

Unfolding Jesus: The Great Self-Revelatory Statements in John
Part Three: Jesus, the Bread of Life
John 6.1-71

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Every human being is marked by an overwhelming hunger at the deepest level of his or her soul. It is both a hunger that can be, and that can never be, satisfied.

This message is about how Jesus offers himself as the satisfaction of our soul's hunger and the object of our soul's deepest desire.

I've shared with you before the quote in Saul Bellow's book *Henderson the Rain King* that so haunted me when I read it as an atheist in high school.

The book is about a man who is profoundly dissatisfied with life and wants more. The way it expresses itself is like a hunger rising up within him, a hunger that comes in the form of two words, *I want*.

There was a disturbance in my heart, a voice that spoke there and said, *I want, I want, I want!*

When I tried to suppress it it got even stronger. It only said one thing, *I want, I want!*

And I would ask, "What do you want?"

But this was all it would ever tell me. It never said a thing except, *I want, I want, I want!*

No purchase, no matter how expensive, would lessen it. Then I would say, "Come on, tell me. What's the complaint?" . . . But . . . the demand came louder, *I want, I want, I want, I want, I want!* And I would cry, begging at last, "Oh, tell me then. Tell me what you want!" (24)

At the point when I read this book, it really jarred me, because it made me slow down and listen to my own interior in a way I never had before. When I stopped and listened, I realized that that same *I want, I want*, was echoing somewhere way deep down in my own soul.

Do you recognize something similar on the inside of you?

Ronald Rohlheiser, in his book *The Holy Longing*, says that hunger is universal. You've heard me share this quote as well. He says:

There is within us a fundamental dis-ease, an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of ever coming to full peace.

This desire lies at the center of our lives. We are not easeful people who occasionally get restless. The reverse is true. We are congenitally dis-eased, only experiencing occasional peace. . . .

At the heart of all great literature, poetry, art, philosophy, psychology and religion lies the naming and analyzing of this desire. . . . Whatever the expression, everyone is ultimately talking about the same thing – an unquenchable fire, a restlessness, a longing, a disquiet, a hunger, a loneliness, a gnawing nostalgia, a wildness that cannot be tamed, an all-embracing ache that lies at the center of the human experience and is the ultimate force that drives everything else. The dis-ease is universal. (pages 3-5)

Do you recognize an unmet hunger in you?

What is the name you would put on your hunger?

And what is the thing you hunger after?

Ronald Rohlheiser wraps up his comments with this really remarkable comment.

Spirituality is, ultimately, about what we do with that desire.

It's an observation that takes us straight to the passage we are looking at this morning..

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We are in a sermon series called *Unfolding Jesus*, in which we're walking through the first eleven chapters of John's gospel, and listening in on the self-revelatory sayings of Jesus, the ones in which he tells us who he is and why he came.

Last Sunday we looked at chapter 5, and we walked through the entire chapter like Sherlock, seeing if we could fit the clues together and make sense of what Jesus was saying and doing.

This time, as come to chapter six, I'm going to do the opposite. I'm just going to focus in on one small section of the passage, and then move in and out of the rest of it from there.

There are a bunch of great passages in this chapter that we won't be able to focus on. I hope at some point you'll be able to read the whole chapter through and do some of your own homework on the passage.

Here's the part of the chapter I want to zoom in on: John 6.34-37.

John 6.34-37

"Sir," they said, "give us that bread every day." Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But you haven't believed in me even though you have seen me. However, those the Father has given me will come to me, and I will never reject them.

Specifically I want to focus in on Jesus's saying in John 6.35 when he says, "I am the bread of life."

In that short declaration Jesus brings together in a short and provocative claim the three main themes that define this mysterious chapter.

I am. Who is Jesus claiming uniquely to be?

The bread. What exactly does that metaphor mean?

Of life. What is the sort of life that Jesus offers us?

Let's look at each of these in turn, and then one other word in the passage that brings it all together.

I am.

We'll start with the person making this claim. Jesus of Nazareth. A carpenter turned preacher who is turning the region upside down with his teaching and his miracles. Everywhere he goes he is met with both a warm welcome from some and a chill hostility from others.

Why? Because he says such amazing and such preposterous things at the same time.

