

WEEK OF DECEMBER 31, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Praise God who sent
Jesus from Heaven
to give us life.**

UNIT: Gospel of John (Part 1)

THEME: Light and Life

LESSON TEXT: John 6:25-40

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 4:3-4; Matthew 16:5-12;
Matthew 26:26; John 4:31-38

STUDY

I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE

BY MARK SCOTT

The world contains all kinds of bread. In addition to white bread, there are also whole wheat, rye, sourdough, multigrain, pumpernickel, and what seemingly grows everywhere in the world—zucchini bread. And that only scratches the surface. Bread is a staple of life. Some people will make a New Year's resolution to cut down on bread, but there are such things as good carbohydrates found in many types of bread.

Jesus told the devil that man does not live by bread alone (Matthew 4:3-4). Jesus cautioned his disciples to beware of the bread (yeast) of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:5-12). At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and blessed it (Matthew 26:26). And in John 6, Jesus used bread as a metaphor for salvation.

According to John's account, two miracles provide the background for this lesson text. Jesus multiplied five barley loaves and two fish and fed 5,000 men (John 6:1-14). (We can only speculate as to the total number of people who were fed.) Jesus then walked on the Sea of Galilee (called a "lake" in verses 16 and 17) to get back to the western side and eventually to Capernaum, where he preached a sermon on the bread of life.

The Motives of the People

John 6:25-27

The miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fish was stunning. Jesus had to command his disciples to go across the Sea of Galilee to the western side as he dismissed the crowd. The crowd did not want to leave Jesus. In fact, they wanted to take him by force and make him a king (John 6:15). But Jesus withdrew from them and went to a mountain to pray (Matthew 14:23). The next morning, when the people did not see Jesus (since he had walked on the water during the night), they got into boats and journeyed across the waters to Capernaum "in search of Jesus" (v. 24).

But the people came to Jesus with impure motives. They wanted to know when Jesus had arrived. But Jesus read their hearts. He told them they really did not want him. They just wanted another meal (since the fish and bread dinner in the wilderness the night before was so good). They sought *signs*, or miracles, but they were oblivious to the greater spiritual realities to which these signs pointed.

They wanted physical food more than forgiveness of sins. Jesus taught them to *work* for the food *that endures to eternal life*. That can come only from the *Son of Man*. God authenticated him by placing *his seal of approval* on him.

The Work of God

John 6:28-33

The word *work* caught the crowd's attention. The rhythm of work and rest was a sacred thing to Israel. So, the question naturally came, "*What must we do to do the works God requires?*" Jesus answered that the *work of God* (i.e., the plan of God or goal of God) was to "*believe in the one he has sent.*" This response again fits the appeal of John's Gospel (John 20:30-31).

Impure motives were evident in the crowd's next question, "Can you show us a sign to undergird our belief?" They wanted what Moses (really God) provided in the wilderness . . . *manna*. Their response amounted to, "Let's see another miracle." Jesus is the Servant of Yahweh; he is not a genie in a bottle to satisfy the wishes of unregenerate people. The *true bread* (beyond the physical) comes from heaven (God) and *gives life to the world*.

The Bread of Life

John 6:34-40

Whether the crowd was sincere in its request for *bread from heaven* is anyone's guess (v. 34). But Jesus received their request and used it to introduce one of his most famous discourses—"the Sermon on the Bread of Life." He elevated the people's concern for bread in a manner that brings to mind the question from Isaiah 55:2, "Why spend money on what is not bread?"

Verse 35 contains Jesus' first clear and official "I am" claim. Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life.*" People who come to Christ and believe in him will have no spiritual hunger. They will have the promise of security ("*I will never drive [them] away*" and "*I shall lose none*"), the promise of resurrection ("*I will raise them up at the last day*"—mentioned twice), and the gift of eternal life. People who choose not to come to Christ or believe in him have no promise of security, resurrection, or *eternal life*. Of all the types of bread in the world, only one truly satisfies, and it is Jesus. ■

IT'S TIME FOR SOME SOUL FOOD

BY DAVID FAUST

As the old year ends and a new year begins, it's customary to sing "Auld Lang Syne," watch lots of football, and make resolutions we will break by mid-January. Many of us resolve to lose weight—but don't. I saw a sign in a Michigan restaurant that said, "Some days you eat salads and go to the gym. Some days you eat a whole cherry pie. It's called *balance*."

