

April 15-19, 2024 Edition

Following The Year_(s) Of [^]Jesus Part 120

I Am The Bread Of Life

April 13/14, 2024

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: Jesus made 8 "I Am" statements in the gospel of John. They are the vehicle by which He shows us exactly who He is and what He came to do. This week we're looking at the first "I Am" statement but let's look at all 8 before we get started:

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. John 6:35 (NLT)

I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." John 8:12 (NLT)

I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. John 10:7-10 (NLT)

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep.

John 10:11-15 (NLT)

I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. John 11:25-26 (NLT)

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is. From now on, you do know him and have seen him!" Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus replied, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don't know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I speak are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me. Just believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or at least believe because of the work you have seen me do. John 14:6-11 (NLT)

I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:1-5 (NLT)

These statements were as unpopular and controversial 2,000 years ago as they are today. What does it all mean? That Jesus is THE BREAD, THE LIGHT, THE GATE, THE GOOD SHEPHERD, THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE, THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE & THE TRUE VINE? What does it mean about Who Jesus is? What does it mean about my

relationship with Him? We'll spend the next 8 weeks trying to unpack all of that by looking at the 8 times Jesus showed/told us Who He is with those two little words, "I AM..."

And if you were counting as you read the above statements and are now thinking, "hey wait a minute- you said there are 8 I AM statements but you only quoted 7 scriptures" then you get the big prize for today- a free case of absolutely nothing except a feeling of not letting anything get by you. There are 8 (at least in my way of seeing things) but the eighth one is different from all the others and doesn't ordinarily make it into the I AM lists. We'll get to that one eventually too.

Tuesday Reflection: When Jesus makes His first I AM statement it is in response to one of the greatest miracles He performed while on this earth. We talked in detail about Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 last January so I don't want to spend too much time on the actual miracle this week but we will spend one day looking at the miracle and then the rest of the week looking at what the miracle was about (this is one of the only miracles Jesus spends a lot of time unpacking and explaining what it was supposed to mean for us). So here goes:

Have you ever heard the one about the Rabbi and 15,000 people who were with Him that were REALLY hangry and not a Snickers bar to be found to take the edge off? That's what this week's focus is. But before we begin talking about the actual story let's take a look at that day in the life of Jesus. Max Lucado calls it the second worst day of Jesus' life (can you guess the worst day? Maybe the crucifixion, huh?). Why was it so bad? First Jesus gets the news that John the baptist, His cousin, had been killed. And if that weren't enough Jesus is informed that Herod, the guy who killed John the baptist is now watching Him closely. Jesus is now on a watch list that nobody wants to be on.

So Jesus takes His closest friends and tries to get away from the crowds. They get in a boat and head off across the lake to be alone for a bit. A time for Jesus to grieve, to recharge, to recover. But the crowd has a different idea in mind. They still want something from Jesus. So they look at the boat's trajectory and run around the lake so that when Jesus gets to the other side... it's like a remake of "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?" (although this was about 2,000 years before that particular TV show had been made so does that make this a prequel?).

Jesus is trying to get away to rest and instead He arrives to a crowd of people who all want a piece of Him with their hands out and their mouths open. Max Lucado calls it the piranha hour (most of you moms know what I'm talking about, right?). So what does Jesus do? He's grieving, He's nervous about Herod, He's trying to get away and being thwarted by people who don't care about anything but their own needs/wants/desires. What would you do (yeah, me too... aren't you glad Jesus isn't like us?). So what does Jesus do?

Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

And because of that selflessness Jesus eventually would perform the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 (well... 5,000 men... that's how they counted back then. I guess they

didn't count children or women because to them children and women didn't count? It wasn't a good time to be a child or woman but more on that another day). Did you know that this miracle is the only miracle other than the resurrection that is recorded in all four gospels? And if Jesus wasn't willing to let God interrupt His plans it would never have happened.

So what about Jesus' "me" time? He got it... eventually. After this day He would go off by Himself and get the rest He was looking for earlier. This isn't a story about how people don't need rest. It's a story about allowing my plans to be interrupted by God. So how about it? Does God have permission to interrupt your day to change the world, even if you're having a tough day? Turns out, God cares about the piranhas. In fact, He cares about them so much He'll do whatever it takes to move them from being piranhas to whatever the opposite of a piranha is (I spent a few minutes trying to think of a perfect analogy but came up blank- maybe you've got a great one but that doesn't help me at this point, does it? ;o) Jesus feeds the multitude on a Friday because He ALWAYS responds to genuine need and desperation but then on Saturday when they track Him down at the Synagogue in Capernaum He refuses to do-it-again. Why? Because He didn't want them to lose track of what the miracle was really all about. It was more than just food for their bellies. A lot more.

