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Session 4 - The Bread of Life

Bible Passages:

- John 6:34-71

Brief Notes:

The crowd had asked Jesus to prove his credentials, perhaps, like Moses, providing bread from heaven (vv.30,31), and Jesus has told them they have misunderstood both who the Giver is (it's God) and what the Gift is – “the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (v.33). Much of this passage is about what this bread is and how we receive it. It breaks up fairly naturally into four sections, each section introduced by a comment of the crowd.

4-40

The request of the crowd in v.34 is rather like the Samaritan woman's in 4:13, and they have not understood what Jesus is claiming. In v.35 he makes it crystal clear. This is the first of seven “I am” sayings in the Gospel. Bread implies something fundamental and essential, something for all (“the world”, v.33). This life Jesus offers is permanently satisfying and permanently secure, grounded as it is in the Father's will (which cannot be thwarted) and the Son's obedience (which will not falter). It's given to all who will come to him and believe in him, but not all will, even when they see him with their own eyes (v.36). It's instructive how Jesus dealt with the refusal of the crowds to believe in him (a problem we are familiar with): he rested in the sovereign will of God,

see also verse 44.

41-51

Jesus rebukes their unbelief that scoffs at the idea of his having come down from heaven, and says such unbelief can only be undone by the sovereign work of God, a work he is confident of. The quotation from Isaiah 54 comes from a chapter which prophesies how Israel would be wooed back (following on from the Servant's ministry described in Is.53); it is a beautiful chapter full of grace and tenderness, and I think we should hear that note of gracious appeal in Jesus' words urging them to come to him, listen to him, believe in him that they might live. For he is the living bread, come from heaven, about to given up in death. The startling "This bread is my flesh" stops anyone from thinking of his claim to be the bread of life in some vague theoretical sense, as merely some truth he represents or points towards. It is he, the Word made flesh, about to be offered up as a sacrifice, in whom life is found.

52-59

The crowd are offended by v.51, but far from backing down Jesus makes it even more offensive by speaking of his blood, which of course was forbidden to Jews to eat and the idea would have seemed repulsive. Blood also spoke of sacrificial death, and so clarifies the fact that Jesus brings life through his death, life that becomes ours as we personally trust in his death for us. The passage clearly uses the language of eating and drinking to refer to faith (eg compare v.46 and v.51), but it helps us see faith as much more than mental assent – it is personal appropriation. And just as food is absorbed in the body, so faith leads to a profound life-giving union with Christ (vv.56,57). Obviously he's not talking about communion (the Last Supper is still a year away) but rather the same truth that communion expresses.

60-71

The final section again picks up the theme of rejection – many find these claims hard and offensive, even one of the twelve would not believe. But Jesus again acknowledges the sovereign work of God by His Spirit, drawing us to Christ and giving us life. We might ask how we come to Jesus and feed on him now, given that he now has ascended "to where he was before": and the answer here is through his words, which are "full of the Spirit and life ... words of eternal life". As we trust his teaching about himself and his death, enabled by the Spirit, this life becomes ours.

Notice key themes: human unbelief even in the face of the evidence, the sovereignty of God in salvation, the locus of salvation in Christ and his death, the necessity of personal faith.

Discussion Questions:

With a long passage and lots of repeated ideas being gradually unpacked, there might be merit in

having just a few questions (with supplementaries) to tease out the truths. So you might simply ask –

- What does Jesus mean by claiming to be the bread of life?
- How does that life become ours? What must we do?
- What must God do?

Alternatively, you could work through the passage in a more straightforward way –

- When the crowd asked for this bread (v.34) what were they imagining it to be?
- In what sense is it true that in coming to Christ we “will never go hungry”?

You might consider this quotation to think further what it means to find our satisfaction in Jesus:

“The critical question for our generation – and for every generation – is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?” (John Piper, God is the Gospel, p15)

- In what ways is that a helpful (and challenging) question?
- As well as this bread offering permanent satisfaction, the life it brings is eternally secure. How so?
- Why won't the crowd believe in Jesus?
- How does Jesus deal with their unbelief?
- How might his example help us when we are frustrated by friends not believing the Gospel?
- Have a look at Isaiah 54. What is it about?
- What is the mark of those for whom Isaiah 54:13 is fulfilled?
- Why do you think Jesus uses the shocking language of eating his flesh and drinking his blood?
- What does he mean by it?
- Does it have anything to do with communion?
- What is the response to Jesus' teaching?
- Jesus has now ascended. How are to come to him and feed on him now?
- What are the main themes that recur through this passage? What encouragement do they bring?

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