

Deuteronomy 8

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[0 : 0 0] There must be more to life than this is the title of a song penned by Freddie Mercury and recorded with Michael Jackson, of all people, back in the 1980s. But that version of the song was only released for the first time, as I understand it, posthumously last year on the album Queen Forever. I think it had been released as a solo some time ago, but the version that was produced back in the 80s, as I understand it, for the first time just a few months ago, there must be more to life than this. And the song ends with the following somewhat despairing lyrics. There must be more to life than this, much more to life. There must be more to life, more to life than this. But is there? Thousands of years ago, about three and a half thousand years ago, to be a little more precise, God said something to Moses and the people of Israel that touches on this big question. Is there more to life than this? And what God said, if true, suggests that there is. There is more more to life than this. God said, man does not live on bread alone. Now, even with what I've said thus far, some of you may have an issue. You may have an issue with the very existence of God, or with a God who speaks to us, or the seemingly implausible notion that His words, if indeed He does exist, and if indeed He does speak to us, that His words are recorded in an ancient book that, some, many would argue, is full of some pretty weird and objectionable material. Maybe for some of you, some of what I've just said is an issue. Perhaps for many of you, it's not. But for those of you who it, for whom it might be an issue, what I would say is, bear with me, humor me if you wish, and listen to what I have to say.

At this point, seated here in church, you don't really have many better options. Playing Candy Crush on your smartphone probably would be a wee bit rude, so just listen to what I have to say and see what you make of it. So, let's think about this statement of God directed so long ago to this people, the people of Israel. Man does not live on bread alone. And let's try and draw out what is being said and what or who the statement is pointing towards. Let's just remind ourselves of the verse in question, or the verse where we find these words that we're going to be considering. Verse 3 of Deuteronomy chapter 8.

He humbled you, that is, God humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Let's think about this statement, and very particularly what's at the heart of that verse. Man does not live on bread alone. I think the first very obvious thing that we can recognize that is being said in these words is that bread is necessary. And bread is indeed both necessary and good for life, for living. What is bread? What does bread represent as the word is used, as the picture is painted here in the passage? Well, bread is what you eat every day. You were thinking of that already with the children. Without bread, you starve to death, to quote one of our children this morning.

That's what happens. It's essential to life. It is necessary. It's necessary for us to have bread, those bare essentials, those necessary elements for life and living. But I think bread, as it's being used here, it can be understood as representing more than just the bare essentials. It represents all the stuff that we consume and accumulate and covet. In this very passage, you have this amazing description of the promised land, and it's more than just bread. There's bread in abundance, but there's iron, there's copper, there's pomegranates, there's wheat, there's all that you could imagine that is good for living. The capacity to create wealth is spoken of. And bread really represents all of those good and necessary material things. We think of ourselves, bread represents, as we think of it in that broad term, it represents that nice house that we want to buy in a good catchment area. That new car, maybe that car that parks by itself. I would love one of these things. I am useless at reverse parking. So one of these cars that parks by itself, ideal. Bread represents that as well. It represents that curvy smartphone that you've got your eye on, shoes or handbags. I don't get that, but for some people that's really important. Well, bread represents those things as well. It represents a pair of Magista football boots. And if you're thinking, I have no idea what Magista football boots are, I have to hear about them time and time and time again. So be glad that if you don't, if you've never heard of them, believe me,

[6 : 26] I have. And the list could go on. Bread is necessary. Without bread, we can't live, we can't survive. Bread is good. Bread is good. And in the measure that it does, I think, represent all of these material things that we can own and enjoy, then it is a good thing. But of course, God is saying something beyond that. It's implicit in what He says that bread is necessary and that bread is good, but that is not the main thrust of what is being said. The main thrust of what is being said is that bread, though good and though necessary, is not enough for life and living. Man does not live on bread alone.

He does live on bread, but not on bread alone. Well, that's the claim. God is saying that if you have bread, necessary and good though it is, it's not enough. Something is missing. Well, is that true?

That is what is being said. That is the claim that is being made. But is that true? There would be many who would say, well, that simply is not true. It sounds nice, but it's not true. It doesn't accord with reality. Bread actually, and all that it represents in terms of all that is material, is enough. The material is ultimately all that there is. And of course, we do readily concede that bread is enough for physical life. If that's all that we are, if the extent of life is simply to be understood as that physical experience, then bread is enough. But is physical life everything? Is that not the gnawing question behind the title of Freddie Mercury's song? There must be more to life than this.

Charles and Diana sadly did not see eye to eye on many things, but they did agree on one matter. I want you to listen to two quotes. First from Charles, and the second quote is from Diana.

For all the advantages of science, there remains deep in the soul a persistent and unconscious anxiety that something is missing. Those are the words, the musings of our future king.

