O Living Bread from Heaven

***Lutheran Service Book* 642** | study by Jon D. Vieker

Introduction

To introduce his sermon one Thanksgiving Day, a pastor held in his hands a loaf of bread and asked the question, "Where did this loaf of bread come from?" Eventually someone answered, "The grocery store." "Yes," he replied. "And where did the grocery store get it from?" "From the company that baked the bread," someone else replied. And so the conversation went, from the baker, to the miller, to the farmer, to the seed, to the soil, to the weather. Finally the pastor asked, "And where did the rain and the soil come from? Everyone knew the answer: from the Lord of heaven and earth.

Today's hymn is addressed to Jesus Christ, the "Living Bread from heaven," who comes in His Holy Supper to feed and comfort us with His body and blood.

- What do you think it means that Jesus is described as "Living Bread" in relation to the Lord's Supper? Why is the word "living" important?
- What kinds of blessings do we receive from this "Living Bread"?

Exploring the Scriptures

The readings for today provide a wonderful context in which to view the hymn. Read Is. 55:1–3.

- In verse 1, what type of food is being served? How much does it cost?
- In verses 2b–3, which of the five senses (surprisingly!) is connected with this eating? What does Rom. 10:17 reveal about the use of this sense?

In today's Holy Gospel (Matt. 14:13–21), Jesus multiples the five loaves to feed the crowd. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in all four Gospel accounts.

- In verse 19, Jesus "looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples." What does this remind you of in the liturgy? Why?
- According to verse 20, what was the result of their eating this meal?

Following John's account of this miracle (John 6:1– 15), the story continues throughout the remainder of chapter 6. Read John 6:32–35.

- Who is this "bread of God … who comes down from heaven" (v. 33)? What will this bread do for the world?
- What does Jesus promise in verse 35?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Rist (1607–1667) was a famous poet and Lutheran pastor who wrote the words to "O Living Bread from Heaven" and nearly 680 other hymns during his lifetime.

Like his contemporary, Paul Gerhardt, Rist lived through the horrors of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) as it raged across much of Europe. In Germany alone, the population was reduced by about 30 percent as a result of the destruction of twenty thousand villages and towns and the resulting widespread famine and disease.

The little village of Wedel, near Hamburg, Germany where Rist served as pastor his entire ministry, was no exception. It was sacked in 1643, and the musical instruments and organ in the parish church were destroyed along with much of the rest of the town.

- Imagine if some sort of disaster (tornado, earthquake, fire, etc.) were to destroy your church buildings and the homes surrounding them. Discuss what some of the challenges ahead might be for your congregation. How might these challenges affect morale?

Despite these hardships, Rist appears to have lived a contented life. He was one of the most prolific German hymn writers of his day, and made significant contributions to the poetic style in which hymn texts were written then. Yet few of his hymns have made it into English. Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878) first translated this hymn into English in 1858.

- Considering the tragedies of the Thirty Years' War, how does Rist's "living Bread from heaven" give the singer hope, encouragement and contentment?

- Where are such things found, according to the hymn? Why there?
- Make a list of what you consider to be some of the qualities of Rist's hymn that have enabled it to speak to Christians for nearly four centuries.

Text

This hymn text is written with language emphasizing the perspective of the individual ("You gave me all I wanted" (st. 3); "Lord, grant me then, thus strengthened" (st. 4)). Many hymns are written in this way, but many others are written from a corporate perspective ("O God, Our Help in Ages Past" (*LSB* 733); "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (*LSB* 656)).

- Do you consider the individual perspective of this hymn to be a strength or a weakness? Why?
- If the pronouns in this hymn were changed to "we," "our" and "us," would it make a difference? Why or why not?

This hymn has many additional biblical references and allusions. Stanza 1 draws from Exodus, when the Lord fed His people in the wilderness with manna from heaven. Read Ex. 16:2–7.

- In verses 2–3, what was the occasion for the Lord raining down bread from heaven on His people?
- In verse 6, what reason did the Lord give for His raining down bread from heaven on His people? What does this say about the Lord?

Stanza 2 describes the Lord's leading of His hungry people to the Lord's table ("this most holy place.") Read aloud together these words: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" (Is. 55:2).

- List some ways that we spend our money and time! on things which do not satisfy. Which of the Ten Commandments is this related to ultimately?
- Now compare Isaiah's words with the second half of stanza 2. What is the good news proclaimed in this stanza?

What does stanza 2 suggest really matters in life? Luther writes in the Large Catechism:

> "... Therefore, Christ asks me to eat and drink, so that this treasure [the Lord's Supper] may be my own and may benefit me as a sure pledge and token. In fact, it is the very same treasure that is appointed for me against my sins, death, and every disaster.
>
> On this account it is indeed called a food of souls, which nourishes and strengthens the new man" (LC V 22–23, 434).

- In stanza 3, what is this "food of souls" described as having the ability to do? How does the Lord's Supper do this?
- What are the eternal results, according to stanza 4?

Making the Connection

This hymn draws us to consider the many blessings given us in the Lord's Supper. How might the following lines speak to the blessings of the Lord's Supper in your life today?

- "The gifts that You have given / Have filled my heart with rest" (st. 1). What kind of "rest" or relief have you experienced as a result of receiving the Lord's Supper?
- "Oh, cup that heals our woes!" (st. 1). What sort of healing have you experienced as a result of receiving the Lord's Supper?
- "This food can death destroy" (st. 3). How will eating and drinking the Lord's Supper destroy death for you?

In Closing

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (*LSB*, p. 323). The Son of God, the Living Bread, came down from His Father in heaven to give His life for the life of the world, and in the Supper today, the living Christ gives us His body and blood to forgive us our sins and to give us life and salvation. "For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation" (*LSB*, p. 327).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 642.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 13A).