He teaches a way of love and peace that is utterly original and compelling and beautiful. "Love your enemy. Turn the other cheek. Take the log out of our own eye before you take the speck from someone else's. Be pure of heart."

And then he says maddening things like this:

John 6.38

For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will.

In response to which, in **John 6.41-42**

Then the people began to murmur in disagreement because he had said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They said, “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph? We know his father and mother. How can he say, ‘I came down from heaven’?”

Or he makes astounding claims like this one in 6.46

Not that anyone has ever seen the Father; only I, who was sent from God, have seen him.

Even the three-times-repeated claim that he is the bread of life – once in 6.25, another time in 6.48, and then again in 6.51 – because of the way he frames it, sounds like a blatant claim that he is God. In Exodus, God tells Moses his name is “I Am.” Now Jesus uses that same phrase to describe who he is.

In response to claims like this, and others we’ll look at in a moment, we’re told in 6.60 that even

Many of his disciples said, “This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?”

A short time later, after more of these comments, we’re told in

John 6.66-69 that

At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him.

Most people, when they read John’s gospel, assume that the disciples reject Jesus because they can’t understand what he is saying. I don’t think that’s right. By speaking in metaphors Jesus was speaking in a way that was very familiar to Jewish people.

They don’t reject Jesus because they can’t understand what he is saying. They reject Jesus because they know pretty well what he is saying, but what he is saying – his claim to be equal with God, and to be the source of eternal life – is too mind-boggling to take in.

Here is a man who has claims that before he lived on earth, he lived in the presence of God the Father in heaven, and that he is sent from God to meet humanity’s deepest need. What in the world do we do with that?

Well, we either fall on our knees or we pick up some rocks. We can’t put him in the category of wise religious teacher and all around nice guy and sidestep his divine claims as though he never made them. He didn’t leave that option open to us.

The Bread.

Jesus says, “I am the bread.”

How are we to understand this? He's obviously not the Pillsbury doughboy. What does he mean when he says this?

In Hebrew culture much more than in Greek and Roman culture it was common to speak the truth using metaphors, word pictures that communicate truth in a much more imaginative and powerful way. The Lord is my shepherd, my rock, my fortress. He carries us on eagle's wings, in his arms, between his shoulders. Metaphors speak to the mind and the heart at the same time.

There are two stories upstream from this one that help us understand what Jesus is saying when he uses this metaphor.

The first one happened earlier in chapter six, when Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people out in the remote regions northeast of the Sea of Galilee.

John 6.5-9

Jesus soon saw a huge crowd of people coming to look for him. Turning to Philip, he asked, "Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?" He was testing Philip, for he already knew what he was going to do. Philip replied, "Even if we worked for months, we wouldn't have enough money to feed them!" Then Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up. "There's a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that with this huge crowd?"

John 6.10-13

"Tell everyone to sit down," Jesus said. So they all sat down on the grassy slopes. (The men alone numbered about 5,000.) Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed them to the people. Afterward he did the same with the fish. And they all ate as much as they wanted. After everyone was full, Jesus told his disciples, "Now gather the leftovers, so that nothing is wasted." So they picked up the pieces and filled twelve baskets with scraps left by the people who had eaten from the five barley loaves.

The other event happened about 1500 years farther upstream. It's the story of God miraculously feeding his people as they walked through the wilderness. We find the story in Exodus 16. Here is a collection of verses from Exodus 16 that tell the gist of the story:

Exodus 16

About forty days into a journey through the desert that would last about forty years, we're told

² In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³ The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day.

¹³ ... in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor.

¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “[Manna?] What is it?” For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat.

³¹ The people of Israel called the bread manna [which in Hebrew means ‘What is it?’. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.

³⁵ The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a land that was [promised to them];

Those two events frame in the conversation that happens next, the day after the miraculous meal, when the crowds track Jesus down.

John 6.25-27

They found him on the other side of the lake and asked, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs. But don’t be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you. For God the Father has given me the seal of his approval.”

John 6.30-31

They answered, “Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What can you do? After all, our ancestors ate manna while they journeyed through the wilderness! The Scriptures say, ‘Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

John 6.32-33

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, Moses didn’t give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

John 6.34-37

“Sir,” they said, “give us that bread every day.” Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But you haven’t believed in me even though you have seen me. However, those the Father has given me will come to me, and I will never reject them.