[9 : 18] Charles' book, and the other one, recognizes something is missing. Diana, reflecting on modern life, spoke of, and I quote, the overwhelming sense of loss and isolation that undermines many people's efforts to survive and cope with the complexities of modern life. They know something is missing.

Exactly the same words that we read in Charles' quote. Something is missing. There must be more to life than this.

Well, if bread is enough for physical life, then what could be missing? Well, nothing if, and it's a big if, all we are is physical or material, but we're not.

We are spiritual beings, and we need spiritual bread. Just as surely as our bodies need food, we need food for our souls. And that food is what is so often missing.

We have spiritual hunger pangs that we struggle sometimes even to recognize, and when recognized, we struggle to satisfy.

[10 : 41] What is the soul food that we need for life and living, in addition to, in parallel with, physical bread that is also necessary?

What is this soul food? Well, back to God and His pep talk to the Israelites three and a half thousand years ago.

Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

There God identifies our soul food, that which we need to consume, along with, in addition to, the physical bread.

But for these words to satisfy our soul, two conditions need to be met. The first is that we need to be hungry for these words, for soul food.

[11 : 44] Now, that's very obvious. If you're not hungry, you don't eat. That's true in the physical realm, or you force yourself to, but with no joy in it. There needs to be hunger.

If there's no hunger, then even though the food is available, you won't avail yourself of it. So that's one condition. There needs to be hunger. But then, of course, very obviously, if there is that hunger, then you need to eat the food that is provided.

These words that come from the mouth of the Lord. We need to be hungry. We need to have a sense of hunger. Now, not everybody feels hungry in this dimension, in this spiritual dimension.

Some people are quite satisfied with bread alone. There are people who live their lives from beginning to end with their focus entirely on accumulating that physical bread and all that it represents.

And therein lies what measure of satisfaction that they have. That is an observable reality. Sometimes as Christians, we imagine that, ah, yes, but deep down or behind the facade, everybody has that sense of spiritual hunger.

[12 : 58] Well, I'm not persuaded that that is true, that everybody has the sense of spiritual hunger. Now, don't get me wrong. We all need soul food, but we're not all hungry for soul food.

We are often plagued by a very human malaise that God deals with in the chapter that we've read that we could call self-sufficiency. This was the great danger that God was anticipating with the Israelites.

He said, I'm going to give you this wonderful land, and it has everything you need, but I know what's going to happen. A few years are going to pass, and you think, this all is my effort.

Nothing to do with God. I'm self-sufficient. I don't need God. I don't need soul food from heaven. I have all that I require.

This malaise of self-sufficiency can mask our hunger, make us imagine that we're not hungry at all. And this is where God so often makes an appearance, if we can use that language.

[14 : 03] God can and does so order our circumstances to bring us to the point of recognizing and sensing our need and hunger for soul food.

Take the case of the Israelites, the passage that we read. We read the whole verse again, verse 3, just to see what's going on there. He humbled you, causing you to hunger, and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

You see, what's happening? God allows for, indeed, is the architect of a difficult trial of real profound suffering for the people of Israel, with the intention, with the purpose that that would shake them out of their foolish and dangerous self-sufficiency.

He brings them to the point of seeing how they are wholly dependent on Him, even for physical food, with the purpose that they would acknowledge their dependence on Him for spiritual food.

Well, what about you? That was true three and a half thousand years ago. What about today? What about you? Is God prodding you? Is He making you think about questions that have seldom occupied your attention?

[15 : 27] Perhaps the loss of a loved one, a broken or breaking relationship, loss of income, or the prospect of unemployment. How many people in Aberdeen today are concerned by that?

The next round of redundancies, will I escape the cut? And do these circumstances lead you to think about bigger questions? Painful though these experiences are, they can be the means that God uses to cure you of your self-sufficiency and helping you to sense what was there all along, hunger for soul food.

It's rightly said that the darker the night, the brighter the stars shine. So we need a sense of hunger, but we also need to eat the food.

Every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. How are the Israelites to eat this food? Well, I think the answer to that is at the very beginning of the chapter. Verse 1 of chapter 8 of Deuteronomy, we read, Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today so that you may live.

This is how you will live as God intends you to live. This is how you will eat and live. Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today.

[16 : 53] The people ate the words by obeying the words. But underpinning that obedience was trust. They had to believe that the words of God would satisfy.

It wasn't just about mindless obedience, but rather trusting obedience. Trust in the word giver. Trust in the one who was pronouncing these words, out of whose mouth the words were coming.

That he is good and his words are good. But let's fast forward to today, to you and to me. Man does not live by bread alone.

