

# THE BREAD OF LIFE

## SERIES: I AM: GETTING TO KNOW JESUS



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John 6:1-71

First Message

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*John 6:1-71*

This morning I would like to introduce you to someone special. She came into my life early on in the pandemic. Her name is Audrey III. She is named after the carnivorous plant from Little Shop of Horrors because she has to eat constantly. But feeding her pays off. She has given us dozens of loaves of bread over the past few years.

Audrey III is my sourdough starter.

I started baking sourdough bread during the pandemic along with half of the world's population. It was something I had always been somewhat interested in, and vast amounts of time at home created the perfect opportunity.

There is something about baking fresh bread. The smell. Warm bread straight from the oven. Melted butter on homemade sourdough. One author describes the sourdough craze as coming out of the “existential comforts of coaxing yeast out of air, kneading, proofing, baking, and sharing.”<sup>1</sup> That captures it pretty well for me. Plus, fresh bread tastes delicious.

We are kicking off a series today called “I AM: Getting To Know Jesus”. Last week on Easter Sunday, we talked about the simplicity of seeking Jesus. Christianity today has become associated with so many complicated topics and themes: gender, race, theology, politics, and more. Trying to sort through everything about what it means to be a Christian seems nearly impossible.

But when you sift out all the chaff, it is pretty simple. It all comes down to Jesus—who he is, what he's done, and what it means to follow him today. That doesn't mean those other topics aren't important. They are. I am not suggesting an overly simplistic solution: “let's just be like Jesus, and everything else will work out.” I am suggesting that everything about being a Christian is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ. You can't even begin to talk about anything else until you know who Jesus is.

Let's get to know Jesus. And what better way to get to know him than by listening to what he says about

himself? Seven times in the gospel of John, Jesus claims to be something. He uses familiar objects or ideas to help people understand his identity. These are simple, evocative statements. They are also richly layered with a historical and theological background.

This morning, we'll talk about the first of these statements. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.”

What does Jesus mean by that statement? If you simply hear him say that out of the blue, it sounds good. Most people like bread. You don't need to know much theology or have thought too much to like this phrase. Jesus is the bread of life. Yes, that sounds great.

But this statement is like an ice cream sundae. Imagine an old-time tall glass serving jar. Three scoops of ice cream. Chocolate on the bottom, then cherry vanilla, and topped with cookies and cream. Strawberry sauce is swirled around the scoops. Then hot fudge, and finally topped by whipped cream and a cherry.

You could walk up to that ice cream sundae, pick the cherry off the top and eat it. And it would be delicious. But it's even better if you take the long spoon and dig down to get a bit of the chocolate, some of the cherry vanilla, strawberry syrup, fudge, and whipped cream—all in one bite.

That's what we're going to try to do this morning. We will dig deep into the history of the Jewish people. We will consider some of the foundational stories of the Old Testament. We will talk about the nature of bread and why it's such an important food. We will think about our own lives and our relationship with food, and we will try to understand the strategy that Jesus is using to reveal his identity to the people around him.

As we do that, my hope is we find the good stuff. This statement is powerful on the surface, but it is mind-blowing in its depth.

We have to start by understanding from where this statement came. It is actually an answer to a question. The question is a response to a series of events. And

that series of events is all part of Jesus' strategy to reach people in the first century.

We will begin by understanding the question. Then we will look at Jesus' answer. Finally, we will reflect on what our response to Jesus as the bread of life could be.

## The question

John 6 is all about bread. All. About. Bread. Twenty-one times in this chapter, the word "bread" appears. That is three times more than any other chapter in the New Testament. What you realize reading through the whole chapter is that Jesus has a master plan involving bread that he is putting into place. He uses the familiar image of bread to tap into something incredibly deep.

The chapter begins with a story you may be familiar with. Jesus feeds 5,000 people with five loaves of bread. Read how that story starts.

### John 6:5-6:

**Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.**

Jesus has a plan—he knew what he was doing all along. The first step was this miraculous feeding. That worked to generate interest in who Jesus was.