Can you imagine being there, and hearing Jesus say this?

Let's get clear about what Jesus is saying.

He makes a stark distinction between those who come to Jesus for what he gives them and those who come to Jesus because they realize he himself is what they hunger for.

We live in a consumer culture, and that consumeristic way of thinking has bled into the church. Here I am with my unique needs and desires. I'll shop around and arrange a meal of my own liking, one that I think will satisfy my unique desires and preferences.

Jesus rejects this Jesus-as-a-means-to-other-ends way of thinking. Their deepest hunger will not be met by something that he gives them. He himself is the end of their longing, the end of their search. He himself is the thing for which they hunger.

John 6.25-27

You want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs. But don't be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you."

That brings us to the primary meaning of this metaphor of bread.

What was the significance of bread in ancient culture? For us, bread is a nice side note, an accent touch, in a meal made up primarily of the other basic food groups: fruits, vegetables, proteins, dairy, and a nice chunk of fresh baked golden brown artisan whole grain bread.

But for people in the ancient world, bread was life. It was the staple food in their diet and was eaten at every meal. In fact, bread and food were synonymous in the ancient world. Give us today our daily food. Our daily bread.

Without bread, you don't go away from a meal a little less satisfied. Bread *is* your meal. Without bread, you die.

Which brings us to this other key word in this saying of Jesus, the final one.

Life.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

Jesus is saying, "I am the thing you cannot live without."

John 6.48-51

Yes, I am the bread of life! Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, but they all died. Anyone who eats the bread from heaven, however, will never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and this bread, which I will offer so the world may live, is my flesh."

Jesus talking about himself as bread that we eat sounds so strange to us, but it is really just an extension of the word picture he is using.

In John 10.9 Jesus says,

I am the door. Whoever enters through me will be saved.

The metaphor of a door refers to something that gives you access to something or someone. But to gain that access, you have to open the door and go through. So, continuing the metaphor, Jesus says, “You must enter through me in order to gain that access. In other words, you need to believe in me, and I will give you access to the life God has for you.”

Here, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” The metaphor of bread refers to something that holds what is necessary for life. But to receive those life giving nutrients, you have to eat the bread. So continuing the metaphor, Jesus says, “You must eat my flesh in order to receive the life I offer. In other words, you need to believe in me, and I will give you the spiritual life that you need.”

John 6.40

It is my Father’s will that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life.

And what is this eternal life that Jesus offers? What is the life he offers?

You’ve already seen in 6.51 that Jesus promises that

Anyone who eats this bread will live forever.

But eternal life is about so much more than mere unending days. That is really just one part, and in some ways the least important part, of the biblical idea of eternal life

Three other dimensions to eternal life are what make those unending days so amazing and wonderful.

First, the eternal life Jesus offers is us experiencing our souls being brought from death to life, as God awakens us to himself and to the spiritual realm. Apart from Christ, we will experience eternal spiritual death and separation from God. Jesus awakens us to God and the spiritual realm.

Ephesians 2.1-5

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world. ... ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Second, the eternal life Jesus offers is us entering into eternal relationship with God the Father through God the Son. He makes it possible for us to know and enjoy and delight in God, and walk through life with him!

John 17.3

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

And third, the eternal life Jesus offers is us enjoying the fullness of life that God intended all along for us as human beings. It is only in Christ that God's purpose for our lives finds its fulfillment – its "fillfullment." Listen to these different translations of

John 10.10

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. NIV

I want them to have it abundantly. RSV

to have it in the fullest possible way. NIRV

My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. NLT

There is simply no comparing the life that is ours in Christ with whatever counterfeit version of life there is to be found outside of him.

And *all* of that is ours the moment we eat the bread that is Jesus.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

Let me spend the last part of this message talking about one other key word in this passage, one that I think helps bring the meaning home for each of us.

It's the word **hunger**.

John 6.35

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again.

As we said when we began, all of us as human beings are driven by a huge insatiable hunger. Our spiritual life, Rohlheiser says, is what we do with that hunger.

