

The Bread of Life

The Feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle Jesus performed which is recorded in all four gospels. That should tell us something of its importance. When Jesus fed the crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children (making a possible total of approximately 15 to 20,000), the crowd became excited about the fact that this miracle-working Jesus might just be the Messiah. The people who were fed abundantly by Jesus began to associate him with Moses and the feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness with manna from heaven. And if Moses could deliver the Israelites from bondage to Pharaoh's Egypt, this man Jesus could perhaps lead them in a successful liberation from Caesar's Roman rule.

Because of their superficial and political expectations of deliverance from Roman dominance, they began to have thoughts of taking Jesus by force and making him their king. The crowd continued to pursue him. After they had been fed the meal of fish and bread, they crossed the lake and came back for breakfast! Jesus' miracle of feeding them was not to gain a popular following but rather was a sign miracle. He fed them out of compassion for their physical hunger, but his greater purpose was to give them a sign to point to his being the Son of God, the deliverer of the New Exodus, and the Bread of Life.

Follow as I read **John 6: 24-35**.

²⁴ So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." ²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰ So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³² Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which ^[a] comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

³⁵ Jesus 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."

In *The God Chasers*, Tom Tenney speaks of our deepest need to know God in a personal relationship. Even if all other appetites are gratified, our souls will

always be dissatisfied until we find our spiritual satisfaction in God. Tenney says God Chasers are people who're more interested in the face of God than in his hands. The people that followed Jesus were not seeking his face, a true understanding of him and a life-changing relationship with him. Rather, they were chasing after his hands, what he could give them and do *for* them. Jesus' concern was to do something *to* them, by giving them a new kind of life. *His* life. We're all part of a consumer culture and have grown accustomed to having our needs met, even in church. *I wonder where you and I stand among this crowd that followed after Jesus?* Just like them, we've experienced something of his blessing and personal benefits in our lives. And, like the crowd that followed him back across the lake, we're interested in what else could come to us from his hands.

We see clearly in this miracle Jesus' love, and his concern about human need and suffering (Mark 6:34). The Lord Jesus was moved with compassion over the physical hunger of the multitude who gathered to hear him teach. Jesus cares about us today, about all our needs, and cares that there are families and children right here in Madison who don't have enough to eat. We should care about them too.

Yet, Jesus used the occasion of the physical hunger of the multitude to point to a more subtle need. These people were chasing God for material and temporal reasons. We're looking at his hands more than his face, in the words of Tom Tenney. His purpose is to not just do *for* us, but to do something *in* us. We want a "handout" of instant gratification, but he wants to do something lasting. Jesus cares about our every need, but as with this crowd, he understands all our hunger and deepest needs.

As God's people and members of our community, we need to be engaged in better care for the materially undernourished and needy. But also, as the church of the crucified and risen Lord, we must recognize that we exist and work on the level of the supernatural Kingdom of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church of Jesus offers Jesus himself, the Bread of Life who grants the gift of eternal life through a relationship with him. Jesus cares about all our needs. But he seeks to draw us closer to himself, that we might discern the greater need in our lives for Jesus himself, the Bread of Life.

Malcolm Muggeridge as a young man in Britain was a committed agnostic and ardent member of the Socialist Party. He was an idealist, and sought to use religion as a platform for creating a perfect society. But his idealism was shattered by the Second World War. He later confessed he had formerly ridiculed the Christian faith as being an idealistic, "pie-in-the-sky" wishful thinking about the afterlife, having no relevance to the here and now. After he came to faith in Christ he said, "Now I see that the Christian gospel is true and has the only certain hope. 'Pie-on-earth' is the real wishful thinking and elusive dream."

The crowd was fed by Jesus at dinner, and the next morning they came in pursuit of him on the other side of Lake Galilee by breakfast time. Yet when Jesus began to speak to them about their spiritual need, they began to leave.

The crowd wanted Jesus to meet their needs, but they were unwilling to believe in him and accept and submit to his claims as The Bread of Life, the one who is greater than Moses and the one who must be received as really and as dependently as physical bread. Jesus used graphic words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood to speak of our desperate, real and eternal need of a personal relationship with him (52-58). The soul-satisfying presence of Jesus is as real as was the manna and water in the wilderness and as real as his physical body and blood.

Missionary friends reported in their newsletter about the Bhakta people of India, who speak of their god as fruit, and particularly as the nectar of sugar cane, for example. They think of their god as a being who, like a sweet delicacy, adds flavor to life. Dr. Beasley-Murray quotes the Indian, Appasamy, who says that for the Bhaktas, "God is milky sugar-cane, nectar, luscious fruit, the finest delicacies, whereas for John, Christ is water and bread. What the Bhaktas desire is rapture, ecstasy, flights of emotion reserved for the few and that in extraordinary hours. What the Fourth Evangelist emphasizes is the moral strength which all men and women need to exercise every day of their lives." And for many people in India, the best they can hope for are moments of pleasure and alleviation from chronic hunger and deprivation. The Bhaktas' god is not a great god for a desperately hungry people.