In the next scene, Jesus leaves the crowd to find some solitude. Later that night, he meets up with his disciples by walking on water to join them in crossing the Sea of Galilee. That whole scene is a bit of an interlude to the theme of bread.

When Jesus and his disciples arrive at the village of Capernaum, the crowd finds him again. The following is the interchange that happens between Jesus and the crowd.

### John 6:25-34:

**When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 26 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that**

**endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." 28 Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." 30 So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? 31 Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34 They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."**

Jesus begins this encounter with a confrontation. They ask him when he got to the village, and he challenges them. He accuses them of seeking him for purely materialistic reasons. Their bellies were full, but they did not realize how empty their hearts were. His encouragement is to take the next step and worry about what he calls "the food that endures to eternal life."

Let me ask you a question: Why are you here? Stop and think about that for a moment. Why have you come to Peninsula Bible Church or tuned into the livestream today? What motivates you?

Several years ago, the Pew Research Center asked this very question of people who attended church at least once per month. Here are the most common answers:

- To become closer to God - 81%
- So children will have moral foundation - 69%
- To make me a better person - 68%
- For comfort in times of trouble/sorrow - 66%
- I find the sermons valuable - 59%
- To be part of a community of faith - 57%
- To continue family's religious traditions - 37%
- I feel a religious obligation to go - 31%
- To meet new people/socialize - 19%
- To please my family, spouse, or partner - 16%<sup>1</sup>

Maybe you resonate with some of these reasons.

I encourage you that whatever the reason you are here, it is a great place to start. God can (and has throughout history) used many different motivations to start people down a journey of faith or to lead them into a deeper place with him. Sometimes it is bread, a cute girl or guy, great music or nice people, or even religious obligation. It is not important what brought you here in the first place. What is important is where you go from here.

For this crowd in the first century, Jesus takes them on a bit of a verbal journey which eventually leads them to his climactic answer. It is a bit hard to follow all the details, so I will simplify it for us. Here's my attempt to capture their conversation.

You usually know how you want your audience to react to the characters when you tell a story. In this case, the author clearly wants us to conclude that the crowd is totally blind. How could they ask for a sign like manna when Jesus just fed 5,000 people with miraculous bread? How could they possibly miss that?

A little more background will help. The crowd referred back to the miracle of the manna when Moses was leading the entire nation of Israel through the desert. They had no food, so Moses prayed to God, and he provided manna for them. Bread literally fell from heaven. This was their foundational miracle. This was how they remembered that God provided for them.

Manna was lodged in their memory, but it also captured their hopes for the future. Over time there arose the idea that there was a treasury of manna stored up in the sky. God kept it locked away. One day, a special servant of God will come to earth—just like Moses did—and unlock the treasury of manna. The blessings of God would flow once again.

That may seem a strange belief, but if we think about it for a moment, it may not be that different from what we assume today. I think many of us have some belief that God stands guard at a kind of storehouse of treasures. It may not be manna, but we believe that God has it in his power to give us the things we want out of life. He has got all these blessings locked away somewhere. He may decide to give us those blessings under the right circumstances.

That explains the request of the crowd. They ask, "Sir, give us this bread always." That kind of bread sounds great. Can you unlock the treasures of manna in heaven? Can we have the blessings of God?

Jesus' strategy has paid off. He has gotten their attention. He has drawn them in. And now they are asking for something. You might even say they are desperate for what they are asking for.

But his answer will throw them off.

## The answer

Here's the climax of the conversation:

**John 6:35:**

**Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."**

The conversation doesn't end there. The chapter continues for almost 40 verses, and Jesus repeats his claim about being the bread of life three more times. We could spend weeks digging deeper into John 6. But with the background we've already uncovered, we're prepared to understand a few important things.

