



Soul Food for Real Living

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 78:23-29; John 6:24-35; Eph 4:1-16

Food is a pretty basic concern. It is not a pressing issue for us, yet we identify concerns over physical needs. Most often we miss the degree to which over two-thirds of the world population worries over water and food. We live surrounded by food in abundance: store shelves packed with more food than will be sold, refrigerators stuffed with items we will discard when or before they turn funny colors for harboring colonies of mold. We overindulge in food, while children and adults in our own country and around the world will sleep on empty stomachs tonight.

We are blind to the desperate food concerns of so many when our supply is overabundant. It may cost more than we wish, but our food is readily available. We pass up the food set before us, allowing preferences to dictate what we choose to eat. Such is not the case for the majority of the world's population or for the crowds in Jesus' day. Some had abundant resources, but most lived hand to mouth, barely earning enough to feed their families sufficiently for survival. That was the context of Jesus' words about bread, food, and God's provision.

Jesus' audience did not look on food as a given. Abundance was for those few wealthy enough to flaunt their wealth by throwing out leftovers from daily feasting. Meat was a special item only available to the larger public on feast days. Bread was enough of a concern for daily existence.

Is it any wonder Jesus speaks of being the bread of life? Bread was the essential food of the people. It was the food they relied on to get them through the day. It was not an extra item on the plate, but the heart of most every meal. All too often, bread was the only ingredient in one's normal diet. It was the food for which one toiled all day in the fields, the rock quarries, or building the king's palace. When Jesus speaks of being God's provision, it is not about the extra-ordinary moments of blessing in life, it is rather about the routines of living. He is not feast food, but the very basis of life.

Elisha feeding a crowd of 100 was no tremendous miracle in contrast to Jesus' feeding five thousand. It was, however, a tremendous statement of God's sufficient provision for the needs of the people. It highlighted that while the nation was concerned with having enough for themselves to bring their tithes and offerings before God, God was faithful to make even a little become more than enough. As the old song says, "Little is much when God is in it." This was the message of Elisha. If they would simply be faithful with the meager resources at their disposal, God would step in to make the difference. There was no need to worry over their pressing concerns for food. God would supply their needs.

Paul calls us to live in recognition of Jesus, becoming worthy of his call to salvation and intimacy with God. In addressing the need to focus on worthy living, Paul mentions Jesus descending into the lower parts of the earth. While some want to consider this as a descent into hell along the First Century understanding of that underworld, Paul's wording does not support such a view. He does not say "below" the earth, but the "lower parts" of the earth. He speaks of God in Christ making the circuit of heaven and earth—God bridging the range between God and humanity.

From Paul's perspective, it is not just that Jesus is God, but the fact that God has chosen in Christ to experience the daily difficulties of life without an abundance which calls for our pause and reflection. The purpose of all this is to bring us to reconciliation with God. When God has come to understand the

struggles of our existence, we are freed to minister as servants of God. We are released to live for so much more than food and material blessings. We are equipped to become even as Christ Jesus, an offering of God's love and provision for the world.

We are equipped and provided in Christ Jesus with so much more than bread to get us through the day. We are called to become the body of Christ in today's world. According to that call, we are also equipped by God to fulfill the call of Christ upon us. We are gifted with the spiritual provision to meet the needs of ministry set before us. Just as Elisha fed a hundred with food for a meager handful, we are equipped by God's grace to minister beyond the physical limitations we see. Together, we are the body of Christ, called not to live for ourselves, but for the benefit of the whole body. We must first, however, take our eyes off concerns for the mundane to focus on the will and concerns of God.

Such was Jesus' concern with the crowds who came to meet him after being fed with a handful of loaves. They were not seeking Jesus to learn from God, but to satisfy the growling of empty bellies. They wished to follow Jesus as a release from the drudgery and sweat of daily labor. They wanted a free ride, not a relationship with God that would change them into ministers of God's presence and blessings for the world around them.

Jesus was happy enough to have fed them on the hillside. He was happy to meet their needs with the sufficiency of God's provision. At the same time, he wanted them to focus on more than economic pressures. He wanted them to take their attention off their material needs and trust God to supply their needs as they accepted God's provision for them to live according to the life and teaching of Jesus.

Rather than follow Jesus by living according to his teaching, they wanted to follow Jesus to eat at his feet and never have to work again. They wanted a free ride that would enable them to carry on with their concerns, rather than the concerns of God. Jesus would have none of it. He offered God's provision, but a provision with a purpose. He offered them a change of focus, granting them the freedom to live according to a new purpose, a purpose and relationship that would feed more than a hungry belly—it would feed the soul for eternity.

They wanted to feast at a banquet table. Jesus wanted their lives to have much deeper meaning. He asked the crowd following him to turn their attention from material things to the presence and purposes of God. They were focused on issues that would never satisfy. Once they had eaten their fill day after day, they would wish for something different. They would grumble as their forefathers eating manna in the wilderness. They would throw away the excess, ignoring its importance to one with nothing to eat.

Jesus' solution was a new focus. It was to take their minds off concerns for physical needs to focus on serving God, instead. God would continue to provide for material needs, but the focus of their lives should be on much more than food which spoils. It should rather be on living in relationship with God and finding nourishment for their very lives.

Spoiled food in our refrigerators, scraps left on our plates, food disposals in our sinks speak to an abundance that does not fulfill. Are we ready to focus on more than material needs to live in the assurance of God's provision? Are we ready to lift our concerns off the mundane onto faithfully serving God? It is only in ministering God's presence before others that we truly learn to live.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*