

26. THE ETERNAL BREAD FROM HEAVEN (6:28-40)

Whether you want to admit it or not, food is something that you think about more frequently than you realise. Why is that? Well simply because it is essential to life. We need food to survive. We need it to strengthen our bodies. The same is true spiritually – we need spiritual food to grow spiritually, and if you are not getting good food, the right food, it is going to have a negative effect on your soul. But unfortunately, most people are more worried about their stomachs than their souls as we saw last time in verses 21 to 27. In the verses that follow, we see that nothing has changed with the Jews from last time. And so Jesus continues to probe deep into their hearts and reveals yet again the goal of His signs and wonders and the true nature of salvation.

In verse 35, we come to the first “*I Am*” statement in the gospel, “*I am the bread of life*”. Often the “*I Am*” statements are dealt with in isolation from the rest of the chapter or section that they are in, with only a few references here and there other verses surrounding it. However, when you study this text, it becomes clear that although this statement is the main point of this section, and indeed the entire chapter, it cannot be divorced from everything else. It is the pivot of everything that happens from verse 1 to the conclusion in verse 71, as it provides the full meaning of Jesus’ description of Himself as the bread of life.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. If a non-believer had to ask you, “How were you saved?”, how would you answer them?
2. Do you know ECC’s position on salvation and justification? Spend some time reading and studying it, making sure that you understand what it means and implies.



AN IMPORTANT CONNECTION

There is an important and instructive connection between John 5 and John 6. Both chapters begin with a miracle that forms the backdrop to the reactions and teachings that follow in each chapter.

John 5 opens with Jesus healing a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. What is striking about this healing is that Jesus seeks and chooses one man out many in the crowd to heal him. A man who makes excuses as to why he is not healed and who does not seem to really be searching for healing, and definitely not searching for a Saviour. No reason is given as to why Jesus chooses this man other than it being God’s choice. As we read in verse 21, “*For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will*”. This same line of thought continues through to the end of verse 26, and indeed is implied in chapter 6. However, through his healing, the man accurately portrays a dead soul made alive by Christ. Thus, Christ presents Himself as the source and giver of life, imparting it to whomever He pleases.

In John 6 Christ is seen as the object of man's desire, as this time, instead of seeking out the people, they seek Him (see vv2, 24-25). However, it is the motive of their search that is called into question. No doubt that whenever God acts, it attracts people's attention – even non-believers. For example, when a sinner becomes a believer or He provides for a believer materially, others notice. This stirs people to seek Him. But what they seek Him for is the question – some may seek Him because He is genuinely drawing them to Himself, while others seek Him only to meet their physical needs. It is this contrast that highlights the relationship between chapters 5 and 6 in that the order of the chapters and events set forth the doctrinal order of salvation, and present its two sides: first the Divine side as God seeks His own, followed by the human side as people seek Him, be it for true or false motives, however, those who truly seek Him do so only because God draws those whom He has chosen and given to the Son..

And so as chapter 6 unfolds, Jesus probes deeper and deeper into the souls of the people to test whether their faith is genuine or not. This need is highlighted with a single word that appears five times in this passage, and is the key word for the entire Gospel of John. The word, "*believe*" (vv 29, 30, 35, 36, and 40). Specifically in this section, we see Jesus is not the bread of life just because He provides for our physical needs, but more importantly, because He provides for our spiritual needs in that He is the One who enables you to believe, live, and remain in Christ for eternity.

THE WORK OF GOD THAT ENABLES YOU TO COME TO CHRIST (VV28-29)

In verse 28, the people ask Jesus the question, "*What must we do, to be doing the works of God?*". Jesus has just stated in verse 27 that we ought to labour for the food that endures to eternal life, and so their question seems to be quite logical – if we are to labour, then how are we to labour? What works should we do so that we can get that food?

Now remember who is asking the question here. These are Jews, and for them it is all about works. They had to make daily sacrifices and obey over six hundred commands of God as recorded in the Torah. Not to forget the many additional laws that the religious leaders placed on them. So this question is coming from a place of wanting to know what specific laws or rituals one needs to obey to gain this food.

