

Jesus, the Bread of Life

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Have you ever been to Westminster Abbey? It's that magnificent old church in London where over a dozen British kings and queens are buried. But not just royalty are entombed there. Westminster Abbey is also the resting place for notables like George Fredrick Handel, Isaac Newton, and Charles Dickens. It's also where **Thomas Parr** is buried. Who is Thomas Parr, you ask? His claim to fame is that he lived to be 152 years old. His life spanned the rein of ten monarchs from 1483 to 1635!

King Charles 1st was so impressed with Parr's advanced age that when the old man died, the king ordered that he be buried in Westminster Abbey. Of course it could have been that King Charles also felt responsible for Parr's death. You see, the old man died only a few weeks after coming to see the king. Charles had received him warmly and insisted Parr eat the royal food – food, as it turns out, that was too rich for Old Tom Parr. At least that's what the doctors back then concluded after an autopsy.

We of course don't need the story of Tom Parr's demise to know that what you eat has a bearing on your health. Too much candy and not enough cauliflower will make it difficult for your body to fight disease. But even if you are a vegetarian and don't indulge in sweets, you're still going to end up like Tom Parr: dead. Today our Bible story teaches that if we want to outlive this life and this world, then we'll want to dine on what endures: **Jesus, the Bread of Life.**

In today's scripture text, we see Jesus making the first of seven "I AM" claims recorded in the gospel of John. **I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE** – clearly identifying Himself as being God. For a long time, wanting His miracles to speak for Him, Jesus refused to personally make this claim. But near the end of His ministry – perhaps growing frustrated with the crowd's stubborn refusal to believe the evidence in front of them – Jesus began to boldly claim the name for Himself.

"I AM." These two Hebrew words used by themselves form God's proper name. When Moses asked who he should say sent him to deliver the Hebrew slaves, God's reply was **tell them "I AM" sent you.** (Gen.3:14, John 8:24, 58). The Jew's of Jesus' day considered this name so sacred that, even when reading the scriptures, they would never say it aloud but instead would speak a substitute name "Adonai." So, whenever Jesus claimed this name for himself, those hearing Him could make one of two choices; either to believe that Jesus was God and accept His Spirit into their life, or to continue rejecting Him while looking for some other form of salvation; which is exactly what we see happening in today's story. But only by knowing the background – the events leading up to Jesus' first public "I AM" claim – can we truly understand what He meant when He said ...

'I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. John 6:35

In Chapters 1–6 of John’s gospel, we see Jesus rapidly gaining such popularity that massive crowds were now following Him everywhere He went, even when He tried to escape them by taking his disciples out into wilderness regions. Twice, at the end of a day, finding such a huge crowd had followed Him into the middle of nowhere, with no food and no place to go, out of compassion, Jesus fed them all. (Matthew 16:9-11).

What set the stage for Jesus’ declaration to be “the bread of life,” was His second miraculous feeding of 5,000 people (John 6:5-15). Such a large following might seem that Jesus was having a successful ministry, but in reality He was losing the battle. The majority, having eaten their fill of bread, certainly enjoyed the miracles, but they stubbornly refused to believe who Jesus was declaring himself to be. The miracles had become a distraction to His message.

After this second miraculous meal, the people became so riled up, *they were about to take Jesus by force and make Him king* (6:15). After all, if this man can feed a multitude from just *five barley loaves and two fishes*, certainly He should have no problem overcoming the Roman government. However, knowing their intentions, Jesus put His disciples in a boat, sending them to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, while He escaped up a lonely mountainside. Later that evening Jesus then strolled across the lake to rejoin His disciples on the other side.

The next day, not finding Jesus and having watched His disciples sail across the lake, the crowd hopped in boats to chase Him down. Having finally caught up with Him on the other side, they basically ask why He was trying to run away from them. In response, Jesus bluntly confronted their real motives for following Him.

*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. **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.*** (John 6:26-27). He said stop fixating on your physical wants and instead accept the gift of an entirely new life that I am trying to give you.

