

## Living Bread

### Old Testament Reading

1 Kings 19:4-8

<sup>4</sup> But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." <sup>6</sup> He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup> The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." <sup>8</sup> He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

### New Testament Reading

John 6:35, 41-51

<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>41</sup> Then, the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." <sup>42</sup> They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. <sup>44</sup> No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. <sup>45</sup> It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. <sup>46</sup> Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup> Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup> This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

This is the Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

### *"Living Bread"*

Today we are continuing with the "I am" statements of Jesus. The evangelist John will recount Jesus telling the crowd, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven."

I can't read that part of John's gospel without thinking of literal bread, and I always think of the same bread. When I was a child, my grandma would make biscuits. Every day she would make a couple of dozen, sometimes more, and all my older cousins would show up on their lunch break to eat. The main dish would be different, but those biscuits would always be there. She never taught anyone how to make them, and when she passed in 1997, her biscuit recipe went with her. Now you can take what I am about to say at face value; in my whole life, I have never tasted a biscuit as good as grandma's biscuit. But I bet most of us remember our grandma's cooking like that. So, let us delve into John's gospel and contemplate Living Bread...

Jesus was teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum when he taught this "I am" statement. This was what Jürgen Moltmann (twentieth-century German theologian) called a clarifying statement. Not that it clarified Jesus to the crowd, but it clarified the crowd to Jesus. After Jesus made this statement, many of his followers left him. It was not enough that he had already turned water to wine at Cana, healed the royal official's son in Capernaum (the same town he is teaching in today), healed the paralytic man at Bethesda, down the road. And just the day before, he fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish, and to top it off, he walked on water.

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But this statement was a deal-breaker for many in the crowd. We all know that gossip travels, and the synagogue was very likely filled that day: every seat taken, people lined down the walls, people standing in the back to see this man called Jesus. Then he says something like, "I am the living bread, come down from heaven." Why?

No sane man had ever spoken the way Jesus spoke. What he was saying, if taken literally, would be akin to theophagy, a pagan ritual of eating a god to gain that god's power. Jesus didn't have to go there, but he did. His statement had a definite shock factor, and it worked. When he was done with this lesson, the synagogue emptied, and the only people who stayed were those who believed he was the Messiah. To put it like Peter would put it a few verses later when Jesus asked if the twelve wanted to leave. "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (Jn 6:67b-69)

Why did he do it? Just before today's reading, we find that the people he fed the day before came looking for him to get some more food. He says, <sup>26</sup> ... 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup> 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 (Jn 6:26-27)." I wonder if the term sycophant applies to this situation. A sycophant is a person who fawns over someone with power or influence to gain an advantage for themselves. You see, these people wanted earthly sustenance. They wanted to be fed, and they followed the man who had just fed them. They were not listening to his teachings, and they didn't understand what it meant when he said he was the bread from heaven because they were thinking literal bread (Like my grandma's biscuits).

However, Jesus was talking about feeding the spirit. John Calvin wrote, "The Lord intended by calling Himself the Bread of Life to teach that salvation for us rests in His death and resurrection and that by true partaking of Him, His life passes into us and is made ours."

The undefeated Jesus is the life inside us that enables Christians to meet the hardships of this broken creation. Calvin says that without Jesus to nourish us, we can do nothing!

I guess we are what we eat, both literally and spiritually.

When one of my cousins would get to my grandparents' house late for lunch and need to rush back out to work, they would grab two biscuits (grandma's manna), and it would hold them over till they got home that night. What Jesus was saying in his magnificent, over-the-top, crowd-spitting statement was this, once we accept him for what he is, not what he can do, then we are on the right path. It is only by the living bread, Jesus, that we are fed spiritually and able to grow and mature as Christians. Without this living bread, we may come to church each Sunday and say our prayers, but the growth that God wants for us will never happen because we will be spiritually malnourished.

I have heard ministers from pulpits preaching on this passage my entire life, and I have always thought something was missing. I knew going into this sermon that I needed to work out my

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theology on this matter. So, let us unpack that thought; An “I am” statement tells us what Jesus is. It is not an “I will” statement, which tells us what will be done. But many times, I have heard people focus on the eternal life aspect of this statement, somehow avoiding the “I am” part. According to John, what is Jesus? Messiah, Son of God, Saviour, Prophet? In the first chapter of this Gospel, John tells us (I bet all you good Sunday school kids can recite it), “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (Jn 1:1-5)” Jesus is the Word, God, and through him came life, and that life was light that could not be overcome by darkness.

To take the living bread into ourselves is to accept Jesus for what he is, not what he can do. Granting believers eternal life is wonderful, and I do not intend to diminish that aspect of Jesus’ statement. However, what happens to us when we mature in Him in the here and now is so much more important, because that transformation is part of John’s “new creation.” This idea is picked up in Paul’s teaching, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:17).”

What Jesus “is”, transforms “us”. We become something different from the old us; we look the same, but our attitude changes, how we look at the world changes, how we hope, and love changes. The very idea of Jesus as the living bread is why we take communion, as a reminder of our acceptance of what Jesus is, and our spirit is transformed because of it.

Jesus is not promoting theophagy or cannibalism. Jesus uses his body as the perfect metaphor for what this world needs. We need him, like living bread, to help us grow into what God calls us to be, and creation needs his sacrifice to right the wrongs of sin and death. Unlike earthly bread, it seems that Living Bread has many great health benefits.

When my grandma passed, the world lost a precious lady, and our family lost that biscuit recipe. I thank God every day that the living bread of Jesus Christ will sustain me indefinitely. At the risk of sounding like the little Baptist church I grew up in, I will ask, have you tasted the living bread? Has it turned your life around? I can promise you this, my grandma’s biscuits, as good as they were, don’t even come close to the bread come down from heaven we call Christ Jesus. With my theology of Living Bread thoroughly baked (Pun intended). It feels appropriate that we end with a prayer of thanksgiving to carry the food metaphor to its conclusion.

Let us Pray,

Father, we give thanks for the living bread, Jesus Christ, who is that, and so much more. When we eat food, we must return and eat again later to avoid starvation, but with living bread, it just multiplies like the five loaves among the five thousand. Help us to grow spiritually, as we are nurtured by you because, and to paraphrase the prayer we learn as children, by Your hand we are fed, Lord, we thank you for the Living Bread. Amen