

I AM the Bread of Life

DAVE BAST

We think of Jesus Christ as a very popular preacher and teacher, and it is true, He was that; but the Gospels tell us there were also times when the numbers dwindled and the enthusiasm of the crowds disappeared. What were some of the things He said that led people to leave Him? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today as my guest co-host is David Den Haan. He is the pastor of the Fairway Christian Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan, and we are very pleased to have you here at Groundwork today, David.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Thank you very much for your welcome, it is great to be here.

DAVE BAST

It is great to be able to sit down together and really focus on the scriptures. Our little tagline at Groundwork is we dig into them, and today we want to dig into John Chapter 6. We are beginning a new series of programs on the great “I am” sayings of the Gospel of John.

DAVID DEN HAAN

John has so many things that he does differently. It is almost like he has said... We have these three – the synoptics – and now it is: I am going to teach something a little bit different, and just take us on a different course.

DAVE BAST

Why don't you read those verses for us, where that comes.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, this is John Chapter 6:35-42:

³⁵Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never go hungry, and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty. ³⁸I have come down from heaven, not to do My will, but to do the will of Him who sent Me.” ⁴¹At this, the Jews began to grumble about Him because He said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴²They said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can He now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’”

DAVE BAST

Yes, there; His first listeners were troubled by this. They sort of stumbled over the claims that He was making; and I think that is one thing that strikes me about all of these sayings – these “I am's;” what bold claims they are that Jesus makes for Himself.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Absolutely. They must have sounded to His immediate listeners like He really thinks a lot of Himself, doesn't He?

DAVE BAST

I take that phrase out of the verses you just read: I came down from heaven – I am the bread that came down from heaven. Now, the background to this whole thing is the story of the Exodus from the Old Testament.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right; Chapters 6, 7, and 8 all have so many allusions to that great story out of Exodus; of Israel coming out of slavery in Egypt, making their way through the wilderness and then to the Promised Land eventually; and it is like Jesus is reflecting with everybody on that story, and then helping them to see that it is fulfilled in Him.

DAVE BAST

Well, and technically, the bread that came down from heaven in the Old Testament is the manna. The children of Israel had escaped from Egypt – from slavery – very dramatically. They went through the middle of the Red Sea; Pharaoh's army that was chasing them ended up being destroyed as the waters came back; all very well and good, but where they found themselves was in the Sinai Desert, and that was not so good.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right; that was not so good. That is a deadly place. The Sinai Desert is a place you do not survive for very long. It is a place of absolute death.

DAVE BAST

And so they began to complain, and that became what would ultimately be a characteristic of Israel all through it's history; sort of grumbling, questioning God, and has He brought us out here to die? And then came this miraculous provision of food. They woke up one morning and discovered that the ground was covered with, in effect, bread; or at least the stuff they could make bread from that had come down from heaven. They called it *manna* in Hebrew, which I think means sort of *what is it?*

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, big question mark lying on the ground there. You know, that is part of the story; the other part is the unleavened bread that was part of the instructions that God gave to Israel already back in Egypt. So it is like there are these two images for bread that Jesus is playing with as He says of Himself, "I am the bread of life." This is what is on everybody's minds as they are making their way toward Passover, which is mentioned in verse 4 there of Chapter 6.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly. So that is the annual festival re-enacting the escape from Egypt; but this claim that Jesus makes sort of incidentally along the way; not just that He is the bread, but: I came down from heaven. That is rather an odd way for someone to describe oneself, isn't it?

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, I don't think I have ever had anybody say to me: You know what? Listen to me, I came down from heaven. Wow, okay.

DAVE BAST

I mean, David, if you are going to introduce yourself, you might start with where you come from or where you grew up, right? But it would be like Grand Rapids, Michigan, for me, in my case; not heaven. So, He is already claiming in effect that He is God.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes; it is an interesting kind of contrast there. He is coming from heaven, and then He uses this very earthy picture: bread. Put those two together: Only Christ can do that.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think that is where we need to turn next, and explore what He meant when He said He was the bread of life.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

This is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and again, joining me today is our guest co-host, David Den Haan.

DAVID DEN HAAN

It is great to be here.

