God Gives the Bread of Life

For Communion service Copper Hill on 11 August 2024

# Scripture: John 6: 35, 41-51; Exodus 16:1-18

# Key Thought: God who provided the manna in the desert for Israel has provided spiritual food for us through Jesus.

# Intro idea:

Today I would like us to think about three uses of the word “bread.”

1. The first is the reference in Exodus to the substance that God sent as food for Israel during their wilderness wanderings. It was called “bread from heaven” (Ex. 16:4; John 6:31). The common name for it was manna.
2. The second use of the word bread for our consideration is the reference in the gospel of John about 1400 years later. Jesus is speaking and refers to himself as the “Bread of Life” (John 6:35). He is making a deliberate comparison and contrast to the manna of the wilderness experience.
3. The third bread that I would like us to meditate upon is the communion bread that is before us this morning. It is here because Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.”

By studying the Scripture and meditating upon these three uses of the word “bread,” we can learn about how Jesus provides for our spiritual life today. Let’s begin with the first of the three

# The manna of the Exodus experience of Israel

## Manna came about because Israel had a need.

The nation was in the desert, just a few weeks out of Egypt. They were hungry and they were grumbling. Their grumbling was partly due to real need and partly based on the fact that they didn’t have the things they were used to back in Egypt.

### A good question is, “What do we learn about God in this incident?”

We note that God saw through all their grumbling to the real need, and he supplied it. He demonstrated once again that He is our Jehovah Jireh – the one who supplies all our needs. He demonstrated that He is, as He had told Moses, a God of compassion who forgives sins. He supplied the actual need which was for bread. In this case, He also answered their desire as well which was for meat. He sent a huge flock of quail. God promises to meet our needs but not our wants. Yet in this scenario, He gave Israel what they wanted too. It demonstrated that He is a God who sees our situation and hears our prayers. The Bible says,

## God sent them bread from heaven

### What was manna?

This is not the most important question, and that is a good thing, because we do not have definitive info. The Hebrew word root refers to a “sweet gum or resin” (ZPEB). Scripture says it was white in color like “coriander seed” yet flakey in shape so it gave the ground on which it landed the appearance of frost (16:14). It tasted like “wafers with honey” (Ex. 16:31) or like something made with olive oil (Nu. 11:8). It was very versatile and useful as it could be ground in a hand mill, crushed in a mortar, cooked in a pot or made into cakes (Nu. 11:8). It had to be gathered every morning as it did not keep even one day, except on the Sabbath when it would miraculously keep over Sabbath because none would be found on the Sabbath. While a couple candidates for a partial natural explanation have been suggested from desert ecology that God could have used (see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09604a.htm> ), none have been discovered that explain the daily occurrence of such a large quantity of such a variously usable, nutritious and good-tasting food, over such a long period of time precisely six days per week. It was indeed a miraculous occurrence.

### And the source of the bread is a key point!

The Bible makes it clear that the manna was “bread from heaven (Ex. 16:4).” The expression indicated the source of this blessing. As Moses put it, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat” (Ex. 16:15). Israel’s experience is reviewed in Ps. 78:17-31 where the inspired reviewer emphasizes this heavenly connection even more.

[God] gave a command to the skies above and opened the doors of the heavens;   
He rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven.   
Human beings ate the bread of angels; he sent them all the food they could eat.  
Ps 78:23-25 NIV

### The sufficiency of the bread is also a key point

Both the Exodus account and the review in Psalm 78 are careful to make the point that the gift of bread from heaven was completely sufficient for their needs.

## The Israelites ate the bread for 40 years

The manna started falling about six weeks after they left Egypt. It did not stop until they had crossed over the Jordan River into the promised land (Joshua 5:12). Near the end of that journey, Moses summarized,

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Dt 8:2,3 NIV

That was the first of the three uses of the word bread, its occasion and meaning. Now let’s move to the second of our three uses of the word, the words of Jesus about …

# The Bread of Life

The subject of bread arises in the discussions following Jesus’ miracle of the feeding of the 5000 with 5 barley loaves and two fish, the text we read this morning. Jesus told the crowds that they were following him for the bread and admonished them,

“*Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” Jn. 6:27 NIV*

The Jews brought up the manna of the OT and how it was called “bread from heaven.” This sets the stage for Jesus to draw comparisons and contrasts between the manna in the wilderness and himself. It’s up to us to study Jesus’ words to try to understand the parallels between the stories as Jesus explains them.

## The first parallel is the implied parallel of need.

Our need for spiritual sustenance is pictured repeatedly in John’s Gospel. Remember the woman at the well (chap. 4) who continually kept coming to the well for physical water. While that water satisfied a physical need temporarily, it did not touch her spiritual thirst. Jesus told her that he could offer her a water that would be within her a well of water springing up to eternal life (John 4:14). This spiritual water would provide continuing inner renewal on a path that is life-sustaining and life-giving and leads to life eternal. He was referring to the promised Holy Spirit that he would send.

Jesus’ thinking about the bread in John 6 is very similar. Jesus suggested that the crowds were following him to get more physical bread to eat (John 6:26). That’s when Jesus said,

“Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." (Jn 6:27).

The crowd was looking for temporary physical refreshment. Jesus was offering spiritual sustenance, something deeper that would build up their spirits, refresh their relationship with God, and prepare them for life now and forever.

Jesus is not telling us not to work to earn our food. Rather, he is highlighting our human lack of focus on spiritual things. Our need today also is to look past our immediate physical needs and cravings and pay attention to our spiritual requirements. To those who will do this, Jesus promised,

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt 5:6 NIV).