The one thing we all try to do in response to our hunger is try to fill it.

And our world is like a never ending Taste of Tippecanoe. Here, try this. Here, sample this. Here, this is what you're looking for. And we go through the world eating. Carrying our hunger out into the world and seeking to satisfy it everywhere we go, with everything we do.

As I was doing research for this message I came across a word from the country of Georgia. It's the word *shemomechama*. It means you have eaten until you are full, but you can't stop eating.

That's what happens when we are eating lots of food, but it's food that doesn't really satisfy, food that doesn't really have what is necessary to give us life.

Food scientists work hard in their labs to come up with junk foods that are packed with just the right combination of sugar, salt, and fat, so they explode with flavor in our mouths. They call it the "bliss point." Food that reaches the bliss point you can't stop eating, even though what you are eating isn't good for you, it isn't giving you life.

Our culture is like a massive supermarket with all of its shelves stocked with junk food – each one offering a bliss point that temporarily satisfies but doesn't really bring us life. The stock market. Research results. Sports achievements. Video games. Porn. Alcohol. Shopping outlets. Netflix. Amazon. Tiktok. Romance novels. Political blogs.

We're stuffed full and starving at the same time. *Shemomechama*.

According to Ann Voskamp

Our fall was, has always been, and always will be, that we aren't satisfied in God and what He gives. We hunger for something more, something other.

Then along comes Jesus, the bread of life that has come down from heaven, who says, eat my flesh, drink my blood, believe in me. In me, and in me alone is life. If you eat this bread, you will never be hungry again.

Those of you who have been followers of Christ for awhile, you know there is a paradox about hunger when it comes to the spiritual life.

On the one hand, what Jesus is saying is absolutely true. There is nowhere else we can find the eternal life Jesus offers, the eternal life for which we were made. And once we eat this bread that is Jesus, we will never need any other kind of spiritual sustenance. He is all we need. We will never hunger again.

Psalm 63.5

I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

And yet . . . and yet, when we give our hearts to Jesus, something fascinating happens. At the very same time that our deepest hunger is met in Jesus, our hunger for him grows.

In his journal, David Brainerd wrote:

Of late God has been pleased to keep my soul hungry almost continually, so that I have been filled with a pleasing pain. When I really enjoy God, I feel my desires of Him the more insatiable.

The more we have of him, the more we want of him. When we worship him, or serve him, he gives us himself, and we are fulfilled, and at the same time, he has only whet our appetite for more of him.

I looked around in other languages for a word that captures this idea but I couldn't find one, so I made one up. We are *saziofame*. That's a word that combines the Italian words for full and hungry, satisfied and famished.

Once we come to Christ, our spiritual life is what we do what that continued and growing hunger for God. We can deaden the hunger, ignore it, snack on other things, look to something short of God to be enough for us . . . but it never is.

I wrote this poem thinking about how often I am guilty of this, even as one who has found satisfaction in Christ.

Before me spreads a feast
a feast beyond all telling out all tallying up all taking in
a banquet board bending beneath a bulging bounty of bread
a spread of meat and drink from the far end of the table to its head

and I and I am enamored of the crumbs that lie beneath instead

We can look to something short of God to satisfy our hunger.

Or we can let that hunger lead us into a deeper life with Jesus. It's the quality that sets apart every one of the great saints through the ages – Augustine, Teresa, Julian, John of the Cross, John Donne, George Herbert. A hunger for God that led them into a deeper life of prayer and worship and solitude and silence and relinquishment. I want it to characterize me too. What about you?

As one person put it, Hunger is an escort to the deeper things of God. (Misty Edwards):

May God make us *saziofame*. May he give us the paired and paradoxical graces of finding ourselves deeply and fully satisfied in Christ and finding ourselves endlessly hungering for more of Christ at exactly the same time.

Lord, in this world that is endlessly hawking counterfeit foods that can never satisfy, let us say with Peter, "Lord, where else would be turn? You alone have the words of life."

Benediction

Go out as *saziofame* people in a *shemomechama* world. Go out into this world that can't stop eating but is never satisfied as people who are fully satisfied in Christ and always hungering for more.

And live a life of love.

Love Jesus.

Love his people.

And pour out his love on this world.