DAVE BAST

We just introduced, in the beginning of the program, this great “I am” saying – the first of them, of seven in John’s Gospel. “I am the bread of life,” and in that context Jesus compares Himself to the manna in the wilderness, and He says: I came down from heaven; I am the bread that came down from heaven; but He not only says where He came from but what He came for here in this chapter.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right; He came to do the Father’s will. It is interesting, He also says in another place in the scriptures: My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me. And He is addressing a couple of things that are so key for us humans because we rebel against both of these things. We rebel against the fact that He came from heaven – I mean, how dare He say something like that, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, and He is not talking about some weird sort of reincarnation or preexisting souls of people; what He is saying in that claim is really: I am God. You know, the New Testament has these marvelous passages that talk about the great preexistence of Christ as the Son of God – the eternal Son of God – who always has been; in John supremely: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. So, that is the background when He says: I came from heaven.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, and that is a tough pill to swallow for us human beings, who want to be little gods ourselves. The other thing that He is really kind of pricking us with is that He came down from heaven to do the work of the Father, ultimately to bring us salvation, and we would like to believe, wouldn’t we, that we really do not need salvation; we have not done anything wrong. We do not need a savior; we do not need the bread that He offers to us.

DAVE BAST

And I think, too, it is important to see the complete consistency of the will of God in saving us. Not just that we cannot save ourselves, but that He wills and He does for us what we could never do – what we would find impossible; and how the Father and the Son are together in this. Sometimes I think people get the wrong idea, that God the Father is the angry God who just wants to destroy people, and Jesus somehow gets in between and changes His mind; you know: No, no, don’t hurt them; I’ll save them.

But listen to these verses from John 6:

³⁸I came down from heaven, not to do My will, but to do the will of Him who sent me, ³⁹and this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day; ⁴⁰for my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise Him up at the last day.

DAVID DEN HAAN

The two are working so much in tandem on this wonderful project.

DAVE BAST

And such incredible claims that He embeds in here: I am going to raise you at the last day.

DAVID DEN HAAN

It is amazing that we have mistaken that so often and so much, that Christ the Son and the Father are different, and they aren't. Christ is the image of the invisible God – He is the one who best represents to us what God is all about; and the biblical writers have to remind us of that from time to time, that there is not a difference between the will that the Father has and the will that the Son has; they are so together.

DAVE BAST

Well, then I come to this central image where He says: I am the bread of life. I am the bread that gives life. I am the only thing that can sustain you, that can... not only life here and now, but life in the last day: I will raise up all those who believe in Me. This fantastic promise that we can escape death – both here and now, we can escape the living death of sort of meaningless, purposeless life or mindless pursuit of goods or whatever, you know; whatever we feed ourselves with; and the idea that bread – bread!

DAVID DEN HAAN

Isn't that a great image? It is a powerful image, and it speaks probably more powerfully to those in Third World countries than it does to us here in America.

DAVE BAST

Oh, absolutely, yes.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Our diets are so varied; we have so much choice and selection; our menus are filled with things other than bread; but if you go to a Third World country, the staple there could be bread or it could, for that matter, be something like rice.

DAVE BAST

Sure; I mean, I think if He were Chinese, He would have said: I am the rice of life.

DAVID DEN HAAN

I think you're right.

DAVE BAST

I just was in Indonesia for two-and-a-half weeks, and it was rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner – three times a day. Or in Uganda, He would have said: I am the *matoke* of life...

DAVID DEN HAAN

There you go, yes.

DAVE BAST

Kind of mashed yams or whatever they are... green bananas, I think; but yes, that is the central image because this was a culture – First Century Palestine – that lived by bread; not by bread alone, as Jesus said in another context – that is another whole program – but bread was what sustained you. You know, different foods were saved for feast days, which were few and far between, things like meat; so what He is trying to get at, I think, with this metaphor is: I am everything.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes; you need Me to live; without Me, you die; without Me, you go into darkness and death. You know, I think about how John is using this image in his Gospel – it is the first one of the “I am” statements, as you indicated earlier – and John is taking this beyond Palestine into the Hellenistic world... that is a big word that we simply use to talk about the culture of the day – in Jesus’ day and beyond; a culture rife with paganism; a culture that pointed to humankind as the powerful be-all and end-all; and so John is taking this image and really using it to confront that culture; particularly a number of the gods in that culture; and the one that comes to mind with this particular word image is the goddess, Demeter, who was the goddess of grain and harvest and fertility. She calls herself the living bread. It is like John is saying: Okay, here is what Jesus says, and you who in the Hellenistic culture, I want you to know that it is not Demeter who is the living bread, it is Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

Really, she was a nature goddess, and one of the very ancient Greek gods, and the myth told about her explained the recurrence of the seasons: Why you only could grow food half the year, because the other half of the year she went down into the underworld to visit her daughter, who was the bride of Hades, the god of the underworld. Yes, wonderful ancient mythology, but it is really nature religion.