Wednesday Reflection: This week we're talking about Jesus' explanation of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 (we'll stick with that title since that's what most of us think of when think of that miracle even though scholars believe He fed WAY more than just 5,000 people that day). It's one of the only miracles He spends a bunch of time unpacking and explaining. Today we'll look at how that miracle was more than just food-for-thought by starting with what was our first point at church last weekend which was that this miracle was food-for-thought.

Confused? Me too. Let's hope this reflection starts making sense (which I know would take a miracle but God specializes in those, right?). What I guess I mean is that this miracle (and every other miracle as well) is not ONLY about food-for-thought but it was partially about food-for-thought. In our modern world we tend to think the miracles are mainly about food-for-thought whereas the people of Israel were more pragmatic- they thought this miracle was only about food-for-the-belly. They got fed on Friday and the next day they tracked down Jesus at the synagogue in Capernaum and demanded He do-it-again. Jesus declined:

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs." John 6:26 (NLT)

In what way did they misunderstand the miraculous sign? Because they focused solely on the sign and ignored what the sign was pointing to- Jesus Himself. The Bible talks quite a bit about miracles and what their purpose is/was. In the book of Hebrews the Bible puts it like this:

The Lord himself first told about this salvation, and those who heard him testified it was true. God also testified to the truth of the message by using wonders, great signs, many kinds of miracles. Hebrews 2:3-4 (NCV)

The miracles were supposed to be signs that pointed to the veracity of what was being said by whoever the miracle was being performed through. They were always in response to genuine need but you could make the claim that the genuine need was secondary to what God was ultimately trying to do with these miracles- point to something else. Why? Because as it turns out a miracle isn't terribly efficient at instilling faith. I used to think that if I could just see a miracle then I'd never doubt again. In my earlier years as a pastor I believed that if I could just perform a miracle then nobody would doubt- everyone would "believe".

But now I realize how wrong I was. Miracles don't do a very good job of instilling faith. All they can do is point to what is supposed to be/become the object of our faith- Jesus. The Old Testament is filled with examples of people who saw amazing miracles and wonders and yet it did not instill true faith in them. Read the story of the Exodus and the nation of Israel on the way to the Promised Land and you'll find a group of people who have no problems believing God is real and powerful but does it instill true faith in them? Nope. Why? I mean, didn't those miracles and wonders give them food-for-thought (as well as food-for-their-bellies in the case of the miracle of the manna which fed them every day in the wilderness)? Sure they did. But changing our minds isn't the same as true faith or belief. It's the start of true faith/belief but just because you think something is true and have absolute certainty in it (like the Israelites did about God) it doesn't mean that your life is going to change because of it. And that's where the rubber of belief meets the road of faith- when our lives are changed because of what we believe. A changed mind doesn't put us on the path of faith- it's more like the on-ramp to the path of faith. Nothing much changes just because our minds are changed or fed by a miracle.

And that's what Jesus is getting at with these people who saw an undeniable miracle in the wilderness the day before when Jesus fed the multitudes- they didn't doubt the miracle/sign. They just didn't understand what the point of it was. They thought it was to feed their bellies but Jesus says it's about WAY more than that. And if He were to feed them again He'd just be reinforcing their preconceived notions about miracles which would cause them to miss the true miracle- THE BREAD OF LIFE was among them. The miracle pointed to Him. He won't feed them again unless there's genuine need. He tries to get them to trust Him not because their bellies are fed and not just because their minds are fed but because they simply have put their trust in Him. And when they are confused by His actions and teaching what do they do? They abandon ship. They leave. They go home. Why? Because they weren't convinced the feeding of the multitudes was a genuine miracle? Nope. It was because they misunderstood the meaning of the sign they saw the day before. They allowed it to change their minds but that's where the impact of the miracle stopped for them.

