

## THE BREAD OF LIFE

### Introduction

1. Put food and people together and eventually complaints will be heard! Put a couple of million people together on an extended trip in a barren place with meager or no provisions and look out if you are the leader! That's Exodus 16 and the foundation for our consideration today.
2. About 45 days into the wilderness journey the grumbling became deafening! Forgetting the hardships of their recent, forced-labor past, these grumblers remembered the meat pots and the plentiful bread of Egypt, and they came to the conclusion that Moses had brought them out into the desert so that they might die. If only they could return to Egypt! Somehow their exaggerated memories had them bellying up to the Pharaoh's buffet! They were ready to mutiny while there was still time to catch the early-bird special!
3. The Lord heard their complaints and patiently and mercifully provided them with an incredible gift – bread from heaven, as much as each cared to eat, supplied six days a week for about 40 years! It was amazing! It was miraculous, the original Wonder Bread! The Israelites called it manna, which in Hebrew means, "What is it?" They could eat it in its natural state or boil it or bake it – but they had to gather it every day and finish it every day (except on the Sabbath). It could not be saved or stored for the following day. Attempts to do so resulted in spoiled, worm-infested garbage. Fresh manna tasted like wafers made with honey. The Israelites could not live without this provision and this provision came from God. It was more, however, than the next meal. It was a picture of that which was to come – a picture of one who would be to His people the bread of life – supplying and satisfying what was needed not only for life but also for eternity!
4. In his Exodus commentary, Philip Ryken writes, ***The Israelites camped by the springs of Elim for several weeks, lingering under the palm trees and taking long drinks of cool water. Then it was time to move on. They were on a spiritual journey, a journey that reveals the pattern of the Christian life. Although there are times of refreshing, usually they do not last for long. Soon it is time to head back into the desert – the place of***

**testing and spiritual growth.** The account of the manna in the desert becomes the illustration and foundation for the sermon Jesus preached on the bread of life, recorded in John 6. It is this message in conjunction with Exodus 16, which we need to consider.

5. Bread in the Bible is a significant theme. It was mentioned at the fall. Now man would have to work hard for his daily bread (Genesis 3:19). Without bread from Egypt, the Israelites would have perished during the time of Joseph and those famine years. The Jews in the wilderness were afraid they would starve, so they cried out for bread. And God answered with "manna" - a kind of "bread from heaven." Sometimes bread was an offering to God. Sometimes it was a temptation to turn from God ("Turn these stones into bread..."; "Where can we get bread for all of these people?"). It is amazing what people will do for "daily bread."
6. Bread also holds a high position in the life of the believer. When we eat the bread during communion, as we did today, that bread represents something special. It is a picture of Jesus coming to earth in the flesh. Surely the point here is that the Bread of life has come to earth to give us exactly what we need.
7. Probably at no time was this idea of bread more significant than in John 6, when Jesus told His followers that **He** was the bread of life. But the amazing thing about this was that after they were told that He was the Bread of Life, many turned away from Him. Why? One would think that after such a statement, people would flock to Him. But just the opposite happened. The ranks were significantly thinned. It got so bad that Jesus asked the disciples, "Do you want to go away as well?" What happened here? If we can answer that question we might also be able to answer the question concerning people's negative responses to Jesus today. Why do people reject the very thing that they so desperately need? Here are three possible objections.

**I. BREAD IS TOO ORDINARY - (It is something everyone can comprehend).**

- A. The people listening understood bread from heaven from the Old Testament account of the Jews in the wilderness gathering manna six days a week for nearly 40 years.
  1. *Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat (v. 31).*
  2. Even that miraculous demonstration from God became routine and ordinary to the Israelites. "What's for supper?" "Manna." "Not again." It was ordinary. They not only

complained about the manna, but they also complained that God gave it to them! Surely He could do better! They wanted something else. (The Israelites, like us, often confused what they wanted with what they needed, those unfulfilled wants becoming the source of their discontent).

- B. The people listening to Jesus understood bread from heaven from current events. Many of them had eaten the bread provided by the Lord when He fed the 5000.
1. Note v. 26, *I tell you the truth; you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.*
  2. This was a colossal miracle - 5000 fed from one boy's lunch! But the collective response from the multitude was, "That was not so hot. We have heard of better. Besides, that was yesterday. What have you done for me lately? I am hungry again!"
- C. The people listening to Jesus could not understand how He could be what they needed. (Do we ever say, "Christ is all we need" but then struggle to live that way?)
1. "This has to be something extra special. We can relate to the, 'come down from heaven' idea. But how can that be you?"
  2. "You are an ordinary guy. We know you, (v. 42). We know your parents. How can you say you are special?" Jesus used a familiar, ordinary illustration that everyone would understand. He still does...but in its simplicity, most people miss it. These guys did. So have most of your neighbors and friends...and maybe even you. It's too ordinary. You need bread to live. You need Jesus to live forever. Without bread you die. Without Jesus you will perish in your sins. That's pretty simple – but most people miss it.