You do not live by bread alone. You might say, okay, check, I accept that. You need spiritual bread to nourish your spiritual life.

Check. Check. This spiritual bread is the words or commands of God that we eat, obey, check. But we have a problem.

[18 : 01] You have a problem. I have a problem. We can't. We can't. We can't obey. Eat the words, to use the picture language.

We can't obey as we ought. If we did, we would be satisfied and our souls would be richly fed. We would experience a spiritual dimension to life that is essential to who we are and how we are wired.

If we ate, if we obeyed all the words that come from the mouth of the Lord, we would know spiritual life in fullness. But we can't.

We can't eat the words as we ought. The food is there, but we can't digest it. We can't consume it as we ought.

We don't obey as we ought. That's the problem, but thank God there is a solution. And the solution is another word from God.

[19 : 04] But note that it or he is a word. The beginning of the Gospel of John we read, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And then further in the chapter we read, Jesus is the Word of God.

And as the Word of God, he is the ultimate and sufficient soul food. Nobody speaks more clearly on this matter than Jesus himself.

Listen to what Jesus says. Let's read from John's Gospel and from chapter 6. John chapter 6 and verse 48. We're going to read a few verses to capture what Jesus says as he draws on the very language that we find in Deuteronomy or the events that are described there in Deuteronomy.

John chapter 6, a reading from verse 48. I am the bread of life.

[20 : 31] Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die.

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.

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

[21 : 34] This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.

Notice how Jesus compares himself to the physical manna that the Israelites were given in the desert. But even that God-given bread, manna from heaven, what better sustenance could you ask for?

A meal that comes from heaven for you to eat. But even that, Jesus recognizes, could not ultimately satisfy. It could not provide the people with spiritual life.

It could satisfy their hunger. It could fill their belly, but it could not give them life. They ate the manna, and they died.

But Jesus, the bread that came down from heaven, can provide spiritual nurture, spiritual life. As he himself says, if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.

[22 : 47] And notice something very important. Jesus is not just the provider of spiritual bread. He is the bread, and he is the only bread that satisfies.

But how does Jesus, as bread, feed our soul? Well, he tells us in these words that we've read in John's Gospel. He feeds us by dying.

Now, that seems a very strange statement to make. And yet, what is it that Jesus says that we read there in verse 51? I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And then immediately he declares, this bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

Speaking of his death. This bread that you need to eat, what's it about? It's about this body being handed over to death in your place.

[23 : 52] His death. A death in the place of sinners to secure our forgiveness and reconciliation with God. A relationship with God, which is of the essence of spiritual life.

His death is what grants to us spiritual life or food for the soul. What do you need to do? You need to eat the bread.

What does that mean? What does that look like? Well, if we return to the passage, to the words of Jesus in John chapter 6. And if we read verse 47, the verse that is one before where we began reading.

John 6 verse 47. I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. You eat the bread of life.

You eat Jesus as you believe in him. As you believe in what he has done for you. As you believe in the death that he died in the place of sinners and place your trust in Jesus.

[25 : 00] That is how you eat this bread that has come down from heaven to grant you spiritual life. I tell you the truth.

He who believes has everlasting life. Spiritual life. Life on a dimension that it goes beyond the merely physical. Important though that is and integral to who we are.

If we go back to Freddie Mercury and the words of his song. There must be more to life than this. What was missing that led him to express himself in that way?

Listen to what he said shortly before he died in an interview that he gave. And I quote, You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man.

And that's the most bitter type of loneliness. Success has brought me world idolization and millions of pounds. But it has prevented me from having the one thing we all need.

[26 : 18] A loving, ongoing relationship. And spiritual life, in its essence, at his heart, is about a relationship.

A restored relationship with God. This is eternal life. To know God. To be in relationship with God. And we can know that relationship.

We can enter into that relationship through Jesus. The bread of life. Who has come to restore that relationship for us.

You see, there is only one relationship that is completely loving and ongoing. To use the wistful words of aspiration that were never realized of Mr. Mercury.

The only relationship that is completely loving and ongoing is a relationship with God secured for us by the bread of life.

[27 : 19] You have to feed on him. There must be more to life than this. So what is missing?

He is missing. And he alone can satisfy. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you that in it we see ourselves as who we really are. How we have been created. What our needs are. We can see how far short we fall.

When we compare our lives to your divine intention for us. But we thank you that that does not need to lead us to despair. But rather we can turn to your word and discover what it is that we need to do.

How you have provided for us. How you have generously provided for our physical needs. But how you also have generously provided for our spiritual needs. That we might know spiritual, everlasting, eternal life.

[28 : 25] And we thank you for your wonderful and sufficient provision in the person of your son Jesus. The bread of life. And we pray in his name.

Amen.