

What did Jesus mean when He said, “I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35)?

ANSWER

“I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35) is one of the seven “I Am” statements of Jesus. Jesus used the same phrase “I AM” in seven declarations about Himself. In all seven, He combines I AM with tremendous metaphors which express His saving relationship toward the world. All appear in the book of John.

John 6:35 says, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

Bread is considered a staple food—i.e., a basic dietary item. A person can survive a long time on only bread and water. Bread is such a basic food item that it becomes synonymous for food in general. We even use the phrase “breaking bread together” to indicate the sharing of a meal with someone. Bread also plays an integral part of the Jewish Passover meal. The Jews were to eat unleavened bread during the Passover feast and then for seven days following as a celebration of the exodus from Egypt. Finally, when the Jews were wandering in the desert for 40 years, God rained down “bread from heaven” to sustain the nation (Exodus 16:4).

All of this plays into the scene being described in John 6 when Jesus used the term “bread of life.” He was trying to get away from the crowds to no avail. He had crossed the Sea of Galilee, and the crowd followed Him. After some time, Jesus inquires of Philip how they’re going to feed the crowd. Philip’s answer displays his “little faith” when he says they don’t have enough money to give each of them the smallest morsel of food. Finally, Andrew brings to Jesus a boy who had five small loaves of bread and two fish. With that amount, Jesus miraculously fed the throng with lots of food to spare.

Afterward, Jesus and His disciples cross back to the other side of Galilee. When the crowd sees that Jesus has left, they follow Him again. Jesus takes this moment to teach them a lesson. He accuses the crowd of ignoring His miraculous signs and only following Him for the “free meal.” Jesus tells them in John 6:27, “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” In other words, they were so enthralled with the food, they were missing out on the fact that their Messiah had come. So the Jews ask Jesus for a sign that He was sent from God (as if the miraculous feeding and the walking across the water weren’t enough). They tell Jesus that God gave them manna during the desert wandering. Jesus responds by telling them that they need to ask for the true bread from heaven that gives life. When they ask Jesus for this bread, Jesus startles them by saying, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

This is a phenomenal statement! First, by equating Himself with bread, Jesus is saying he is essential for life. Second, the life Jesus is referring to is not physical life, but eternal life. Jesus is trying to get the Jews' thinking off of the physical realm and into the spiritual realm. He is contrasting what He brings as their Messiah with the bread He miraculously created the day before. That was physical bread that perishes. He is spiritual bread that brings eternal life.

Third, and very important, Jesus is making another claim to deity. This statement is the first of the "I AM" statements in John's Gospel. The phrase "I AM" is the covenant name of God (Yahweh, or YHWH), revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). The phrase speaks of self-sufficient existence (or what theologians refer to as "aseity"), which is an attribute only God possesses. It is also a phrase the Jews who were listening would have automatically understood as a claim to deity.

Fourth, notice the words "come" and "believe." This is an invitation for those listening to place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. This invitation to come is found throughout John's Gospel. Coming to Jesus involves making a choice to forsake the world and follow Him. Believing in Jesus means placing our faith in Him that He is who He says He is, that He will do what He says He will do, and that He is the only one who can.

Fifth, there are the words "hunger and thirst." Again, it must be noted that Jesus isn't talking about alleviating physical hunger and thirst. The key is found in another statement Jesus made, back in His Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:6, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." When Jesus says those who come to Him will never hunger and those who believe in Him will never thirst, He is saying He will satisfy our hunger and thirst to be made righteous in the sight of God.

If there is anything the history of human religion tells us, it is that people seek to earn their way to heaven. This is such a basic human desire because God created us with eternity in mind. The Bible says God has placed [the desire for] eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The Bible also tells us that there is nothing we can do to earn our way to heaven because we've all sinned (Romans 3:23) and the only thing our sin earns us is death (Romans 6:23).

There is no one who is righteous in himself (Romans 3:10). Our dilemma is we have a desire we cannot fulfill, no matter what we do. That is where Jesus comes in. He, and He alone, can fulfill that desire in our hearts for righteousness through the Divine Transaction: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

When Christ died on the cross, He took the sins of mankind upon Himself

and made atonement for them. When we place our faith in Him, our sins are imputed to Jesus, and His righteousness is imputed to us. Jesus satisfies our hunger and thirst for righteousness. He is our Bread of Life.