## **II. BREAD IS TOO NECESSARY - (It is something everyone has to have).**

- A. We needed bread. You gave it to us, once! We have to have bread to live. So give it to us all the time (v. 34).
1. While it is necessary to eat in order to sustain life, there is more to this than mere literal bread. But that too is most often forgotten. We figure if it is something everyone has to have, probably everyone will have it. But Jesus seemed to be saying something more.
  2. "We thought it was too good to be true. So, we have to work for this bread (vv. 27-28). Tell us what we have to do. We work for bread now, but what you say you

have sounds pretty good. What do we have to do to get it?"

3. In an amazing statement, Jesus answers them. *The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.* You need it. You asked for it. Here it is. How would you expect them to respond? Are we surprised they responded like this:

B. Those in the wilderness needed bread. Moses gave it to them every day for four decades. It appears to us that they had a better deal than we do.

1. "Okay, Jesus. You fed us. It was a pretty amazing thing. How did you do it? We are impressed, but keep in mind you are still in the minor leagues. Moses gave our people manna for 40 years. You did it once. It's necessary for us to have bread. If you are the bread of life, where is it?"

2. We would be more convinced if we had a little more to go on.

C. Since we need it and you claim to be what we need, where is the proof (vv. 30-31)?

1. "Show us a sign that will really convince us. You say you are the bread of life. We need bread to survive. How about a lifetime supply? Perhaps then we will believe."

2. "What you are saying doesn't look all that interesting to us, much less necessary. Daily bread we understand. Bread from heaven, we understand sort of. But you being the bread of life for the whole world ... We don't think so."

3. "Bread is so necessary to sustain life. You are saying that we need something that we do not have - but you are (and have) what we need. How can you be what we need and how is it possible to take you in? No. Anything as necessary as bread is not likely related to you."

### **III. BREAD IS TOO TEMPORARY - (It is something that always requires a fresh supply).**

A. Yesterday we ate and were filled. Today we are hungry. You say that you are the bread of life and that to eat you is to live forever, (v. 51).

1. How is it possible for what we know as temporary to last forever?

2. Every day we are in a battle for bread. We work. We earn. We buy. Every day it is the same. How can you say that to feed on you as the bread of life will stop that endless cycle?

B. Years ago our forefathers ate manna in the wilderness, but they eventually died. You say that if we feed on you, we will live forever, (v. 58).

1. Their bread didn't last from day to day. Every day they had to gather it. They could not save it, except on the day before the Sabbath. Otherwise it would spoil.

2. Eventually, after they entered the land, the bread from heaven stopped coming.
3. Ultimately, whether they ate or not, all of the forefathers died. Yet here is Jesus who claimed to offer an endless, miraculous supply. To eat means to live forever. These Jews did not understand that kind of bread. "It can't be. We don't buy it" (vv. 60, 66). **And they walked away from the very thing that they needed most!** They stood at the entrance of the banquet hall and walked away famished!

## Conclusion

1. That's the way it was 2000 years ago. Bread was too ordinary. Who could follow someone who claimed to be bread? Bread was too necessary. Claiming to be a kind of exclusive, eternal bread would exclude too many. Bread was too temporary. The idea that a permanent, eternal state of living could result from merely believing in someone was, pardon the pun, hard to swallow. That's the way it was, and that's the way it is today.
2. But Jesus **is** the bread of life (v. 35), and believing in Him **does** result in eternal life (v. 51).
3. I am interested in the two basic responses. Those are also much like today. I don't claim to hardly even begin to understand all that Jesus was talking about in verses 43-58. But I can believe it...if I trust Him. We can be like the crowds. "This is hard" (which does not mean "hard to understand", but rather, "hard to tolerate." They knew what Jesus said; they just refused to accept it).
4. There is something quite interesting in the exchange that takes place next. Jesus asks if these grumbling followers took offense at what He was saying, as if that was in question. And then he said something a little strange (vv. 62-64). What was He talking about? Perhaps this illustration will help. Donald Grey Barnhouse was visiting several missionaries around the world while his family was staying in Berlin, Germany. Mrs. Barnhouse and the kids discovered a world-famous zoo there. When Mr. Barnhouse returned to Germany, the kids wanted him to go with them to the zoo. They particularly wanted him to see Rupert, the magnificent sea lion. Everyone in Berlin knew and loved Rupert and the best time to see him was at feeding time. The keeper would come to the edge of the huge pool of water and Rupert would mount a platform, catching the fish thrown to him. As the feeding time drew toward the end, the keeper would throw the fish further and further out, causing Rupert to stretch his

