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Sermon Notes

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Bread of Heaven

John 6:25-35

Christmas feast:

Sumptuous feasting is a big part of the heritage of Christmas celebrations around the world. A table laden with specialties and delicacies and aromatic dishes that fill the senses... the sights of the fine dishes and silverware and cutlery, the aromas the waft up from each dish and mingle in the air and mysteriously float toward your nose, enticing your mouth to salivate... that's all part of the delight. But nothing compares with actually feasting on those foods with great eagerness... hopefully you've saved enough room in your stomach for all the wonderful dishes which have been prepared so laboriously by the cook or cooks of the house.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens taps into those sensory expectations in 19th century Victorian England. The ghost of Christmas present is a luxurious figure, sitting on a kind of a throne made up of all the foods with which the people would be gorging themselves in their Christmas feasts that day – turkeys, geese, game, poultry, pork, log wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, seething bowls of punch that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam. Everything the whole nation of England would need to make merry by feasting.

And then the ghost takes Scrooge on a visionary journey to the home of Bob Cratchit, his overworked and underpaid clerk, as they prepare their own Christmas feast:

The family is having a dinner of roast goose with sage and onion stuffing, mashed potatoes, and apple sauce. This is followed by Christmas plum pudding with brandy sauce. This was a substantial meal that the Cratchits have saved up all year to put on their table. But it is still too small for what their needs really were. When Scrooge experiences his form of a conversion at the end of the night, one of the first things he does is to buy the massive prize turkey still hanging in the window of the poulterer's shop – the one that was bigger than Tiny Tim – and sent it off by cab to the Cratchit residence to improve their Christmas feast.

So... I honestly don't know what each of your family's will do for your Christmas feast tomorrow. You all have your own traditions, I am sure. But tonight, we get to partake in a different kind of feast... a spiritual one... in which the "Bread of Heaven" is the food provided.

The term "Bread of Heaven" first appears in the Bible in Exodus 16:4. It is during the astonishing Exodus of the Jewish nation from their slavery in Egypt. Just before this, God had miraculously split the Red Sea open for them and made a dry avenue for the whole nation to cross, while the water had walled up on the right and the left... then God had drowned the pursuing Egyptian army in the same water, thus delivering Israel forever from that threat. But now, a new threat came, as they were in the desert without water to drink or food to eat. God miraculously turned the bitter waters of Marah sweet for them to drink... then he addressed himself to the task of feeding the nation – perhaps as many as two million men, women, and children.

Exodus 16:4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you.

This “bread from heaven” was manna... and it miraculously appeared every morning on the ground for the people to collect in baskets. In this way, God fed the whole nation for forty years in the desert. Bread from heaven.

This manna, this “bread of heaven” was celebrated a few other places in the Old Testament, in Nehemiah 9 and Psalm 105, but it was referring to that forty-year miracle.

The next new reference is in the text I am studying with you tonight... John 6.

The context is powerful... Jesus had just fed 5000 men plus women and children with five small barley loaves and two small fish. The people returned the next day looking for more food.

Jesus made it plain what their priorities should be:

John 6:26-27 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

So it is always with us... though we don't want to act like pagans whose god is their stomach, yet this is always our tendency:

Ecclesiastes 6:7 All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.

We tend to be creatures of the moment, creatures of the physical, creatures of the appetites... we need to hear again and again from Jesus,

Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.

When Jesus said this, the people pressed in on him:

John 6:28-29 Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

So many of us want to know this one thing: what must I do to get eternal life? What good work will please God? How can I pay for my sins and live happily ever after in heaven? We want to EARN heaven by our works. Jesus made it plain the one thing necessary: BELIEVE IN THE ONE GOD HAS SENT.

What an amazing requirement. Believe only... no great works are required for heaven, no achievements, no pilgrimages or valiant quests or bloody victories won over dragons or knights in black armor, no secret knowledge won through mystical alchemy... no, just believe in the one God has sent.

