

# "I Am the Bread of Life"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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*Exodus 16:1-5 (NRSV)*

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. <sup>2</sup>The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

<sup>4</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. <sup>5</sup>On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."

*John 6:35-40 (NRSV)*

<sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup>Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; <sup>38</sup>for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup>And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup>This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

*We need to eat to make it from one day to the next. But what sort of nourishment is needed to sustain life everlasting? It is the nourishment that is Jesus. He is the bread of life. Eternal life.*

I just don't eat as well as I should; not enough fruits and vegetables, too much processed food, and so on. I know this and if I forget there are daily reminders everywhere I turn. Countless magazine covers and news stories tell me how I could do a better job of nourishing my body. You'd think that at my age, I'd realize that my body needs all the help it can get.

More than 3,000 years, the Hebrew slaves who escaped from Pharaoh faced a more pressing problem of nourishment: starvation. The problem was that there just hadn't been much time to pack. When Moses said go, everyone had simply dashed for the Red Sea. They somehow found the time to plunder the Egyptians, grabbing jewelry and clothing, but they had not prepared any food provisions other than some loaves of unleavened bread.<sup>1</sup> When the Hebrew slaves reached the safety of the Sinai wilderness, they realized that choosing gold over food had perhaps not been the best decision and they began to complain, "you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3). But of course, they were completely wrong. They

*Jesus: The Great I AM*  
*a Lenten series*

This is the first Bible study in a seven-week Lenten series.

In John's Gospel, Jesus makes seven dramatic statements about himself that begin "I am . . ." These include "I am the bread of life" and "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In this seven-week series, we'll explore each of the seven statements, seeking a deeper understanding of what they reveal to us about Jesus and the vocation that will take him to a cross in Jerusalem and then on to his resurrection and exaltation.

<sup>1</sup>The bread they take is unleavened because there was not even enough time to wait for the bread to rise.

were God's people and God would provide for them. Soon, God began raining "manna" upon them, the "bread from heaven," a flakey, nutritious substance that could be gathered off the ground each morning. When the sun grew hot this bread from heaven melted, but there was no need to store any food. God provided them with fresh manna every day. A powerful reminder that God provides every day.

More than a millennia later, descendants of these Hebrew slaves gathered along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee anxious to see the miracle-working teacher named Jesus. It was a crowd of thousands and Jesus asked one of his disciples, Philip, where they could buy bread for everyone to eat. They would surely need nourishment as the day wore on. [It will help to have your Bible open to John 6 as you read the rest of this study.]

Philip told Jesus that feeding the crowd would take far more money than any of them had. But a boy came forward with a few loaves and a few fish. Jesus told everyone to sit, gave thanks for the food, and then gave it to be distributed to everyone – and a few

loaves became enough to feed thousands.

### John's Gospel

Though written from differing perspectives and for varied audiences, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke share much material. Matthew and Luke probably had a copy of Mark's Gospel when they wrote their own. Indeed, the three Gospels are often referred to as the synoptic Gospels, meaning simply "read together," emphasizing some of their similarities.

But John's Gospel is quite different. It was the last to be written (probably the early 90's AD) and shares little material with the other three. For example, almost none of the miracles recounted in the synoptic Gospels are found in the Gospel of John and vice versa. John is very clear about why he wrote another Gospel: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus' miracles are often concrete expressions of God's kingdom. For example, in the kingdom of God there are no blind or lame, so Jesus makes the blind see and the lame walk. But in John's Gospel, Jesus' miracles are signs to his true identity. The question is always, "Who is Jesus?," and there are only two options: either Jesus is one with the Father, the Great I AM, or he is not. There's no patience for fence-sitters in John's Gospel. Do you believe or not? Will you choose the light or the darkness?

Jesus, realizing that the crowd would demand more from him, went up a nearby mountain and later that night, made his way back across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum – by foot!

The next day, the crowd finds Jesus again and he tells them that they only followed him because of the previous day's miracle. And then, he tries to take them to a whole new place. Jesus tells them that he can do better than some loaves of bread that will grow stale and old anyway, he can offer them "the food that endures for eternal life," namely himself, "for it is on [Jesus] that God the Father has set his seal" (John 6:27).

Now, I'm sure that the folks on the seashore that day were confused and mystified at this, but like the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4), they want what they think Jesus is selling. She wanted "living water" so that she wouldn't have to make the trek to Jacob's well anymore, and the crowd is surely hoping for a lifetime bread supply. All they want to know is what work they have to do to get such bread. Jesus replies that they must simply "believe in him whom he [God the Father] has sent" (6:29).

