

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The seven "I Am's" - "I am the Bread of Life"

Have you ever stepped into your local supermarket, or baker's shop, to be greeted by the smell of fresh-baked bread? The vision of warm, crusty bread with plenty of butter is irresistible, especially if you are feeling rather peckish! Bread is one of our oldest and most valuable foods. Where would we be without it?

Did you know that the Lord Jesus, in John 6:35, said, "I am the bread of life"? Over the next seven weeks, we plan to look at the seven occasions in John's gospel where the Lord Jesus refers to Himself as, "I am". The statement "I am the bread of life" comes first in these seven sayings. In this way, the Lord Jesus underlines the fact that He had come to meet our deepest needs.

However, before we embark on these seven occasions, we need to understand the significance of this expression "I am", when used by the Lord Jesus. It is no less than an assertion of His deity. It expresses His eternal self-existence. Of course, in a certain way we too can use the words "I am", about ourselves. Our existence is real; we have being because we were created and were born. But the contrast between our kind of usage of these words and His use of them needs to be pointed out. Our being had a beginning, a point in time, or date in history. He never had a beginning. He exists eternally, and because of this is always the "I am".

Indeed there are many scriptures that make this quite clear. In John 8:58, the Lord Jesus says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am". Notice He does not say, "Before Abraham was, I was". This would have expressed only part of the truth. It would have meant that He existed before Abraham was born. Abraham is contrasted with One who is eternal. The One who only received life and later died, is contrasted with the Source and Giver of all life. There is continuity and unchangeableness in this word "I am". The Jews certainly understood what the Lord Jesus meant by these words, because immediately they took up stones to kill Him. They realised that He was claiming to be a divine person, the Jehovah of the Old Testament.

These same words reflect the great revelation of this divine name to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:13 and 14. "And Moses said unto God, 'Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, "The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you"; and they shall say to me, "What is His name?" what shall I say unto them?' And God said unto Moses, 'I AM THAT I AM': and He said, 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you'". This name, for this is what it really is, involves the absolute existence and the eternal consistency of the One it describes. God was about to deliver His people from the bondage of Egypt as a demonstration of His power and His wisdom, shattering and exposing all their enemies in so doing. These great features however are all seen in the person of the Lord Jesus.

Isaiah the prophet uses the same words in Isaiah 41:4, "I the LORD, the first, and with the last; I AM HE". And again in 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I AM God, and there is none else". The continuous nature of the present tense, I am, in all these expressions must be understood. He continually is. From eternity to eternity He is God. He was, He ever will be and He is.

As well as these Old Testament verses, there are a number of New Testament occasions where this "timeless present" construction is used in statements about the Lord Jesus. In Romans 9:5 we read, "Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen". Christ came, on the human side, from Israel: He was born into holy manhood. Yet always He is and abides nothing less than the supreme God. Even when we look at that little child, held in His mother's arms, wrapped in swaddling clothes, born there in a stable at Bethlehem, He was even then, as to His person, God over all. This is the wonder of the incarnation. When the apostle Paul considered this amazing fact, it called forth from him a burst of praise and adoration, and so it should from each one of us.

Again in John 1:18 we read, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him". The construction of this verse is the same as in the last verses quoted. Although the Lord Jesus was a man in this world, yet He abides in the bosom of the Father in an eternal, timeless way, without beginning and without end. The unique Son of the Father, ever in that place of closest intimacy, of complete union and communion with the Father, is fully able to reveal Him to men. No man has ever seen God, but the Lord Jesus said,

"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). In His person as a man in this world was seen the full revelation of God.

Bearing all this in mind, let's turn now to our text, "I am the bread of life". Here bread is spoken of as the basic requirement of life. The words show us that the Lord Jesus has become a man in order that men might have life. That life is closely dependent on Himself. Our life as believers is inseparable from Him; we received the gift of life in receiving Him, and that life is sustained by feeding on Him. John 6 opens with the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. This is one of the "signs" of this Gospel. They are all pointers to the glory of His person. Take for instance the first one in John 2:11, "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth His glory". Also in 20:30-31, "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God". The discourse on the bread of life arises out of this feeding of the five thousand.

The hungry multitude had gladly partaken of the food that He had provided, and they wanted more, but He underlines their greater need, which they were not aware of, that is the need of life from Himself. The Lord uses the simple figures of "bread" and "eating", to highlight the deeper needs of men, and to present Himself as the One who can meet these needs.

In referring to "the true bread from heaven", He points to Himself as the great Essential for life. He is the genuine Supplier of life of the highest kind, eternal life, which endures and satisfies and is possessed by those who receive Him. "The true bread from heaven" is contrasted with the manna in the wilderness which the Jews' forefathers ate, and were now all dead. The crowd, only recently so well fed by the Lord, raises this matter of the bread which Moses provided, the manna, which continued all through the 38 years in the wilderness. The people seem to think that this was a greater sign than that just given by the Lord Jesus. It seems as though a full stomach was their main aim in life! The Lord Jesus, however, points out that it was not Moses who gave them that bread. That bread was but a figure of what was incomparably greater, that of Himself, the gift of His Father, come down into this world to do His will, which involved His going into death in order that life might be available to the world. Later verses in this chapter will make it clear that His death as well as His incarnation was vital, if so great a gift was to be available. If a man receives the "bread of life" today, he will live forever, while those who ate the manna in the wilderness were all now dead.