But note how Jesus responds in verse 28. They ask what "*works*", plural, they need to do, but Jesus replies by saying that there is only one work that needs to be done, and that work is done by God – He answers, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent*". What Jesus is saying is that your belief, your faith in Him is not a work that you do, but is a work of God. It means too that it is not based on your ability to choose God, but rather that the choice too is a work of God. This fact is confirmed in many other places in Scripture, such as Romans 9:16 and Ezekiel 36:26-27.

But what about the passages that tell us that WE must believe? That WE must have faith? Surely this implies that there is some work that we must do. That faith itself is a work we have to do. Well yes and no, because over and over we find in Scripture that faith is a gift from God (e.g. Eph. 2:8-9). Faith is not something that we can develop or choose to do of our own free will – it is from God. The reality is, without the gift of faith, we cannot choose God. Without Christ, the Bread of Life, man is in bondage to

sin, is corrupt and has no desire to chose God (cf. Rom. 3:11). Therefore, not only did we need God to send Jesus to die on the cross for us, but we also need Him to make us born again (cf. John 3).

And as Ephesians 2:1 tells us, without Christ, man is dead in trespasses and sin. And what choice does a dead man have? None. He cannot choose to do anything, and therefore does not even have the ability to chose God. But when you are born of the Spirit, you receive the gift of faith that only then enables you to choose Him.

What then about repentance? Is that not a work one has to do? Well again, yes and no. It is a work in that you do have to repent, however, it too is a gift from God (cf. Acts 11:18). The only way you can turn one hundred and eighty degrees away from sin and towards Christ, is because it has been granted by God for you to do so. The reality is, you are fully dependent on the sovereign Lord for your salvation. The only thing that you contribute to your salvation is the sin that made the work of God necessary in the first place. Eternal life is not something earned nor chosen, it is a gift from God (see also John 6:27).

Based on this truth, anyone who seeks for Jesus, comes to Him and believes in Him, do so only because of the work of God enables you to do so. In that sense then, Jesus is the Bread of Life in that He is the source of the spiritual life that causes you to seek Him. He is the one who causes you to be born again.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How does the fact that both repentance and faith are gifts of God challenge what you have always believed about the two? What comfort or concerns does it raise for you personally?

The Calvin-Arminius Debate



One of the great debates in church history has to do with this very teaching – between God’s sovereignty in salvation and man choosing God of his own free will. This debate is known as the Calvin-Arminius debate (Arminian after the theologian Jacob Arminius).

John Calvin taught that election to salvation “depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16). But Jacob Arminius taught contrary to this teaching and held that salvation is dependent on the completely free will of man. However, as we see in John 6:29 Jesus tells us that saving faith is a work not of man, but of God. This verse, among others, makes clear that the Calvinist understanding is the correct understanding.



THE PROVISION OF GOD THAT ENABLES YOU TO LIVE IN CHRIST TODAY (VV30-35)

Less than twenty-four hours earlier, these people witnessed Jesus feeding the five thousand. They all saw, touched, and even tasted the sign and the work that Jesus did, yet now they ask for further proof that He is sent by God (v30). This is a clear demonstration of their unbelief.

And then in verse 31, they say, “*Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat”*”. This is despite the fact that just the day before after the feeding, the people said of Jesus, “*This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!*” (v14) - a reference to

the promise of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 of God raising a prophet like him to lead the people, referred to as the Messiah. This means that the day before they believed Jesus to be the Messiah, but because they did not receive any bread from Jesus for breakfast, they doubt Him and demand more proof. In their minds, if Jesus is anything like Moses then He must provide them with bread everyday. Unfortunately, many in the church are just like these Jews and want Jesus to daily provide for them like some kind of vending machine, yet they miss the fact that He is the provider of daily spiritual bread.



Note: God is our provider of all that we need for physical life, but our attitude should never be just to desire the physical, but rather the spiritual. For when we seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, all these things will be supplied as well (Mat. 6:25ff).



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. The attitude of always seeking for proof of God, or proof that He loves us is nothing new and will probably always exist until Christ returns. Think of a time when you “challenged” God to prove either of the above to you. What happened?
2. Consider Jesus’ rebuke of the Jews for continuing to look for signs (see also Mat. 12:38-42). Based on this, what ought to be your attitude when you are tempted to ask God to prove Himself?

Jesus’ response in verses 32 and 33 confronts their worldview as He corrects the three misconceptions they have about Moses and the manna.