To this challenge, the crowd then came back with what seemed to be a sincere question about what He was offering, ***what must we do to perform the works of God?*** To their direct question, Jesus gave a direct answer, ***this is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.*** You can’t hear a more simple invitation to faith than this. “Believe that I am who I say I am and that I have the power to offer that for which you really hunger, which is an eternal relationship with God.” And how do they respond to this heavenly invitation? They come back with, ***“but what about the bread?”***

These people had followed Jesus around the countryside, witnessing His miraculous healing of the blind and the lame; they may have even personally eaten not one but two miraculously provided meals from His hands. And yet, in response to Jesus’ heavenly invitation they demand, ***what [other] sign are you going to give so that we might see it and believe in you?*** Basically, they were saying, “Moses fed us for forty years in the wilderness, how much free bread will You give us?”

They were only following Jesus for the free meals and entertainment, and as such they were being blinded to the spiritual opportunity, standing right there in front of them; Jesus, the Messiah, *the true bread sent down from heaven to give life to the world.* (6:33)

This flat rejection of Jesus' invitation to faith is the key to understanding the shocking thing He would next say to them: "Moses didn't give you that bread, God gave you that bread. Now I am the living bread that God has sent down from heaven ... and unless you now eat this bread ... ***eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.***" (6:35-53).

For us, hearing these words, after 2,000 years of sharing Christian communion, monthly rehearsing the language of Jesus' last supper, *this bread is my body broken for you, take and eat, this cup is my blood shed for you, take and drink*, we understand that He was speaking symbolically; especially since He handed around real bread, not his flesh, and offered a cup of wine, not real blood. But to those refusing to believe Jesus' direct call for their simple faith, this sounded like cannibalism and it had its desired effect: ***because of this many of His disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.*** (John 6:66)

Jesus would later explain to those few disciples who chose to remain, ***it is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*** (John 6:63)

So just what did Jesus mean by calling Himself, "the Bread of Life," [saying] *those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.* (John 6:54).

Remember I told you earlier, that the key to understanding Jesus' "Bread of Life" declaration, was that it left those hearing Him with but one of two choices: either to accept His earlier given, invitation to simple faith – to *believe on the one whom God has sent* – or to reject Him and continue looking for their own form of salvation. We are still given the same choice: *it is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.* **We can either seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, trusting Him to give us each day our daily bread, or we can keep striving for whatever it is we desire more, which will never satisfy us.**

These faithless followers of Jesus were only looking for Him to satisfy their immediate hungers: political liberation and revenge against their enemies with an easy life thereafter. But since they brought up Moses, let's discuss him for a bit.

In the same way that God gave them shoes and clothing that never wore out, He gave the escaping Hebrews forty years of bread in the wilderness because there was no other means around for meeting their physical needs (Deut. 29:5). But the day they stepped foot in the Promised Land, those miraculous gifts ceased and thereafter they had to grow their own food and make their own shoes. While, until pointed out to them, they may not have even noticed God's miraculous provision of clothing and shoes, this miraculous daily provision of manna, and the restrictions for its gathering, was intended to teach them one particular lesson: that **God was able and willing to provide for their every daily need as they faithfully followed Him.** For the same reason, this is why Jesus taught us to pray, *give us this day our daily*

bread. As we in faith seek to follow God, and live righteously in His kingdom, we will learn that we can trust Him to take care of our every other need, both physically, spiritually, and yes even politically: *"if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed"* (John 8:36).

This is what Jesus meant by identifying Himself as ***the Bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*** In the same way that Jesus told the woman at the well, that all who drank of the "living water" He offered would find within themselves a spiritual spring *"gushing up to eternal life,* so now He tells us that all who "eat" this spiritual bread – by faith accepting the spirit of God into our lives – will find real satisfaction for that which we really hunger.

And that offer still stands. All who by faith come to Jesus seeking more than just their daily wants, will find that He stands ready to provide their every need: *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*
(John 4:14, John 6:35)

At the end of World War II, the Allied forces found and began to rehabilitate many hungry and starving orphans. Yet, while they received excellent care and were well fed, the orphans still had great difficulty getting or staying asleep. One psychologist came up with a solution that worked. Each child was given a piece of bread to hold onto when they went to bed. This allowed the children to sleep soundly; because they were assured they would have food the next day.

If you want peace and comfort for your soul, knowing that no matter what tomorrow may bring, hold onto Jesus, He is the bread of life, the bread from heaven, the food that endures for eternal life to all who partake of it

Just as He asked the woman, what are you really thirsty for, now Jesus asks us, what are you really hungry for? Let's pray about this.