Unlike the manna, He was "the living bread". Bread that gave life in Himself as well as feeding that life where by faith, He was received. The manna provided for their physical needs; all they had to do was go out and collect it, and eat it. This did not require any work of faith. Indeed many eventually died in the wilderness through unbelief. How different then the promise of the Lord Jesus, "If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever" (John 6:58). He warns them about labouring "for the meat that perisheth" (John 6:27). He advises them to set their sights in an entirely different direction, to get an appetite for heavenly food, without which no earthly provision can ever satisfy their, or our, souls' desire. If our appetites and energies are misdirected, then it is not surprising if our hearts are never satisfied. Only feeding on the Lord Jesus can do that.

Notice also in verse 35 how the Lord Jesus speaks of believing on Him and coming to Him. "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst". We must believe on Him whom the Father has sent. This is more than just having respect for Him, but involves trusting Him for everything and relying on Him to supply our every need. If we come to Him in this way, we shall never be turned away, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

In receiving the Lord Jesus, we take in and benefit from all that He brings to us. We know that, naturally speaking what we eat eventually becomes part of us. The old saying, "What you eat is what you are", is not only true physically but spiritually as well! If we have a poor diet, it very soon affects our bodies and our health. So the believer has to eat proper spiritual food. If he does not, he will not grow and get on in his spiritual life. The life that we have received from the Son of God can only be sustained and enjoyed by our feeding on Him as the bread of Life. In verse 33 He is also called, "The bread of God". We do not suggest that God's life needs to be sustained, but the heart of God is delighted with, and satisfied by, the person of His beloved Son. So He surely can satisfy our little lives and hearts!

In verse 51 He says, "And the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world". The Jews could not understand this because they took His words literally and could not see the spiritual import of what He was saying. He says of them in verse 63, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life". So He had to say in verses 53 and 54, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day". It is only as we take in, by faith the meaning of His coming from God as a man, and His going into death on our account, that we can have eternal life.

The tense of the verb in verse 53 is important. It should read, "Except ye shall have eaten ..." This refers to something that we have done in the past, and only on this basis can we have life. But then verse 54 speaks of a continual eating

and drinking. Life continues by our feeding on Him, and all the implications of His death. These words should make a deep and profound impression on us. Our life is not dependent on what we understand in the scriptures, but on the fact that we believe what the Bible says. The scriptures however, insist on our being real in our faith and that the truth of God should have a real and practical effect on our lives. Surely if we daily feed on the perfection of the life of Jesus, and then think about the reason why He had to die, our hearts will be humbled. At the same time, we will ever be thankful for the love of God that planned it all out, and to the Son of God who, in expression of that love, died for us on the cross of Calvary.

There is one more remarkable truth in this chapter. It is in verse 57. "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me". The Lord Jesus ever lived here on account of the Father. The closeness of His life with the Father's, His drawing always from His Father in the most intimate way, is the pattern for our life, as believers, with our Lord. It may seem incredible to our minds that any of us could live so in communion with God as He lived. But that is the possibility which feeding on Him produces. Few may ever have attained unto it, but that is no reason to doubt the meaning of these words. In the person of the Son of God, there is that which has the potential of reproducing the life of Christ in the believer. This is the most fruitful thing that can ever be in our lives. There is nothing more pleasing to God than that the features of His beloved Son, seen in manhood in this world, are now produced in the power of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of the believer.

Sadly the majority of the crowd were unreceptive of His words. Material things of this life so filled their minds that "bread from heaven" and "eternal life" meant little to them. How easy it is to condemn them and in so doing to forget how much of our own lives are taken up with material things. Material things are necessary so that we may provide all things honestly, but if they become the objective in our lives, then we will lose sight of the true value of spiritual things, and have no appetite for the bread of life. It seems so strange that men refused the offer of eternal life and soul satisfaction, and would rather go on with lives of sin, ending in death and never finding true satisfaction of heart. We need to take heed to this warning.

These words caused even many of His disciples to turn back, and walk no more with Him. It is an amazing thing that the Lord Jesus never tempered His words to suit His hearers. He knew the effect that His words would have, but He still said them. What was the reason for this? Firstly the truth was expressed and seen at all times in Him. But, secondly, the Lord must have reality. His words searched men out and revealed what they actually were. They were not prepared to take on board the practical implications of His words.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart". The word in the original language for "discerner" is the one from which we get our English word "critic". We are used today to hearing the Bible criticised and spoken of in an irreverent way. But when I read the Bible, what actually is happening is that I am being searched by it, because it brings out what is in my heart. The word of God is not judged by me, but I am judged by it. That was what happened here. The Lord's words brought out the fact that His listeners were not prepared for the practical issues that His teaching demanded.

How wonderful however, that the same words brought to light the reality of the faith of Peter. When Jesus said to the remaining disciples, "Will ye also go away?" Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6:67-69). May the words of the Lord Jesus in this chapter have that same effect on us!

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