

I Am Bread
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So, we've eaten the feasts, we've unwrapped the gifts, we've recycled the paper and the boxes. The kids have played more with the boxes and the wrapping paper rolls than the toys that were enclosed. Christmas is done.

Anyone feel let down? It's like Christmas promised so many things – family, feasting and laughter, and then January credit card bills arrive, and reality asserts itself. It's like a movie preview that had all of the funniest bits in it, and then the whole movie was just two hours of life that you can never get back.

When we are confronted with the gap between our reality and our dreams, we get angry, and feel cheated.

This isn't new to us. Let's talk about the Passover.

The Passover was a feast that remembered the night that the angel of the Lord killed the firstborn of every Egyptian household, but spared the firstborn in every Hebrew slave hut. After this devastating judgement on Egypt, Pharaoh sends the Hebrews away across the Red Sea, with water towering on either side. Then, out in the middle of nowhere, just at the moment that the people were grumbling and complaining about the lack of food in the wilderness, God sends them a feast of manna and quail, and continues to provide food for them as they wander for forty years, being shaped into the nation that would become Israel.

The Passover was the defining moment for Israel, when they were rescued by YHWH, and began to go towards their promised inheritance. Passover represented everything that Israel hoped for again in their Messiah. Their expectations were for a new Moses to lead them in defeat of their enemies.

In the beginning of John chapter 6, we see Jesus, out in the middle of nowhere, feeding a great crowd of people, during the feast of Passover. This has all kinds of images, connections, and questions for the people who eat this feast.

In nearly every detail, John is pulling our eyes to see Moses in the story of Jesus. Both stories involve large crowds. Both stories happen in the wilderness. Both stories involve miraculous feasting on meat and bread. Then there is the escape from a hostile crowd across the water. How John tells this story begs us to compare Jesus and Moses. We pick up the confrontation in verse 25.

25 When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

26 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. 27 Do not work

for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

28 Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

29 Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

30 So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? 31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

32 Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

34 “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

35 Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 36 But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. 37 All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. 38 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. 40 For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

41 At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42 They 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’?”

Now we have another similarity to the Exodus story. People grumbling. And at the heart of the argument is Jesus’s response to the question, “Rabbi, what works must we do to do the will of God?”

Jesus, ever so helpfully, tells them that he is a loaf of bread. And when people give him confused looks, he says that they have to eat him. And drink him.

43 “Stop grumbling among yourselves,” Jesus answered. 44 “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. 46 No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. 47 Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. 50 But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

52 Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

53 Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. 55 For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. 56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains

in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” 59 He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

I don't think that the audience is out of line to be confused here. I certainly was. But then I got to thinking. I remember reading Deuteronomy 8:3, another reference to manna. It says this: “[God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors 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.”

Jesus also uses some language that is hard to pick up in translations. He says, “I AM the bread of life.” Where have we heard that before?

Exodus 3:14, and Moses at the burning bush. “I AM who I AM. Tell them that I AM has sent you.”

Seven times in the book of John, Jesus makes an I AM statement, claiming to be a loaf of bread, a gate, a light, the way, the truth and the life, the resurrection, a good shepherd, and a plant.

This helps us to interpret this particular statement. Obviously, Jesus is not saying that he is a physical loaf. There are symbols, metaphors at play here. Specifically, John is making us look at the contrast between manna and bread, between Moses and Jesus, and ultimately between life and death. To these people, bread meant that you lived another day. It was provision, it was strength, it was evidence of God's hand in their lives, it was an offering of hospitality, and a gift. Its absence meant vulnerability, starvation and death. Not having bread symbolized poverty and exile.

Jesus is being blunt. He is saying, very clearly, that he is God. He is the God of the Old Testament, the provider of heavenly bread. Even more basically, he is the bread itself. He is the reason underlying the universe, the source and author of life itself. What a crazy claim! Without Jesus there is no life. Not just for humanity, but for everything that is.

Where Moses brought the Israelites through the water on dry ground, Jesus doesn't need the ground. Where Moses offers bread from the hand of God, Jesus offers himself, the very flesh of God. Where those who followed Moses die, those who follow Jesus will rise from the dead. For the first, and maybe only time in history, the advertisement, the preview, is only a shadow of the greatness of the real deal.

I AM the reality. I am the bread of life.

This is, to say the least, offensive. Eat flesh and drink blood? Jesus, don't be crass! Moses clearly says that drinking blood gets you stoned. And cannibalism?

Jesus simply says, I am not Moses. In fact, Moses, the greatest human being in the Jewish story, manna, the very evidence that God cares about Israel in a special way, the forming of Israel as God's special, chosen people, all of these are far short of reality. They were the signs pointing forward to something more. Something better. Something more full.

The story continues.

60 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! 63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. 64 Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. 65 He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them."

66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

67 "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

The people were having a hard time accepting that Jesus, someone they thought they knew, was so much better than Moses. And they had only seen Jesus feed them. How much more trouble would they have if they saw Jesus the Christ, seated in glory at the right hand of God almighty, the name at which every knee on heaven and earth and under the earth will bow in reverence, worship, humility? If they realized who Jesus is, they would be unable to comprehend it.

So much easier to accept the familiar, to equate our reality with our potential. Moses is a reasonable size. He can be comprehended. And so, many of the people with Jesus left him, in favour of Moses, the law, and death.

And now I picture Jesus looking at me. Asking, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Where else do we look for life, identity, and satisfaction?

Money. Here's something you might not have known: less than 10% of the money in Canada is printed in hard currency! It isn't even a physical thing any more — it is a series of electronic signals flashing between computers from banks to stores to governments. And we will do almost anything to get more of it!

Nations. We draw maps and build walls, and tell people that they cannot cross our line. It makes us feel secure. Yet that is all it is. The land knows no division. They are merely smudge-able marks on a map.

Ethnicity. How sobering it is to realize that what tripped up Israel so long ago, namely believing that they were favoured by God above all others, still gets in our way today. We see a difference between us and them, you and me, yours and mine. It helps us justify lack of equity and hoarding good things for us and ours. God merely sees created and creator.

Gender. We want to divide humanity according to gender, defining roles, pay rates, and appearances according to male and female. God sees his precious children, each uniquely made and gifted.

But none of these things deliver. We still feel lost, we still need identity, and we still need life.

Jesus says, "Do not work for that which does not satisfy."

Only do the work that is inspired by belief in Jesus.

This is where I will end for today. Ephesians 3:20-21 says this. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us, to him be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."

How about that! I can imagine a lot of money. But God will accomplish more — a kingdom where every need is met for all of creation, rendering money obsolete. Use our money to meet needs of others.

I can imagine a lot of power and authority. But God will accomplish more — a kingdom in which authority is all his, and creation operates according to his purpose and design, and no one elevates themselves above another. Work for equality and justice, loving all of creation, of which we are stewards!

I can imagine a long life. But God will accomplish more — a fullness, a completeness of life, such that death in any form is incompatible. Work not to avoid death and discomfort, but to become that which will live, and bring others into life!

The reality is so much greater than our ideas, we cannot even imagine how much more it will be. It is the difference between an ancient tribesman wandering a desert with a ragtag group of escaped slaves and the ascendant Lord of all creation and glory!

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

Only one thing is needed. Believe in the one who was sent to give life to the whole universe.

Eat the bread.