### “Bread from Heaven,” by S. Finlan, August 5, 2018

**Ephesians 4:2–13**

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bear with one another in love, 3making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.4There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. 8Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.” 9When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.

11The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

**John 6:24–35**

24So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

25 When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” 26Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

28Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?”29Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” 30So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? 31Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

32Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

There’s enough for several sermons here. I could start with the letter to the Ephesians, which gives instruction to the church at Ephesus. It lists some roles people can play in a church: “evangelists, pastors, teachers” (4:11), and there’s no reason this can’t include Sunday school teachers. A few verses later it talks about maturity, “the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13). Or I could go to John’s Gospel and look at the crowd’s *lack* of maturity, its desire for “signs,” miracles (6:26).

Instead, I want to talk about something that is present in *both* passages: the Incarnation, the coming of the divine Son to live a human life. It might be easy to miss the Incarnation in Ephesians. It’s where it says that he “descended into the lower parts of the earth” (4:9). That’s a little bit confusing. It just means he came *down* to the material world. As the Common English Bible says, he went “down into the lower regions, the earth.”

The Gospel of John gives us more information about the Incarnation. In the prologue it says the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14). In today’s passage, Jesus says “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven” (6:33). *He*is the bread of God, having come down from heaven to live an earth life. As is typical for Jesus, he slightly downplays his own role, and says “it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven” (6:32). But in verse 35 he comes out and says: “I am the bread of life.”

Back in verse 27, Jesus tells the disciples to “work for . . . the food that endures for eternal life.” So we have four phrases, and I think they all mean the same thing: the bread of God, the bread from heaven, the bread of life, and the food that endures for eternal life. Let’s look at these four images and see how each one sheds light on the idea of the Incarnation of the Word.

The first two images are closely linked. He says the bread of God “comes down from heaven” (v. 33). That is, he is *sent* by God. Why was he sent? I turn to the 18th chapter of John, where he says “For this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). Jesus revealed truth, and he lived *loyal* to the truth. Truth is the activity of God in the intellect. So the bread of God feeds us with *Truth*.

The second image is that he is the bread from heaven. This makes a linkage between heaven and earth, since he came *from* heaven *to* earth, from the spiritual level to the material level. He had a mind capable of feeling sorrow, a body that could feel pain, a heart that felt love, and he showed us how to live faithfully, trustingly, and spiritually.

He suffered the difficulties and joys of an earth life, so he understands what we go through. You are never alone and forgotten, although you can certainly *feel* that way sometimes. But Jesus walks with you; he knows your pain, and he is willing to go through it *with* you. Jesus is a life-*sharer* as well as a truth-*revealer*. He wants to enter into conversation with *you*, as you live your life.

The third image is the bread of life. We eat *physical* bread to stay alive. The bread of life is what feeds us *spiritually*. But what *is* it, actually, that nurtures our spiritual life? What feeds us? I think that it’s both the Spirit that Jesus bestowed, and Jesus himself, dwelling with you: his loving nature always nearby, his guidance always available.

In verse 33 these three images (bread of God, heaven, and life) are linked: “For the bread of *God* is that which comes down from *heaven* and gives *life* to the world.” That was Jesus’ mission: to give life and truth and spiritual nurture first of all to his disciples, but then to the whole world. The Spirit of Truth is a worldwide influence, trying to teach us that we are all spiritual brothers and sisters.

Now, we humans can be slow learners, I know *I* am. It takes a long time for his spirit, his attitude, to sink in, and to change the way we think and act. But his Spirit *is* sinking in; it has even had an influence on other religions.

Do not despair, even if we seem to be backsliding culturally. Jesus *is* giving life to the world, whenever people *accept* it, of course. There will be spiritual advances.

Now, let us look at the fourth image, “the food that endures for eternal life” (6:27). The nurturing that Jesus is doing for us is going to continue beyond this lifetime. But eternal life is not on pause, awaiting the future life. Eternal life begins *in the* *present*. You can begin living eternal life here and now! It is a *quality* of life and action, not just a *duration* of life.

Jesus said we can have abundant life here and now. If you open yourself up to God’s transformation, be ready to have all your interactions with people changed. If you have Jesus, then you have a certain spiritual aura, and you will become aware of this light in others. The bread of heaven nurtures our spiritual conversation with Jesus and others.

All of these transformations are intended by that wording of the Eucharist that I use, the one that says “this is the bread of heaven.” The bread of heaven is Jesus—the man of heaven . . . *and* the man of *Nazareth*—who was sent to teach us about God, and who sent his Spirit to guide us toward truth.

*Eucharist*, in the original Greek, means “thanksgiving.” The Eucharist is not meant to be a somber and frightening ritual that makes us think about the murder of Jesus, or makes us feel guilty for it. Jesus intended it to make us think about his dual nature, heavenly and earthly, and to recall his promise to feed us spiritually, and guide us into eternal life.

What are *you* thankful for, in the life of Jesus? What saying or story makes you feel safe and secure from all alarms? Let’s think about this for a second. What story in the life of Jesus makes you thankful? Or what saying of Jesus inspires you?

Jesus came down from heaven, but he lived an earthly life, with human emotions, disappointments, and death. He came to reveal the truth, and to give life to the world. He *shares* our life; he *gives* us life, and he feeds us spiritually. Bread nurtures us. Spiritual bread, that is, truth and love and Jesus’ personality, nurtures us spiritually.

Let us be filled with this spiritual bread, and then go out and live our lives with new energy! Jesus himself did that, and he even said, also in the Gospel of John: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me” (4:34). We too can *do* the will of God!