First, there is still the surface level. In this culture, both Jewish and Roman, bread was the staple food. Bread was and had been the basic sustenance to keep living and avoid dying. Every culture has a staple food, usually some kind of grain. Corn, rice, and wheat make up the staple foods for 80% of the world's population.<sup>2</sup>

Staple foods are not just about survival. They take on significant emotional weight. That's why we have the term "comfort foods." There is something safe, assuring, secure, and delicious about the foods that sustain us. Bread means something to me. Some people can taste the region where rice was grown. We become emotionally attached to food.

For Jesus to say that he is the bread of life means far more than him simply claiming to be the primary fuel that powers life's sustaining. Bread is not just about not dying. Bread is about living—a rich and delicious existence. Even more so, the bread of life.

Secondly, Jesus is reaching deep into the history and theology of Israel that we have already talked about. The Jews are expecting a new prophet who can open up the heavenly storehouses of manna and rain down bread upon them. Jesus is more than a new Moses. He is the bread itself. He is the gift and the giver, all wrapped in one.

This whole sequence of events led up to Jesus making this pronouncement. He is connecting dots, drawing threads together from thousands of years of history and tradition. All of it culminates in him. He is the bread. He is the new manna. He is God himself. But he is also the provision that God provides to sustain life—not just earthly life during the challenges of wandering in the desert, but a new kind of life that begins when you receive the gift he offers and continues into the halls of eternity forever.

Finally, there's one more thing that Jesus does. He gives us a new tradition going forward. We will be participating in the tradition in a moment. He reimagines the staple food which sustains life and gives it new meaning as a way of remembering him. These words set up a rich theology of the Lord's Table which has fed the church for over two thousand years.

At this moment, Jesus does what he always does best. He reaches back into the culture and history of bread for the Jewish people. He reaches deep into the human experience of food, life, and daily meals. And he casts forward into the kingdom he is inaugurating. Past, present, and future—all of it point to him.

## Who is Jesus?

He is everything. He is the basic necessity for life, the culmination of all our hopes and fears, the animating force in the universe which keeps electrons spinning around their nuclei and ecosystems teeming with the cycle of life.

I know that this is a radical thing to say. Jesus' statement that he is the bread of life is far more than what people in his day expected. They wanted a new prophet to bring in a new season of national independence. Jesus offered much more.

When Jesus spoke these words in the first century, it turned off a lot of people. We read later in the chapter that they walked away. These claims were too much for them. It was more than they bargained for. They weren't willing to accept a Jesus quite this cosmic.

That is still true today. People can accept a Jesus, who is a great teacher or a religious leader, or even a path to God. But a Jesus who is the foundation of all of reality? The basic sustenance of life? That is too much.

But for me, this is why I am still a Christian. It is not because everything makes sense to me. It is not because

the theological system answers all my questions. It is not because I understand what happens to people who have never heard the gospel on a far-off continent.

It is because this Jesus is unlike anything else in the universe. The more I study him, the more I see. And I still feel I only catch a glimpse of how universal, how elemental, how foundational Jesus is not just for salvation but for all of existence.

We will continue to see some audacious claims by Jesus over the next several weeks. These are not claims that can be ignored. You can disbelieve them. You can walk away as many of his followers did in the first century. But you cannot stay neutral. You cannot ignore the magnitude of what Jesus is saying about himself.

## Our response

If that is true, how should we respond? What do we do when someone tells us they are the bread of life?

In times like this, turning to Jerry Seinfeld can be very helpful. Seinfeld is a comedian who had one of the best TV shows of all time. One of his best bits from a 1989 appearance is about paying for the check after a meal: "We're not hungry now: why are we buying all this food?"<sup>3</sup>

Seinfeld has explained a very important truth about humankind. Food isn't appealing if we aren't hungry.

Haven't you had that experience? If you were to stop eating for one day and I brought a loaf of bread near you, your body would have a dramatic physical response. You would start salivating. You would want this bread more than anything you had wanted in your life. Everything around you would fade away compared to this loaf of bread.

But if I brought you this bread immediately after a large meal, your response would be completely different. You wouldn't care at all. No response. If the meal were unusually large, you might even be disgusted by the sight of more food.