God sending this One... this is the "reason for the season"... the SENDING... One God SENT – sent from where? Sent from heaven, from his side... to earth, to the virgin's womb, to Bethlehem, to the stable, to the manger... the one God sent to save sinners like you and me... Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, the one God has sent.

And what does "believe" mean? Know and be assured in your heart that this One is actually God in the flesh, and that he alone can save you from sin.

Well, these Jews standing around Jesus at that moment wanted to challenge him... because Jesus was not just doing what they wanted him to do – namely, feed their stomachs with another miraculous meal. So they demanded more proof before they would believe in him:

John 6:30-31 So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

So here again is that phrase, "Bread from heaven"...

And these increasingly hostile people are demanding a DAILY miracle like Moses did. Moses won their loyalty by doing a miracle day after day for forty years... giving a nation of 2 million people bread from heaven to eat.

Jesus has to recalibrate their minds and souls to understand what really happened back then:

John 6:32 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven."

Moses was just simply a servant... he did nothing great except that God used him. The real source of the manna was Almighty God, not Moses. And now, the same one who fed the nation back then wants to feed you again, now... but in a more perfect way... the TRUE bread from heaven.

Now by saying, "The TRUE bread from heaven," Jesus was not denying the actual physical manna the Jews ate day after day for those forty years. But the word "TRUE" means "BETTER" and "PERFECT" and "FINAL" bread from heaven.

The manna was indeed physical... but it was also an acted out prophecy of Christ, the Savior of the world:

John 6:33 For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

The true bread from heaven is a person... not flakes of sweet wafers that tasted like coriander seed and honey that the Jews collected off the ground and baked or boiled or ate directly...

The TRUE BREAD from heaven... the PERFECT, FINAL FEAST from heaven is a PERSON... HE who comes down from heaven. And this person is the one who gives life to the world.

This is the mystical truth of Christmas... Jesus CAME DOWN from heaven for the purpose of being bread to give life to the world.

Just as physical bread gives life, so Jesus gives life. But the life that physical bread gives is temporal and will end in death. The life that Jesus gives is eternal, and death cannot touch it. Jesus wants them focusing on that life... eternal life.

The people, not understanding Jesus' words, said they wanted that bread:

John 6:34 "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

But Jesus, knowing they still don't understand at all, makes it more and more clear what he means:

John 6:35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

Later in this passage, he will explain how he is the bread that came down from heaven to give life to the world:

John 6:47-51 I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

So... tonight we celebrate the true Christmas feast.

The Lord's Supper that we are about to eat is itself just a symbol... behind that reality is the physical body of Jesus, his flesh, which he gave on the cross so that we might live. By his death on the cross, he took away the wrath and judgment of God for our sins, the death penalty his law demanded. If we believe in Jesus, his death will be applied to our sin debt and God's death penalty will be removed... and we will live forever.

BUT beyond that initial faith, that initial EATING of this bread from heaven, there is an ongoing EATING we must do... our faith must be fed again and again and again by Christ. By reading the gospels, we feed our souls on the words and works of Christ as are revived. By reading the epistles, we learn the theology of Christ, the full truth of the gospel, and we are revived. By the consistent feeding on the Word of God, we are eating the Bread of Heaven... and our souls are strengthened.

Indeed, by reading the Christmas story in Luke or in Matthew and learning again the circumstances of Jesus coming into the world by the Virgin Mary, our souls are strengthened. We are feeding on the Bread from Heaven.

And in a moment, when we partake of the Lord's Supper by faith, we realize again the doctrine of our salvation... Jesus' physical body was nailed to the cross and died so that we might be forgiven... and Jesus' physical body was resurrected from the grave so that we might live forever.

Before we partake... let me ask you... DO YOU BELIEVE in him? This is the work of God – the only thing God demands from you for the forgiveness of your sins. To believe in him is to feed on him, and to live on him forever. Have you found this salvation through faith in Christ?

John 6:25-35 When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" ²⁶ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

²⁸ Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

³⁰ So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

³² Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."