So what they are saying, in effect, when Demeter claims to provide bread is, they are saying: It is really just the world – it is nature that we worship; and the same is true in our culture, or any culture – it is so interesting to think of the layers of this. There are first the people who Jesus addressed, who were largely Jewish, and who were thinking in terms of the Exodus story, and then there are the people who John is writing his Gospel for in Asia Minor, around the city of Ephesus, toward the end of the First Century, who were pagans mostly; and then there is our culture, which looks for life in all kinds of ways and places, ignoring or rejecting the life that Jesus offers.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right; sometimes biblical scholars will call that: Horizons. You know, the different horizons that come up in the text, and there is the horizon that Jesus is working with there in Palestine, like you say; and then the horizon of the world of Hellenism; and then ours, and there are all kinds of interesting things that John and Jesus are of course saying that have resonance with us today, too.

DAVE BAST

And what He is really talking about here – let’s get down to it – is not only the claim to provide life, but the necessity of believing in Him; and when He offers Himself to the people as the bread of life, He goes on to say: You know, you really need to eat Me. You need to consume Me. You need to receive Me into yourself.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes; people did not receive that message very well. A number of them took off right at that point.

DAVE BAST

That was the hard point. We will look at that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

This is Groundwork; and we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with David Den Haan, I am Dave Bast, and today the scripture we are digging into is John Chapter 6, a tremendous chapter, very long chapter, but full of good things, and the central claim in it is Jesus’ great statement, “I am the bread of life,” but that is not all that He says. Not only that He came down from heaven as the bread that gives life, but He goes on to say something that is very difficult, and was difficult for His first listeners, and maybe for us, too. Listen to this, verses 53 through 55:

⁵³Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the

last day; ⁵⁵for My flesh is real food and My blood is real drink.”
What do you make of that, David?

DAVID DEN HAAN

Wow! Jesus is taking it all the way when He says stuff like that, isn't He? He is not leaving any shadow of a doubt about what He thinks and believes about Himself, and what He wants everybody else to know about Him. I am absolutely essential, He says, for you to have life.

DAVE BAST

Well, and He says it so graphically. I mean, this is the language that actually gave rise to the charge in the First Century that Christians were cannibals.

DAVID DEN HAAN

That is right.

DAVE BAST

You know, pagans would overhear this sort of thing and they would say: Ooh, wow. What are they doing? You know how people are with any strange, little, new group, and they tend to think the worst: Hey, do you know what they are doing? Blah, blah, blah.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Oh, there were so many misunderstandings with Christian sects.

DAVE BAST

They are eating babies – those Christians are eating babies.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes. They are kind of crazy over there – absolutely nuts! You know, you have mentioned to me before a wonderful quote from John Calvin, and it just helps us to understand a little bit of what relationship faith has to Jesus Christ. What is that quote again; how does that go?

DAVE BAST

Well, Calvin once said that faith is the mouth and stomach of the soul; so clearly this is not literal language. Jesus did not literally want people to eat His flesh and drink His blood; but it is very powerful, symbolic, and I think I would argue sacramental language, whereby He is talking about the absolute need that we have to believe in Him, to receive Him, to lay hold on Him by faith, to be joined to Him in a kind of mystical union whereby He lives in us and we live in Him. He is the absolute center, and apart from Him there is no life.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right; you know, as a pastor I get to see that play out in reality so very often. There will be people who come to faith in Jesus Christ, and they look the same on the outside; they bring, you know, the same kind of quirks in their personality and they wear the same clothes and all that, but there is something fundamentally different about them when they come to be united to Jesus by faith. The bread of life has entered them. They have joy; they have a sense of peace about them, even in the midst of whatever turmoil they are encountering in life, there is something powerful about having Christ within you that you really begin to live, perhaps for the first time.

DAVE BAST

Isn't it Paul who says somewhere: When Christ, who is our life, appears. That says it all.

DAVID DEN HAAN

If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is interesting, this language... I use the word *sacramental*. John does not actually tell the story of the Last Supper in his Gospel...

DAVID DEN HAAN

That is true.

