of *hayah)* light” (Gen 1:3) is to announce the manifestation, not just the existence, of light. To the Hebrew ‘to be’ does not just mean to exist . . ., but to be active, to express oneself in active being.”1

For Jesus to say I AM means that Jesus is manifesting the existence of God in his very being. Well, that brings a different meaning to I am the bread of life. It’s not being the bread of life that the audience is upset about – yet – it is being from heaven that they don’t understand. After all, They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” He can’t be from heaven – he’s that kid from the neighborhood. The Mark version of this story refers to Jesus as that carpenter, Son of Mary, and refers to brothers and sisters. In other words, he is very human, they see him all the time, they know his family – he is certainly not from heaven.

Imagine their understandable lack of comprehension. The people hearing this at the time didn’t have 2,000+ years of knowledge of Jesus, something called the Bible 300 years later, with scholars of every time suggesting meanings and working out wording and helping us understand how statements and concepts fit into God’s cosmic view.

This bread of life discourse section of the gospel of John does not happen in a hostile environment with people looking to find ways to arrest Jesus. That happens later. These four weeks we will spend on Bread, represent Jesus explaining something very difficult for people to hear. They grumble about the craziness of it all, and they even claim he is outlandish. But here, they don’t accuse him of a crime.

Think how much harder this would be to hear these days. We consider ourselves sophisticated in many ways, progress has made us certain about many formerly unknown facts, and has helped us to invent things that help us to know even more things with certainty. How hard would it be in this day and age to hear someone tell us that they come from heaven? If we repeated it to anyone we would be accused of believing in fantasy or conspiracy theories.

Why do we believe what we believe about God and Jesus? If I gave us homework, I would ask you to answer that question for yourself this week. Just ponder it a few times, keep the answer in your head, write it down, or talk to a friend. Maybe you’d come up with the answer right away, in one great statement. We would have a variety of answers. My guess is they would all be different but have many similarities.

I believe because

…it’s true.

…I find my life makes more sense with Christianity in it.

…life would be overwhelming without it.

…I’ve known my whole life that God and Jesus are in the world and in my life. It’s a great comfort and source of joy.

…it’s just a feeling I have. I struggle to understand many parts of it.

Having faith in God in Jesus Christ is a life long endeavor that deepens over time. As we grow and learn, God within us remains to guide us and teach us and lead us. Just as one single statement never holds an entire belief or truth, one’s faith is not built upon one single encounter. When we study scripture we begin to recognize that the words we read and hear, while ancient, are still very much alive in our modern daily lives. Every experience that confirms our belief, confirms something we used to question, deepens the foundation on which our faith stands.

Jesus told his audience, “Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” God is doing the work right now, to draw us closer and closer.

Amen.

1(<https://hebraicthought.org/meaning-of-gods-name-i-am-exodus/#:~:text=In%20this%20case%2C%20the%20meaning,used%20in%20most%20Western%20languages>. Center for Hebraic Thought, The Biblical Mind, “‘I Am Who I Am’? The Real Meaning of God’s Name in Exodus” by [Dr. Michael LeFebvre](https://hebraicthought.org/authors/dr-michael-lefebvre/) on February 15, 2022)