Tomorrow we'll talk about the next step on the path of true faith/belief but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what "miracles/wonders/signs" mean/have meant to you in your life? Have you ever heard yourself saying the words, "I'll believe IF you do this or that."? I think back to when I would make those kinds of demands on Jesus and now I realize when I did that I was just like the crowd who demanded that Jesus feed them again and then they might believe in Him. I also realized that making a demand like that pretty much assures God isn't going to do what I've demanded. Maybe you've done something similar in your life.

Thursday Reflection: So now we know that the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes was about WAY more than just foo-for-the-belly. It was also about food-for-thought. It was meant to change the way the people thought. It was supposed to challenge their thinking and make them wonder if maybe Jesus was Who He claimed to be? But if we stop at food-for-thought we'll find ourselves in danger of becoming like the people of the Bible who saw miracles and didn't doubt that they were real but never let their change of thinking impact the way they lived their lives:

That is why the Holy Spirit says, "Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled, when they tested me in the wilderness. There your ancestors tested and tried my patience, even though they saw my miracles for forty years... Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. Hebrews 3:7-12 (NLT)

The writer of Hebrews warns not those who don't "believe" in God to be careful about "unbelief" but those who are already believers. Doesn't that seem like an impossible contradiction of terms? How can I have an unbelieving heart if I'm a believer? By never letting my faith/belief get beyond food-for-thought. Growing up I defined belief as certainty and uncertainty as doubt. But when those are the definitions I'm working with I end up with all kinds of confusion as I read the Bible. In fact, read Hebrews chapter 11 and you'll find the hall-of-faith. The greatest heroes of our faith. Men and women who did amazing things "through faith". These are household names: Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel...

Do you know what all of those people had in common beyond that they did great and amazing things "by faith"? They were all weak, messed up and filled with uncertainty. So how then did they do these things "by faith"? Because faith does not mean 100% certainty. Faith means moving forward in spite of uncertainty and that's when we get off the on-ramp to a life of true faith/belief and onto the actual pathway of faith but moving away from simply a change of mind to a change of our will. Letting our belief (as limited as it may be) move from our thoughts to our actions and intentions. When the people tracked down Jesus after being fed the day before and demanded that He do it again they said this to Him"

They replied, "We want to perform God's works, too. What should we do?" Jesus told them, "This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent." John 6:28-29 (NLT)

What were they asking Jesus for? A deeper understanding of what God wanted from them? A closer connection with their Creator? No. They wanted to be able to perform flashy and impressive miracles the way Jesus had. It sort of reminds me of the time in the book of Acts when a guy named Simon who was a sorcerer in Samaria watched as Philip and Peter performed amazing miracles and wonders among the believers there. Simon offered to pay for the ability to do these miracles and Peter's response was withering:

Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. Acts 8:20-22 (NLT)

Simon wanted the flash of the miracles but Peter says his real problem is not greed but that his heart isn't right. I don't know about you but I can identify way too much with Simon and the people who asked Jesus how to "perform" the same works as Jesus. What does Jesus tell them (and by extension me and you)? All God wants from us is to believe in the one he has sent. There's that word again. Believe. Faith. It keeps popping up. We've talked about this A LOT in these reflections that Biblical belief/faith isn't about 100% certainty. The other two English words that are sometimes used to translate the one Greek word from which we get belief and faith are trust and commitment. You can't understand Biblical belief or faith without also adding the definitions of trust and commit to what we ordinarily think of when we hear the word "believe". That's where the changing of the will comes into play. Changing the way we think (what I generally thought of when I heard the word believe or have faith) is only the on-ramp to a life of "faith". Where the rubber meets the road in a life of faith is when we are committed and willing to trust even when our certainty and understanding wavers. More on that tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what the definition of faith/belief you have lived your life working with.

Friday Reflection: Changing the way we think (what I generally thought of when I heard the word believe or have faith) is only the on-ramp to a life of "faith". Where the rubber meets the road in a life of faith is when we are committed and willing to trust even when our certainty and understanding wavers. For instance, there's the time Jesus comes down from a mountain top experience with God and finds that His disciples couldn't cast a demon out of a young boy. When Jesus arrives and finds out what's going on the dad says this to Jesus:

When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Mark 9:20-22 (NLT)