Naturally, they expect something akin to what God provided to their ancestors, bread falling from heaven. But that isn't what Jesus is talking about at all, for the manna, though God-sent, was *not* the "true bread of heaven . . . that gives life to the world."

*"I am the bread of life"*

The crowds are still waiting to get their bellies filled when Jesus declares to them, "I am the bread of life." Jesus himself is the nourishment needed for eternal life. This is the first of seven

profound moments in John's Gospel when Jesus declares "I am the . . ." Why seven? Because it is the number which signified wholeness and completeness; God created the cosmos in seven days. Why is the "I am" significant? Because it is the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush (see Exodus 3).<sup>2</sup>

This simple statement had to rock the crowd back on its heels. Jesus, this man from Nazareth, is the bread from heaven, he says, sent by God the Father, so that who believes in him may have eternal life. Jesus is the nourishment, the bread, that sustains eternal life, which neither hunger nor thirst can touch. Further, it is Jesus who will raise the dead on the last day!

#### "Belief" and "Faith"

Translations, even of the Bible, can be tricky. At several points in Jesus' ch. 6 discourse, English translations use verb forms of the word "belief" to translate the Greek root, *pistis*. Jesus says, for example, "all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life" (v.40) and "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life" (v. 47). The Greek root here, *pistis*, means "faith," but because English has lost the verb form of "faith," we substitute "believe." And this creates a problem.

For many English-speakers, the word "believe" speaks mainly of the intellect; it is a "head" word. Thus, it becomes easy to see "doubt" as the opposite of "belief" and make the whole thing about whether we agree with the basic doctrine/beliefs about Jesus, as we do when we affirm our beliefs when reciting the Apostle's Creed.

But this isn't what the NT writers are getting at most of the time when they use *pistis* in a variety of grammatical forms. *Pistis*/faith is a "heart" word; "trust" is an excellent synonym. If I have faith in someone, it means I trust them. If we have faith in Jesus, we trust him in all things and with every part of our being – or at least we do the best job of trusting him as we can.

If we still had a verb form of "faith," the two statements above would read thusly: "all who see the Son and faith in him [put their trust in him] may have eternal life" and "Very truly I tell you, whoever faiths [trusts] has eternal life."

Do I trust Jesus? Do I trust that what he says is true? Do I trust that he loves me and gave his life for me? Will I entrust to him all the messiness and mistakes of my life? These are the sorts of questions to ask ourselves.

Let's be clear here: Jesus is claiming to be much more than the miraculous manna of the Exodus. The path to eternal life lies through him. He will do what only God can do – resurrect the dead. To some, even many, who listened this must have seemed blasphemous. Little wonder that Jesus' claims drew quick opposition (v. 41-42).

But Jesus is not through. He is the bread of life, the nourishment needed for eternal life. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v. 51). And so Jesus brings the crowd to the cross and to the deep mystery of his body and his blood. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day . . . those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide<sup>3</sup> in me, and I in them."

One can't miss the sacramental language here, speaking to the deep mystery of what we call Holy Communion. These words help us to understand why most Christians have seen Holy Communion as more than a mere remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. Instead, we embrace that in the bread and the cup, Christ is present. It is the bread of heaven, Jesus the Christ, who nourishes us for eternal life, who will sustain our resurrected bodies. The only question for us is this: Will we trust Jesus?

<sup>2</sup>On seven other occasions in John's gospel, Jesus makes absolute "I AM" declarations. For example, earlier in chapter, Jesus walks on water to reach the disciples' boat in the night. They are terrified, of course, and Jesus says, "I AM; do not be afraid" (v. 20). The translation is typically, "It is I; be not afraid" as in the NRSV and NIV. But such a translation masks the literal "I am" in the Greek. Like pretty much everything else in John's gospel, all these "I am" statements signify Jesus' divinity. He is not only the Messiah, but God.

<sup>3</sup>*Abide* is one of those words that we find in our Bibles, but rarely use ourselves. It translates the Greek word, *meno*, which is variously translated as "remain," "stay," "endure," "abide," and "continue." John uses *meno* to convey the permanence of Christ's relationship with his people and with each of us as individuals. This permanence is a deep, active, and very real union – we are *in* Christ and Christ is *in* us, both being favorite formulations of Paul's.

## *Feeding Thousands with Loaves and Fish More than a miracle*

There is only one miracle story that is told in all four Gospels. It is the story of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people with just a few loaves and fish. In John's Gospel it provides context for Jesus' revelation that he is the bread of life. As God fed the freed Israelites with manna, so Jesus has fed the multitude.