enormous body. Finally the last fish would be thrown toward the middle of the pool and Rupert would lunge off the platform and catch the fish in his mouth, but in the process would splash a wave of water into the unsuspecting crowd! Barnhouse had purchased a small movie camera and caught the event on film. Later the family gathered to watch the movie, but just as the movie was about to end, Barnhouse reversed the film. The kids were delighted to see the water return to the pool and the fish go from Rupert's mouth into the bucket and so on. As you can imagine, the children always wanted to see the film in reverse – "Please Daddy, make Rupert spit fish." Here is the point of the story. When Jesus asked the people, "What if you were to see the Son Man ascending to where he was before", He was not talking about His future ascension, but rather it was His incarnation that he was addressing. He was saying that if they were offended and found these things hard to tolerate, did they want Him to retract them – to rewind the whole plan of redemption and take it back to heaven with Him? If so, what would they do then?

5. Amazingly, their response was to turn back and no longer follow Jesus. Some will respond like that – but others might respond like Peter.
6. Jesus asked the twelve how they felt about leaving. Peter looked at Jesus and drew the conclusion I hope you have, or will soon draw. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the holy one of God." If the whole thing was rewound, our case would be hopeless and we would be helpless. But thank God that Jesus did not rewind it and take it all back. He continued to press on and that course took Him straight to the cross where He became a ransom for our sins – that we might be forever supplied with the bread of life! And that bread continues until we get to the Promise Land!
7. How about some bread? It's fresh... We need it ... And even we can understand how to take this bread and eat it... How about it? Is He the bread of life for you?
8. I close today with a story from Philip Ryken (from a single mom in Philadelphia).

"Our broken, often discouraged single parent family live in the suburbs of Philadelphia...As usual, bills accumulated and financial pressure intensified...We had little food and no money to buy groceries. One Friday while I was home during a lunch break, I did what came easily: I sat on my bed and cried. During my crying and groaning the phone rang. 'I'm from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* Action Line, and I understand you could use a Thanksgiving dinner...We would love to know where you shop, so next Tuesday you can go to the store of your choice and pick up a gift certificate for \$50...We hope you have a wonderful Thanksgiving.' My reaction was

joy, relief, and excitement – plus guilt. I had neglected to trust the Lord, who remains faithful. Glancing at the clock, I rushed back to work and straight to a friend's office. Barbara had heard me exclaim many times that Jesus loves us. With great enthusiasm I told her what happened. She responded with a glint in her eye. "Ginny, I'll do one better than that. I have a turkey that was given to us in the freezer...I'll bring it over on Monday, and you can spend the extra money on something else.' On Tuesday...as we put the groceries away I was reflecting on how faithful God is even when our trust falters. Then as I was about to shut the cabinet, the doorbell rang...'Is your mother home? We are from the Church of the Open Door. ..We have brought you your Thanksgiving dinner.' With my mouth still open we watched as they brought in seven bags of groceries – and a 21-pound turkey. We had to clear space for the groceries in the bathroom linen closet, the laundry room and under one bed. As we were preparing for bed that night, I received another phone call – Carol, a friend from church. 'Ginny, she said excitedly, 'John and I have just come from the market and we bought food for Thanksgiving...We want you and the kids to come over...We won't take no for an answer.'"

7. Ryken concludes, "Most people have never been in that exact situation. That's not important. God provides for each of his children in a different way. What is important is to know that if we were in that situation, it would be for the testing of our faith. All we would need to do is trust in Jesus, who for the sake of his glory will provide whatever we need."
8. It is not ultimately about Thanksgiving dinners or miracle lunches for the multitudes or even food at all. It is about God meeting all of our needs in Christ Jesus, starting with our greatest need for eternal life. It is not really about full stomachs or overstuffed cupboards, but about God's glory – which He demonstrates when we learn to trust Him. He is the bread of life – and He calls us to find our fullness in Him!