Sometimes we offer Christ as less than he is. We appeal to people to come to him and receive his benefits and blessings to tack onto their lives. But Jesus is the Bread of Life. He's life itself, and not just a dessert we can take or leave, or who adds a bit of flavor to our lives. Without Jesus, his incarnation, his suffering and death on the cross, and his resurrection, we would be lost and condemned to everlasting death. When Jesus told the crowd he's the Bread of Life, he's saying something radical. Without him there is no help for life and no hope beyond the grave (Ephesians 2:12).

In saying he's the Bread of Life Jesus compared himself to Moses, when God fed the Israelites manna in the wilderness (48-49). During those 40 years, God kept the Israelites alive with this strange wafer-life substance that came down from heaven. The word "manna" is a transliteration of the expression. "What is it?" A lot of young newlyweds eat "manna," yet wouldn't dare ask the bride-cook, "What is it?" Yet "manna" has kept a lot of newlyweds alive during the first years of marriage!

Jesus offended this crowd by saying Moses didn't produce the manna. God did. And Jesus is the God man, who as the Eternal Son fed the Israelites. Paul says that Christ was the source of the spiritual food and drink of the desperate

Israelites in the desert (1 Corinthians 10:1-5). But now he is with them, not just as physical manna, but as the Bread of Life.

Eternal life is not only everlasting life without end in heaven. Eternal life is the life of God that changes our lives right now. Jesus the Bread of Life satisfies our desperate hunger for life and also Jesus is life itself, but also the fulfillment of life. As Paul expresses in his Ephesian Letter, God's plan is not just to give us an extended everlasting life, but rather to give his very life to us. Paul therefore prays that we will all be filled up with all of the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19).

My parents honeymooned at Lake Lure, North Carolina. Being young and underemployed, they skimped on food in order to stay in the grand lodge there next to Chimney Rock. Assuming they were on the European plan they declined eating in the great restaurant in the lodge, and instead ate in cheaper diners in the area. How disappointed they were to discover that all week they had been paying by the American plan! They could have eaten sumptuously in the grand dining room. After all, they paid for it.

Jesus the Bread of Life has paid for a great salvation, and has through his atonement made provision for every spiritual blessing, and for us to live in the fullness of the spiritual gifts and graces. The Bread of Life has called us into a personal love relationship with him, to feast on his riches.

Jesus says we're to eat his flesh and drink his blood (53-58). Our relationship with him is to be as essential as the real food we have to eat to stay alive. And, our relationship with him is to bring greater joy and fulfillment than a feast on our favorite meal. It's usually after we get emptied of our attraction to and fondness for and dependence on the things of this fallen world that we learn to deeply love and delight in Jesus alone. Augustine said our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Our hearts are hungry until they feed upon the life of God. Yet people overlook and reject the one who offers himself as the Bread of Life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a young pastor and theologian who was arrested, imprisoned, and executed by the Nazis just weeks prior to liberation by the Allies in 1945. In his profound and widely influential study of the Sermon on the Mount, called *The Cost of Discipleship* is this poem, which Bonhoeffer wrote toward the end of his brief life of 39 years. Knowing the end was near, he calmly said "good-bye" to his friends in the Gestapo prison when he was transferred to his final holding place. Witnesses said he seemed totally at peace. This is the poem he wrote titled, "New Year 1945":

*Should it be ours to drain the cup of grieving
Even to the dregs of pain, at thy command,
We will not falter, thankfully receiving
All that is given by thy loving hand.*

These are the words of a man with a relationship with Christ that transcends all circumstances, and that gives joy, strength and a calm assurance of the love of God. Because Dietrich Bonhoeffer sought the face of God, he could then gladly receive anything from the hand of God. God chasers learn to trust and gladly receive anything from his loving hands. The crowd wasn't interested in that kind of relationship. They were interested in only what Jesus could do for them, but not in what he could do *to* them. They were more interested in the hands of God than in the face of God.

Today's Scripture has a vitally important message to me. In my period of grief over the passing away of Nancy, I find myself in a "grabbing" mode. I'm more interested in what Jesus and other people can do for me than in seeking God's face. I selfishly expect people to dispel my loneliness by being present with me, and I'm reminded by my indirect mentor, Henri Nouwen, that I need to practice solitude, and spend more of my time seeking God's face, not his handouts to me. Not that I'll deny my need for the encouraging companionship of friends, but that I'll not rely on them to fill a deeper void in my heart that only God can fill. I need to seek the face of Jesus in people I lovingly serve, and allow him to give what he knows I really need—himself. I need to be a God chaser, seeking his face and not his hands.