- It was not Moses who provided the bread, but God. However, there is a double-meaning here in that Jesus is referring to God providing the manna in the wilderness, but also that Jesus too has come from heaven (cp. John 1:1-3, 14).
- Not only is God the one who provides the bread, but that God Himself is in their midst in the person of Christ. He is the one who has come down from heaven to give life to the world. While in the wilderness the Israelites could not see God physically, they only saw the cloud, smoke, fire, lightning, light, and even darkness, that concealed Him. But these people have God in the flesh in front of them.
- He is the Bread of Life and the Living Water. Not just ordinary bread or water that temporarily satisfies, but bread and water that is life-giving. He is the source of what they truly need, He is the spiritual bread and water necessary for eternal life. He is the one who brings true and lasting satisfaction, a satisfaction that nothing in this world can provide. A satisfaction that gives you peace and contentment despite things not being as they you would like them to be.

And like bread and water that you need daily to stay alive physically, you need spiritual bread and living water to stay alive spiritually.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. In the sermon, two ways in which Jesus as the Bread of Life provides that enables you to live for Christ today – peace despite life being difficult and overcoming sin. What other ways can you think of where Jesus as the Bread of Life provides for your every day Christian walk?
2. Martin Luther said that we are “simultaneously sinners and saints” – in other words we continue to sin, while at the same time, Jesus continues to forgive us. How does this truth help you in your daily battle with sin?

But note the guarantee in Jesus’ words in verse 35– “**Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst**”. This means that anyone who seeks Jesus with the right motives and truly believes in Him, will always be fed and watered.

Are you feeling spiritually hungry and dry, then feed on Jesus and drink the Living Water He provides, and you will find satisfaction for your soul. Put your full trust in Him, and He will satisfy your soul too.

“We will be weak, but coming to Jesus will make us strong. In turmoil, we will find peace. In grief, we will gain comfort. In confusion, we will see truth. Coming to Jesus is the answer to all our spiritual needs, and Jesus promises to always provide”.¹⁰³



THE WILL OF GOD THAT ENABLES YOU TO REMAIN IN CHRIST (VV36-40)

Jesus reveals a startling truth in verse 36 that seems to be a bit of a break in the flow, but in fact, emphasises everything else through its negative contrast – Jesus says, “*But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe*” – proving that seeing is not always believing. Jesus’ point is that although faith and repentance are both gifts from God, the fault of not believing still resides with man. This is one of the tensions we find in Scripture that many find hard to reconcile. Because if God is responsible for our coming to salvation, then how can man be held responsible for not believing in Him? Why does God not save everyone? Why does He not give the gifts of faith and repentance to all? How do we reconcile this?



Here are two ways to things to think about that may help to settle the issue.

1. Imagine that you have a billion rand and you want to give it away. Who are you going to give it to, and how are you going to select the recipients? Well you may decide to draw up some criteria of who you think deserves it. Perhaps you give it to those who have achieved something in life or are entrepreneurs. Or maybe you decide to give it to people who have been deprived of the luxuries of life and to give it to the poor and needy. But whatever criteria you choose, you are soon going to realise that there are more people than there is money, and so you need to reduce the list of possible recipients and draw up more criteria. But again, you will realise that there are still too many people and not enough money. So you end up having to simply choose people from the list to give money to, and in doing so, many who meet the criteria will not receive a cent. Now is

¹⁰³ Phillips, Richard D. *Reformed Expository Commentary. John Volume 1: John 1-10*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, p392.

that fair or unfair? To be honest, you cannot call it either because at the end of the day, the choice of who you give money to is up to you, and not everyone can receive some – even the criteria you drew up are based on your choice of what you deemed made a possible recipient worthy. So too with God. Salvation is His plan and His decision, so He gets to choose who receives it. This means that some will be saved and some will not.

2. Which glorifies God more, His acts of love and mercy, or His acts of holiness and justice? If you say love and mercy then you minimise the fact that God is holy and just. Of all His attributes, His holiness is the one most mentioned in the Bible. But if you say He is glorified most by His acts of holiness and justice, then minimise His love and mercy and in effect are removing the need for the cross, making it a redundant act. Because if He acts only in holiness and justice, no one will make it to Heaven. For God to receive the glory that He is due, He has to be glorified in all His ways and attributes. This means that He has to be glorified for His love and mercy, and for His holiness and justice. When it comes to God's glory, you cannot have one without the other. Therefore, there has to be both saved and unsaved people for Him to be fully glorified – through the saved He is glorified for His love and mercy when they are glorified with Christ, and through the unsaved He is glorified for His holiness and justice when they are judged.