If you want to know how *not* to lose weight, an article on the website MuscleandFitness.com describes "The 10 Craziest Diets You've Never Heard of." The list includes:

- **The Dessert with Breakfast Diet.** (Why not enjoy a brownie with your bacon and eggs or ice cream with your oatmeal?)
- **The Baby Food Diet.** (Nothing sounds yummier than replacing one of your daily meals with a jar of pulverized peas and carrots.)
- **The Vision Diet.** (Reduce your caloric intake by wearing blue-tinted glasses that make food look less appetizing.)

Fad diets promise quick fixes, but there is no substitute for eating reasonable amounts of healthy foods, staying hydrated, exercising, and getting enough rest. What lifestyle habits will nourish your spiritual health in the coming year? Here are some tips I have discovered.

Worshipping God feeds my soul; preoccupation with myself starves it. To find my true self, I need to focus on the one who created me. Praising God reminds me I am his child and his servant. His will takes priority over my own.

Time spent encouraging friends is life-giving; excessive isolation drains me. Some alone time is good, but God designed us to serve, learn, and grow in community with others. "As iron sharpens

iron, so one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

Scripture nourishes my soul; worldly wisdom withers it. The prophet Amos predicted his people would face "not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). Our spiritual hunger should lead us to read the Bible, not rely on a constant diet of man-made ideas.

The Holy Spirit is like a cooling breeze and a refreshing drink of water, but doing things in my own strength leaves me weary and dry. The start of a new year is a good time to pray, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:10-11).

Constant activity exhausts my soul; sabbath rest refreshes it. A healthy rhythm in the new year will include regular times to slow down, be still, and enjoy the Good Shepherd's "green pastures" and "quiet waters" (Psalm 23:2).

Prayer sustains my soul; giving God the silent treatment weakens it. Conversation with the heavenly Father is a privilege to be enjoyed, not a burden to be endured. The year ahead will go better if we heed the apostle Paul's instruction, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6).

Decade after decade, century after century, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). To be spiritually fit in the new year, let's partake of "the living bread that came down from heaven," for "whoever eats this bread will live forever" (John 6:51).

Personal Challenge: Write down one specific spiritual growth goal you will pursue in 2024. ■

DISCOVERY

BY DOUG REDFORD

1. How did you do focusing on one verse from John 1:1-18 each day this past week?
2. In the opening statement from his study, Mark Scott wrote, "The world contains all kinds of bread." What is your favorite kind of bread? What kinds of bread did you get to enjoy over Thanksgiving and Christmas?

Ask two people to read aloud **John 6:25-40** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.
3. Jesus told the people, "Do not work for food that spoils." What are some types of "food" on which our contemporary culture tends to focus?
4. When the people asked Jesus about "the works God requires," he told them, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:28-29). Do you think believing in Jesus requires work (or effort)? Why or why not?
5. The people also asked Jesus to give them a sign so that they could believe in him (v. 30).
 - Do you think asking for such a sign indicates spiritual strength or weakness? Explain your answer.
 - If someone told you that they were looking for a sign to help them believe in God, what would be your response?
6. The people called Jesus' attention to how their ancestors ate manna in the wilderness (John 6:31).
 - How can looking to the past aid us in spiritual matters?
 - How might looking to the past become a hindrance to us in spiritual matters?
7. Jesus declared that he had come to do the will of the one who sent him (John 6:38).
 - In what way or ways is any follower of Jesus sent by God?
8. Twice in our passage, Jesus referred to the "last day" (John 6:39-40).
 - What word would you use to summarize Jesus' description of what will happen on the last day?
 - How does this viewpoint compare with how the world often looks at the last day/end of time?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. As the new year gets underway, focus this week on reading each day some of God's promises in the Bible. Many websites can provide a starting point for your reading.

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **John 8:31-58** as we continue with Part 2 of our study of the Gospel of John; the theme for January is "I AM." You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■