

BREAD OF LIFE

Introduction

The story begins with a miracle; it develops into a conversation about faith and eternal life. After the feeding of the five thousand Jesus challenged the crowds that followed him. They came after him, he said, not because they understood the point of the miracle, but only because their material needs were met. This led him to speak about spiritual things.

Jesus speaks about our priorities

‘Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life’. Jesus was challenging their priorities, as he challenges ours.

People are still attracted to Christianity, as the Galileans were to Jesus, because of the benefits it brings. Missionaries used to talk about ‘rice Christians’, people who professed faith in Christ only because they benefited by doing so. Today many people are attracted because of stories about physical healings. When the church helps the poor others join in – but are not themselves Christian.

It is true and wonderful that the gospel brings many benefits to individuals and society. God is love, and that love in the lives of his people has always brought huge benefits. God is the hearer of prayer, and many a person has been rescued from great danger when they called on him.

But, as Jesus points out, these things are not the main things. His saying quoted in our text shows that all these things are temporary – and we need what will last for eternity.

This is a theme in Jesus’ teaching. ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you’ (Matthew 6:33). He tells the story of a successful farmer who planned to increase his storage capacity; God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be?’ (Luke 12:20).

He speaks here about eternal life. This has a number of elements.

It means overcoming death. It is called ‘the last enemy’ (1 Corinthians 15: 26). It has been overcome by Christ, and he says in connection with his resurrection, ‘Because I live, you shall live also’ (John 14:19).

It means overcoming the condition of sin in which humanity lies – which produces death; for as long as we are guilty before God the penalty of death is in force. Jesus, our sin-bearer, rose from the dead showing that forgiveness can now be obtained.

It means overcoming our spiritual death. Eternal life is the very Spirit of God at work – a new energy and a new disposition, love that motivates and self-control that guides.

What is our priority? Treasure on earth or treasure in heaven? ‘Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves bring in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal’ (Matthew 6:19-20).

Jesus speaks about himself

Having told the people who followed him that their priority should not be material things (‘you ate the loaves and were filled’), he now tells what the ‘true bread that gives life to the world’ really is. It is himself (verse 41).

If we want eternal life we must obtain it from him, and only from him. If we want rid of sin's penalty; if we want spiritual life; if we want to rise from the dead at the last day into peace with God – then Jesus is the Person to whom we must go.

Many people refuse to go to Christ for life (John 5:40; 6:36). They called him 'the son of Joseph', as if to say he could not have come down from the Father in heaven. Today many people refuse to come to Christ saying there are many ways to God.

That does not frustrate God's saving purpose. The Father has sent him, and he will succeed. 'This is the will of him who sent me, that is should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day' (verse 39).

Since unbelief controls the human heart it takes a divine miracle to make a person willing to receive Jesus. That is what God does. 'It is written in the prophets, "And they will all be taught by God"' (verse 45). Faith is the result, and in every century people have had their eyes opened, and their heart changed, and have received Christ Jesus sent by the Father to give eternal life to dead sinners.

Obviously that is far more important than bread, or the manna that his contemporaries celebrated as a remarkable work of God on their behalf. It is far more important to healing, gifts of the Spirit, or any other miracle God may do for us. Indeed, Jesus spoke of people who would say on the judgement day, 'Lord. Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name, and done many wonders in your name?' Jesus went on to say, 'And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me you who practice lawlessness"' (Matthew 7:21-22).

Jesus gave his life so we may live

His saying puzzled his hearers. It still puzzles many, not least in connection with the Lord's Supper – what does he mean by, 'my body given for you'? They said, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'

They had been thinking about the miracle of the loaves, so it was natural to speak in terms of food. Jesus had been speaking about himself as the Giver of life, so it was natural to speak of himself as the 'bread of life'. He continued that illustration by referring to obtaining eternal life as 'eating his flesh and drinking his blood' (verse 53).

That last comment remains puzzling until we realise what Jesus had in mind – that he would literally give his life so that others might live. His body would be broken and his blood shed so sinners could have eternal life. It was a reference to Jesus bearing our sins and suffering our death, so we might have our accusations removed and go free.

We benefit from his sacrificial death when we receive him as our own. The gospel is God offering Christ Jesus to us. When we accept him his death becomes ours, just as our sins were credited to him. One with him we now find that his resurrection shows our penalty gone and a new life beckoning.

So make him your own!

His new life he shares with all his people. It is eternal life. There is no condemnation for him or for any whose sins he took away. Our spiritual death can be overcome by the resuscitating work of the Holy Spirit and his presence on our soul. And the end will be the resurrection of our body and eternal glory with Christ.