Since no-one meets God's criteria – all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, no one seeks after Him, and all are born enemies of God – it all comes down to His choice as to who He saves. Therefore, there will remain those who deny Him and refuse to believe, despite the evidence that is right in front of them, as Jesus tells us in verse 36.

In verse 37 Jesus begins with the words, "*All that the Father gives me*". This means that everyone who receives the gift of salvation is a gift from the Father to the Son. This is deeply humbling when we consider our state before God. As unsaved sinners we were dirty, wretched, poor, enemies of God. Seeking our own desires and not those of God. Yet despite that, God chose us and gave us as a gift to the Son that we might be saved.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How does the fact that you are a gift to the Son from the Father make you feel? What response does it prompt in you towards both the Father and the Son?



However, note the assurance in verse 37, "*All that the Father gives me will come to me*". There is no doubt here – all that the Father has chosen and given to His Son will come to the Son, they will be saved. There are no maybes about it. Nor will Jesus cast away or reject any whom the Father has chosen and given to Him, as Jesus goes on to say in the second half of the verse.

If you are saved, if you are born again, it means that you were chosen by the Father and given to the Son. And any who have been chosen but are not yet saved, this verse assures us that they will not leave this earth until they are saved.

The reason why we can be certain of this is stated in verse 38, *“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me”*. As we have already seen on our journey through the gospel of John, Jesus is all about doing the will of the Father who sent Him. By stating this fact, Jesus is telling the Jews yet again that when they oppose Him, they are also opposing the Father. A truth He declared previously in chapter 5.

But what is the will of the Father? We are told in verses 39 and 40, *“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”*. This is Jesus’ promise to all who are saved, you will not be lost because He will guard you to the end. This means that if you are His today, you will be His forever. This means that you cannot lose the gifts of repentance and faith that He has given you. This means that you will always be a child of God.

Now this does not mean that you will not slip along the way, but it does mean that you will never completely fall away. As the writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 3:14, holding your confidence in Christ to the very end is confirmation that you are saved. But those who fall away and die fallen, Hebrews tells us, were never His in the first place. Why not? Because Jesus has promised that He will do the will of God and guard you to the very end so that you remain in Him.

Jesus is the Bread of Life, and as such, He is all you need. Do not be like the Jews and others in the world who chase after the miracles and the things that will fade away. Rather seek Jesus and feed on Him, the Bread of Life who does not pass away. God has done the work of salvation that enabled you to come to Christ in the first place. It is Christ as the Bread of Life who provides all you need for your walk with Christ today as you face the challenges of this world. And it is Jesus, the Bread of Life who will sustain you, who is enabling you to remain in Him until the day of His glorious appearing.

Come to Jesus today, and feed on the Bread of Life.

Roman Catholic Position on Justification

On 13 January, 1547, the Council of Trent, held in the Italian city of Trent, issued a decree on justification in response to the challenges to their theology by Martin Luther twenty years earlier. He protested that the Roman Catholic church was corrupt and taught things that can not be found in scripture (e.g. the selling of indulgences to release the souls of loved ones from purgatory).



Pope Paul III saw the Reformers’ ideas as heresy and wanted only to define Roman Catholic doctrine and condemn the heretics. The doctrine of Justification was the toughest theological question they had to deal with – Luther argued that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The council decided that grace is necessary at each step of justification, however, man’s free will must cooperate. Unlike the Reformers who taught that justification is a one-time act of God declaring a person righteous (forgiven) as a result of the cross, the Roman Catholics see it as God’s ongoing process of making a person new and good. For them, faith is not the only condition of salvation although it is its beginning. According to the Council of Trent, in order for the grace of justification to grow, we must obey God’s commands. The council also decided that justification can be lost by certain sins and that no man can be sure that he will be finally saved. This is still the official position of the Roman Catholic church.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How does the Roman Catholic position summarised above on justification contradict the teaching of John 6?
2. If a Roman Catholic friend had to say to you that James 2:14-26 proves that we must add our works to faith in order to be saved. How would you answer him? Apart from John 6:28-40, what Scriptures would you use?