In today’s world where there is so much striving for pleasure and possessions, how we need to hear again Jesus’ admonition. In the context of this crying need for spiritual food, Jesus talked of God sending

## bread from heaven and pointed the people to himself.

By saying “I am the Bread of Life” and reminding the people that he came from the Father, Jesus echoed Moses in pointing to the source of real refreshment- our heavenly Father. Jesus said,

It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” John 6:32-33

How does God intend to meet our spiritual need?

He sent Jesus to be our spiritual food. What does Jesus mean when he tells us, “I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE”? John 6:35 To understand it we ask first, “What does Jesus mean by life?” Fortunately, he defines it for us in John 17:3

“This is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

So, to have spiritual life is to have a relationship with God through Jesus, to be a spiritual child of God.

In the phrase “bread of life,” Jesus is drawing a metaphor with the staple of our physical diet – bread. Just as physical bread sustains our physical bodies, so being in relationship with Jesus will sustain our spiritual life. Along this theme, the Apostle James writes,

Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. James 1:21 ESV

Jesus, the Word of God who spoke God’s Word to us, gives us spiritual life as we give hospitality to him and his words in our minds and hearts. As John wrote,

To those who received him, he gave the right to become children of God. John 1:12

### In relation to this, Jesus also suggested a crucial contrast between the manna and himself.

Their forefathers had eaten the manna – yet they died in the desert. Jesus promised that those who eat of his bread would live forever. The crowd had no way of even beginning to understand this, until after his resurrection. Now we can see that Jesus was pointing to the fact that his resurrection from the dead would make it possible for all those who believed in him to rise from the dead as well. Our new spiritual relationship with God would begin now and not be interrupted by physical death because of Jesus’ resurrection. So, trusting in Jesus who is the Bread of Life, opening our hearts to him, and allowing his words to dwell in us richly brings eternal life! Hallelujah!

Now let’s think about the ….

# The Communion Bread

As the people of Israel ate the bread God provided, so when we take Communion, we eat what Jesus has provided. In the Upper Room at the Last Supper, he instituted the practice that we still share today of remembering him by sharing bread and grape juice, just as he did with his disciples on that night. As we partake in these elements of bread and grape juice, we embrace in faith the words of Jesus, “I am the Bread of Life.” It’s okay to admit that we do not comprehend all that those words mean. There remains mystery in it and in this sacrament. But I think based on our study this morning, there are three truths that we can focus on.

1. Our partaking of the Communion Bread symbolizes our sharing “in Christ.” Those who ate the manna were the OT people of God. The Sacrament of Communion helps to define the NT people of God. Those who partake are those who are taking in and heeding the Word of God and are the disciples of Jesus today. When we are “in Christ,” God is at work in us making all things new (2 Cor. 5:17). “In Christ” God is at work to meet all of our needs through his abundant divine supply (Phil. 4:19). Paul summarizes boldly saying that when we are “in Christ Jesus” then Jesus “has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1 Cor 1:30). So partaking of the bread and juice symbolizes being “in Christ.”
2. “I am the Bread of Life” means that Jesus feeds us spiritually through his words. Just as manna fed the Israelites and Jesus fed the five thousand, so Jesus’ words still feed our souls. As we read Jesus’ words, the Holy Spirit continues to teach us what Jesus would teach us if he were still here in person (John 14:26) and our mind and our souls are built up through the taking in of the words of Jesus and his disciples. Partaking of Communion reminds us that Jesus feeds our souls by his words and his Spirit.
3. Ultimately, Jesus said that the bread of which he spoke referred to his sacrifice of his life for the world.

“This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

So, when we share in the sacramental bread, we are remembering Jesus’ sacrifice for us. We remember specifically that Jesus told us that his sacrifice would bring us life.

The bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” John 6:33 NIV

So, the pastor in serving Communion says something like, “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was broken for you preserve your soul and body unto everlasting life.” In taking Communion, we remember that Jesus gave himself for us and we affirm again our belief in his promises.

For us as Methodists, we have an expression that we feel summarizes how God works though this sacrament. As we obey Jesus’ instruction to remember him, God makes this sacrament a “means of grace,” ministering to us by his Spirit as we partake.

### One last parallel comes to mind.

The Jews ate of the manna only until they entered the Promised Land. Jesus gave us the sacrament of communion with its bread and grape juice for his church to use for a specific limited time period as well. Jesus said that we will no longer need to remember him in this way when we reach our promised land – his heavenly kingdom, for then we will be with him forever. He said,

“I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom." Mt 26:29 NIV

Paul wrote,

“Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” 1 Co 11:26 NIV

# Conclusion

So, as we prepare to take communion this morning, let us examine ourselves as the Bible admonishes us to do (1 Cor. 11:28).

1. Am I “in Christ?” Have I believed on Jesus for the forgiveness of my sins and the renewing of my relationship with God making me one of his forever family?
2. Am I remembering when I partake of this sacrament that I am symbolizing my personal dependence upon the sacrifice of Jesus for my spiritual life both now and in eternity?
3. If the answer to these two questions is “yes” then God is already making these moments a means of grace for you. If the answer to either one of the questions is “no” then I advise you to wait to partake until the answers have changed to “yes.” You do not have to wait long because God is ready now to hear your prayer of repentance and faith.

# Reference pages:

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09604a.htm>

<http://www.bible.ca/archeology/maps-bible-archeology-exodus-route.jpg>

**Hymns:**

Holy, Holy, Holy

Who You Say I Am

Break thou the Bread of Life

Be Still My Soul