On the surface, this miracle story is pretty simple. A huge crowd has gathered and there is enough food only for a few. Jesus tests his disciples by asking how the crowd will be fed. Typically enough, the disciples don't have a clue. So Jesus takes the loaves and fish, blesses them, and then distributes them. Miraculously, there is enough to feed fifteen or twenty thousand people. The crowds take the miracle to be a sign that Jesus is the "prophet who is come into the world," the one who can teach in God's name.

But we would be mistaken if we understood this story to be about no more than Jesus' astounding powers. Instead, this is a profoundly rich story that taps into the very core of the Christian faith. There is more going on than we can do justice to in this brief study, but here are a few keys:

- John notes that this miracle happened during Passover, which celebrates the Exodus of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt. Thus, John introduces the theme of the Exodus and God's provision for his people which figures so prominently in this chapter.
- Jesus knows what he is going to do to feed the crowds, but he wants to know if Philip, Andrew, and the other of his close disciples know. Have they begun to grasp the source of Jesus' power and, hence, his identity? Evidently not. Rather than understanding that Jesus is about to do something that will reveal God's glory, Philip and Andrew respond with practical concerns about how much it would cost to feed so many. Throughout the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, even his closest disciples have great difficulty truly grasping who it is that they follow.
- John's Gospel was written late in the first century. The Christian community had shared the Lord's Supper for decades. Jesus' taking of the bread, giving thanks, and distributing it is clearly evocative of the sacred meal shared by all Christians.
- Just as Moses instructed the people to pick up all the manna, Jesus makes sure that all the uneaten fragments are gathered up. Truly, God not only provides for our most basic needs (like food) but does so to overflowing!

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

John's Gospel can be a challenge. It isn't as action-oriented as the Gospel of Mark nor are the large teaching sections as neatly laid out as in Matthew. Yet, when you read the Gospel of John, the deeply moving depth of this witness to Jesus Christ is impossible to miss, even as we struggle to understand. Jesus' discourses often seem repetitive and abstract. "What is he saying?" we ask in puzzled wonderment.

My suggestion is that you try a slow, reflective reading of a manageable portion. For example, slowly make your way through chapter 6, from which today's study was drawn. Ask yourself questions, as you try to make your way deeper and deeper into the story. How does the feeding of the thousands with a few loaves (v. 11) set up what follows? There is no Last Supper scene in John's gospel – could Jesus' breaking of the bread here be such a moment? How does the story of Jesus walking on water fit into this chapter? We can connect the manna story easily, but what makes Jesus the "true" bread of heaven? How does Jesus contrast himself with the story of the manna in the wilderness? As Jesus goes on, how closely does he identify himself with the Father? Wouldn't the Jews think that it is God who is to resurrect? Can you see what makes some of his fellow Jews so angry? Can you see that Jesus *is* blaspheming unless his claims are true? As Jesus takes the crowd deeper into the mystery of his flesh and his blood, what do you think the crowd was making of all this? Would it only make sense, such as it does, to someone living post-cross, post-resurrection? John's Gospel begs to be chewed over and gnawed on. Take and eat, indeed.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In 2007, the Lenten sermon series was drawn from John's Gospel. We read through the Gospel that year and the daily readings for this Lent will again take us through the entire Gospel.

<p><b>Monday, John 1:1-18</b> The Word becomes flesh. What are three main themes that John wants us to grasp in this prologue to his gospel?</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, John 1:19-33</b> John the Baptist offers his testimony to Jesus. Such testimony plays a big part in John's gospel, for the overarching question is: "Who is Jesus?" How would you respond to someone who asked you that question? What do you think John means when he calls Jesus the Lamb of God? Why has the Lamb of God come?</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, John 1:35-51</b> How do these men respond to their encounter with Jesus? Who offers testimony here? What do you make of Jesus' response in v. 51? You might check Genesis 28:12 and Daniel 7:13-14.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, John 2:1-12</b> Jesus goes to a wedding in Cana. Why do you think that his mother, Mary, wants Jesus to do something about the wine? Why doesn't Jesus want to? Why does he do it?</p>
<p><b>Friday, John 2:13-24</b> Jesus cleanses the temple in Jerusalem. You might read Jeremiah 7:1-15 as background. What is Jesus trying to accomplish by interrupting the temple activities? Why does John put this episode at the beginning of Jesus' ministry?</p>	<p><b>Saturday, John 3:1-21</b> Nicodemus visits Jesus during the night. What is Jesus trying to convey to Nicodemus? Why is it so hard for Nicodemus to understand Jesus? Why does Jesus think Nicodemus ought to "get it?"</p>

