

Do you want to live forever?

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13. Ephesians 4:1-16, John 6:24-35

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I couldn't decide to call this, "do you want to live forever?" or "Does food heal all things?" If you'll bear with me, I will take you through the therapeutic impact of thought, food and action to bring you back to the importance of the bread of life.

There's a tension between Jesus telling us "He is the bread of life" and the Jewish tradition that chicken soup can heal all things - from viruses to divorce.

Chicken soup – I tell you, in the Jewish tradition, is powerful stuff - both as a pharmaceutical and a cultural bond. It is so strong that when I came down with a type A influenza, my cousin posted packets of chicken soup from America. Bless her. And it does work because I felt loved and we all know (for those of us who read *New Scientist*) that feelings of love and support strengthen the immune system.

There's one for the sceptics – praying over someone does work.

Just as positive attitudes can influence how you handle life's bumps and bruises. My sister used to write (and I think edit) for a series of books called, *Chicken soup for the soul*. These were short stories about the length of a daily reflection which were all about nice things that happened. Anyone could submit a story. It just had to be about an act of kindness or a healing experience.

The book was an overnight success and has now expanded into about 5 or 6 editions including special issues focussing on forgiveness and family. Talk about meeting a need!

Which strangely, brings me to the crying psalms. People see this Psalm as a very negative one but I can tell you, it meets more than David's needs. I loved poetry as a child and when I discovered the Psalms, I was beside myself with delight. Do you remember that in Protestant churches of the 50s and 60s there was almost a complete absence of the crying psalms or Laments. I know it's hard to remember something that wasn't there. You see, they were seen as somewhat unseemly. Too emotional.

When I found them, it was treasure! I couldn't imagine having such an honest and safe relationship with anyone. I couldn't imagine that you could wail, curse, complain, cry and confess. These people were doing it *with God!!* Oh my heavens. I grew up in a world where we couldn't do this to our parents, much less

God¹. We kept our pain to ourselves. Complaining to God was seen as not only distasteful but certainly disrespectful. The God of my childhood was more like a school principal – someone who watched us always looking for flaws and misdemeanours.

And yet, when you read the psalms, they don't seem courageous, just vulnerable and honest. What an amazing thing to be able to just let it all out – even your doubts and scepticism. It was a freedom I couldn't *imagine* and yet, here it was...in the Bible! (my secret book)²

It is pretty obvious that David wrote this Psalm later in life. He has the wisdom of hindsight and the burden of bad decisions and grief that only an older person can have. He is closer to the end than the beginning and yearns to be right with God. David does not want to live forever. Living forever means living with guilt and grief.

Has anyone been watching *Do You Want to Live Forever?*³ For you ABC Tv die-hards, it is a commercial production that looks at whether exercise and diet can turn back the biological clock. It was the 3rd highest ranking program for the period with 1.634 million viewers. Now **that** says something.

Anti-aging is a big industry right now. From cosmetics to injectables, vitamins to surgery, it is in the news every day. It is often the “medical breakthrough” in the evening news. Perhaps because scientists and journalists have reached the age when they realise, this life is not forever. There is a mad rush to discover the fountain of youth and of course, there's a lot of money to be made in it.

The cover and editorial in *New Scientist*⁴ referred to an article outlining the explosive number of vaccines in development to fight almost every disease attached to aging. You name it: cancers; Alzheimer's; hardening of the arteries; and much more. Vaccines can be used to slow an illness, treat an illness and they are hoping in some cases, such as Alzheimer's, to prevent it. Much of this rides on the back of the research into personalised cancer treatments which is well advanced. I already feel like a pin cushion.

There are a lot of economic benefits from healthy aging. It is obvious that it would save health systems a lot of money. Living independent healthy lives releases our children to enjoy their retirements. Where once we were driven from the work

¹ And certainly NOT to a priest or Rabbi

² In our house all the naughty books and the valuable ones were kept on the top shelf away from little hands. So I assumed the Bible was on the 'naughty' list so I would sneak it down and read it when no one was home. Turns out, it was up there because it was an heirloom.

³ [Watch Do You Want to Live Forever? Season 1, Catch Up TV \(9now.com.au\)](#), with Tracey Grimshaw and Dr Nick Coatsworth a TV series on 9Now.

⁴ “The end of aging”, *New Scientist*, 6 July 2024, p.5; “Immune to Aging”, p.32-35

force to make room for young people moving up. Now we are being asked to return because skills shortages in every sector. I have a friend in his 80s who will never run out of work as an electrician. There's just no young ones coming up behind him. COVID did in our back-packer supply of barkeepers, wait staff and baristas. Who else is available to work part-time, casual with split shifts for a low wage you couldn't live on? Older people, post children – that's who.

But then there's a downside as well⁵. As we live longer, we outlive our capital. I noticed in the United States that the people serving me in chain stores were much, much older than me. Older people couldn't afford health care without work. Closer to home, the 'new' staff at my local Woolworths tend to be 60+. Already, we live healthier and longer than our grandparents. We risk a 'population explosion'. There is not enough housing as it is. It puts pressure on food security. We rely on a certain number falling off the planet just as a certain number are born.

But the worst outcome is stagnation. When the old guard hangs on – nothing changes; no new ideas take root and no chances taken. The way things were done in the past holds progress in a bony grip.

What does all this have to do with the Bread of life, you might well ask.

Paul's Ephesian letter on the Body of Christ talks about the roles of the people of the church. But before he goes there he says, "...each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." This passage has often been either interpreted as 'these are the functional hierarchal positions of the church' OR 'it is the job of everyone to do these things. But what I think he is really saying is that the gifts, like manna from heaven, are meant to be used by anyone/everyone specifically to feed, to enhance, the larger work of the church. Each according to their measure of grace – or in other words, their capacity (and need) – and that capacity changes.

Manna from heaven was not just to feed the starving (metaphorically or otherwise) but to feed their faith.

Which brings me to John (at last!).

In this reading, Jesus is quite specific when he says you didn't look for me for what I've done, the miracles and stuff, but because 'you ate the loaves and you had your fill'⁶. He takes them on about instant gratification talking about food that spoils and how they, without regard, or even recognising what it means to have

⁵ "Live Long and Prosper" IBID

⁶ John 6:26

food from God. Food that lasts for an eternal life is something beyond earthly greed. He points out Moses did not make bread fall – God did.

In other words, all the miracles and healing don't mean anything unless people see them as signs pointing to the eternal gift of God through Jesus. Food is just food – unless we understand its source.

Do we want to live forever? Perhaps but not in this body. The miracle of faith is not found in a vaccine. If we can make lives longer and less painful then the downsides are definitely a price worth paying. But if we are living forever for selfish reasons, what use is the miracle? “The miracle that really matters is the miracle of faith, when God breaks through the misconceptions we have held about life, our pursuit of unsatisfying answers, our self-centred worlds, to reveal the radically new age embodied in and taught by Jesus.”⁷

There is another life.

Does food heal everything? When it is given or received as the bread of life, it does. It is in the loving giving. It is how faith and energy are transmitted from the source. It is not the food but in recognising the action, the source, the love in which it is offered.

Today, you have been fed. I hope you go out and feed others.

⁷ Bruggemann, Cousar et al Texts for Preaching, Year B, p 456