DAVE BAST

The first three all tell that story of Jesus taking the bread the night before He died and it was a Passover meal, and again, Passover is echoed here in this chapter...

DAVID DEN HAAN

Sure is.

DAVE BAST

But John just kind of tells about the foot washing and then goes on from there; but yet here, I think it comes in in a way – the idea of the body and blood of Christ.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right; and I think we as a Church have a wonderful privilege of administering bread to our culture. When we bring the bread of life – Jesus Christ – to them; and I think, too, about a worship service that I led a couple of weeks ago – actually just this past weekend – where we had communion, and you talk about the sacramental connections here, you know. In our church we have the elders distributing the elements to people seated in the sanctuary – so the bread goes out and then the cup – the grape juice goes out; and then they are seated at the front row, right in front of me there, and I have the wonderful privilege of saying to these folks as I hand them the bread: This is the body of Christ given for you. For me, it is one of those moments in ministry, Dave, where I just really sense grace, almost like coursing through me from God to these brothers and sisters of mine. It is a powerful moment as I bring the bread to them.

DAVE BAST

I think... you know, clearly there has been a lot of debate and controversy in Christian history over the meaning of the Eucharist or Communion or the Lord's Supper, and what that means exactly. How is this the body of Christ and the blood of Christ? Does it happen... Well, you know, without getting into all of that – maybe that is a good thing to talk about sometime – but it is more than just a kind of a sentimental thinking about it or remembering. I think the fact that we are physical beings, we tend to over-spiritualize and say: Oh, you don't really need that. You just believe in Christ, you know, it is just this mental sort of thing. No, no, He said, no; there is... You have bodies, too, and I have a body, and somehow there needs to be this physical act of taking and appropriating.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right; there is something about the fact that God made the world and called it good, that He sent His Son, Jesus to this world as a baby – as a human being – and then raised Him bodily after the crucifixion – God likes material stuff.

DAVE BAST

But we cannot leave this story without looking at the aftermath, or the consequences, because John says very clearly that people were offended by this. When Jesus said this – when He got to this point... You know: I came down from heaven. I am the bread of life. You need Me. You can only find life in Me. You need to eat My flesh and drink My blood; people said: What?!

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, Jesus was throwing some serious curveballs at them...

DAVE BAST

I am out of here!

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, forget this guy. I have other things to do and to believe – yet, it is interesting when you look at the response that the people had back then – I think about responses that people have today to the Gospel; you know, it is like Paul says in II Corinthians, where he says: We preach Christ and sometimes that has kind of an aroma to it – a wonderful aroma of life – sometimes an aroma of death.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it smells bad to some people; forget it!

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yep, I'm out of here; I don't need this.

DAVE BAST

I've got plenty of life I can find in other places. I've got my gimmicks and my technology and my pleasure, and you name it...

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes; there are so many substitutes, aren't there, for Jesus in our culture.

DAVE BAST

For me to live is golf; for me to love is baseball... whatever it is.

DAVID DEN HAAN

I was watching a commercial the other day – it was a computer company and they had their earbuds in the actors' ears, and all you could see was a kind of silhouette or the profile of these actors, and they were dancing all over the stage, totally full of life, and the message of the commercial is: If you really want life – if you want to be fully alive, buy our technology, buy our music, and then you will know what life really is. It is like those counter Christ claims back in the ancient world that John wanted to address: No, it is Jesus, John said, and today our message from the Church really is the same: It is not technology, it is not money, it is not golf or baseball; it really is Jesus Christ who makes you alive.

DAVE BAST

Well, and I love Peter at the end here – at the end of John 6. Jesus turns to His disciples and said: Okay, are you going to leave Me, too? And Peter speaks for all of them, and he sure speaks for me, and has done many times when he says: Lord, where else can we go? You have eternal life. You have the words of eternal life. I have often said that to myself, you know, when I have failed – when I have turned aside and tried to find life in these other things that I know will not satisfy.

DAVID DEN HAAN

For me, it raises the question: What appetite am I developing? You know, in my own life, what hunger do I have? Am I hungry for the bread that actually does give life, or am I mistakenly, foolishly looking after other things and assuming that they are what give me life – they make me truly alive. That appetite development, that has become an issue for me as I have looked at this text again.

DAVE BAST

Great; well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. Thanks especially to David Den Haan, our guest co-host this week. I am Dave Bast.

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