The question for us this morning is: Are you hungry? Because if you're not hungry, then the bread of life will have no appeal to you at all. So I'll ask again, are you hungry?

It is a trick question because I know the answer. You are hungry even if you don't realize it. You just may not know what you're hungry for.



So I will rephrase the question: What are you hungry for?

In our story this morning, Jesus had given the people a sign so that they would eventually pay attention to him. He fed them actual bread. They ate miraculous loaves of barley that were supernaturally multiplied to feed thousands of people. But the whole purpose of that miracle was so that they would see who he was and become convinced of their utter dependence on Jesus.

As you think about your hunger, I invite you to consider whether God has given you a similar sign. It is not likely to be quite as monumental as the feeding of 5,000 people. It could be something small—a sense of direction or a circumstance that came together, or a comment from a friend that made everything click into place.

Or it could be something big—healing from a disease, answered prayer, miraculous provision just when you needed it.

Take some time to think back over the past few weeks. Has Jesus been trying to get your attention? And is it possible that, like the crowds in the first century, you haven't seen the significance of what Jesus is trying to show you? It's okay if nothing comes to mind too. Take this as an encouragement to keep your eyes open for what God might be doing next. What's next for you with Jesus?

The amazing thing about bread is you never stop needing it. Maybe you're just exploring Christianity. Maybe you're a new Christian. Perhaps your faith feels stagnant. Or perhaps you have believed for a long time but sense a new season of growth is coming. No matter where you are, you need bread.

It may look different. Maybe you need some dry toast. Or bread pudding. Or a sandwich. Or a dinner roll with butter. Or perhaps you need fried rice, corn tortillas, wheat pasta, or something else entirely.

I have asked you to look back and consider whether Jesus has been trying to get your attention. Now I want to ask you to look forward. What is next for you? What does it mean to feed on Jesus as the bread of life? Maybe, it is getting involved in the church community or finally establishing a regular rhythm of devotion. Or it is reconciling a strained relationship or starting to give financially even though things seem unsure.

Whatever it is, take the next step. Allow your hunger to drive you to Jesus.

## Conclusion

I began by introducing you to the sourdough starter that has been helping me to create delicious bread for the past few years. Several months back, I gave my brother some of my sourdough starter and the tools for making bread. His sarcastic response was, "Thanks for a birthday gift that I have to feed every day for the rest of my life."

Bread is amazing. There is life in this jar. A living organism feeds off the flour that I offer to it every day. And I nourish this life so that it can, in turn, nourish me.

This morning we have seen Jesus walk through a carefully constructed plan. He fed the crowd with miraculous bread to get their attention. He drew them in with promises to unlock the blessings of God. And then he surprised them by offering not a set of gifts but the giver himself.

I have asked you to consider whether God has worked or is working in your life in this way. How has he tried to get your attention? How has he drawn you in and invited you to go deeper? And what is he inviting you to explore as a next step?

Our next step together will be to celebrate the ceremony that Jesus gave us to remember him and look forward to his return. After all this talk of bread, what better time to observe the Lord's Table together?

Jesus wraps up his discourse about bread:

### John 6:53-54:

**So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.**

These statements must have been very confusing at the time, but they would be explained only days later. Now we understand that Jesus was referring to this meal that he gave us to celebrate. For thousands of years, the church has gathered around the bread and the cup as a way of remembering our dependence—not on physical food but on the spiritual sustenance that Christ provides.

This is the celebration of who Jesus is. He is the primary sustainer of life for the universe. At this moment, you are experiencing your union and dependence on Jesus in a physical way. That should be completely mind-blowing. As you take the bread and dip it into the cup, reflect on what God invites you into as your next step with Jesus.

## Endnotes

1. Jeremy Webber, "Pew: Why Americans Go to Church or Stay Home," Christianity Today, August 1, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/july/church-attendance-top-reasons-go-or-stay-home-pew.html>.
2. "Staple Food," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Staple\\_food](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Staple_food).
3. Jerry Seinfeld, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-hk5turqgA>.