Do you see the key word the dad uses? It jumps right out at me since I grew up believing that to believe meant to have 100% certainty and zero uncertainty. It's that little two letter word, if. Doesn't that suggest some doubt to you? In the church I grew up in if I had ever expressed anything less than 100% certainty and zero uncertainty I would have expected to be cast out into utter darkness where there would be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth (the church I grew up in didn't mess around ;o) And don't think Jesus didn't notice that little two letter word the dad used:

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Mark 9:23 (NLT)

What would you say to that? I know what I would have done. I would have conjured up some certainty. I would have summoned every acting skill I possess to assure Jesus that I had zero uncertainty. I BELIEVE!!!!!!! But surprisingly the dad doesn't do that:

The father instantly cried out, "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!"
Mark 9:23-24 (NLT)

Huh? Help me overcome my unbelief? I was shocked a younger man to read that story for the first time and get to this point in the encounter. Well, that's it for this guy. Jesus is going to send him away. Help-me-overcome-my-unbelief indeed! Give me a break! I hate to see how Jesus is going to respond to that. But Jesus takes that statement of "faith" from the dad as anemic as it appears to us and heals the kid. You can almost see Him shrug when the dad says that if you close your eyes and try to imagine it. "Ok... I can work with that." Why? How?

This story only makes sense if you realize that faith isn't about 100% certainty and doubt is about the presences of uncertainty. The Israelites that "rebelled" against God in the wilderness possessed absolute certainty. So did the people fed in the wilderness by Jesus. And yet both of those groups of certain people exhibited classic Biblical unbelief in spite of their "certainty". The dad in this story had little certainty and plenty of uncertainty and yet is held up almost as a hero of faith. And let's not forget the apostles who were with Jesus when He fed the multitudes. They saw the miracle just like the multitudes. The next day they heard Jesus' freaky sermon when the the crowds showed up and demanded Jesus do-it-again. The multitudes deserted Jesus but not the apostles:

At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him. Then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, "Are you also going to leave?" Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe... you are the Holy One of God. John 6:67-69 (NLT)

Not a ringing endorsement of certainty, huh? But they had committed their will to Jesus. They were sticking with Him even when uncertainty clouded their minds and certainty deserted them. And how does Jesus respond? If you close your eyes and imagine it maybe you can see Him shrug here too. Faith is NOT 100% certainty. Unbelief is NOT the presence of a lack of certainty. Faith is committing my will to Jesus in the face of uncertainty and that kind of faith will change you in ways you can't imagine because that kind of faith/belief won't just change your mind and your actions- it will change your heart and it turns out your heart is pretty important for more than just pumping your blood:

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

Your heart is what drives you. According to the Bible every single thing you do flows from your heart. How is that possible? I don't know exactly but Jesus talked about it a lot and if we're paying attention we might be surprised at how to go about changing our hearts so that our lives will be changed:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21 (NIV)

I heard that verse a lot growing up but it never clicked for me that the way to change my heart was to change where I put my "treasure". I always thought it was the other way around- when I find something that makes my heart really beat then I'll put my treasure there. But Jesus says that's backwards- you want to change where your heart is then just

change where you keep your treasure. Think about it- if I don't have money in the stock market then I pay almost zero attention to the fluctuations of the market. But once my "treasure" is in stocks and bonds I notice and follow closely the ups and downs of wall street. Why? Because that's where my treasure is. When I rented a house in Eagle River I paid little attention to the ups and downs of the real estate market but once I bought a house here you can beloved I notice.

So what does that have to do with this miracle and what Jesus said the next day that it was all about- what it was pointing to? What Jesus asks us to do is to have the signs we see change our minds but don't let it stop there. From there we are to change our will- our actions and intentions- even before our certainty catches up with our commitment. And then, once we've done that and as we see that Jesus can be trusted even if we never fully understand His ways or how our lives are going our hearts start to catch up with where we've put our treasure (and this is not just about money- it's about SO much more than that).

So where are you on this change your mind/will/heart journey with Jesus? I didn't ask where your certainty level lies. That's a separate question. The question for today is, are you and I going to be like the people who saw the wonders of God in their lives and had zero uncertainty yet were filled with doubt/unbelief because of their lack of trust and commitment or are we going to be like the people in the Bible who dealt with tons of uncertainty (not the same thing as doubt or unbelief at all as it turns out) and yet through their commitment and trust they saw things they never dreamed they'd see? So I'll ask you (and myself too) as we end for this week- where is your treasure today? Because the answer to that question will tell us where our hearts are.