

THE GOSPEL OF

JOHN

I Am
the Bread
of Life

INTRODUCTION

John 6:22-71

At the height of the pandemic an interesting craze hit the western world. No matter what social media platform you turned to—from YouTube to Instagram and even Facebook, it seemed like everyone and their brother, and their mother and their cousin started making bread at home. Yeast became hard to find so everyone started learning to make sourdough.

Bread is called the “staff of life” because virtually every society that has ever existed has some form of bread. From the familiar sliced bread and rolls, baguettes, focaccia, and even bagels to the less familiar lavash (central Asia), chapatti (India), tortilla (yep, its bread) and even matzoh, everywhere you look bread can be found. It is the food of peasants, the stuff of basic subsistence.

It shows up throughout the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, from manna in the wilderness to the Lord’s Supper, bread becomes a symbol of God’s provision so it is no surprise that the first of Jesus’ “I am” statements John records is “I am the bread of life” (6:35). As common as bread is, as natural an illustration, today’s passage shows just how easy it is for even the provision of bread to be misunderstood and misused.

Thus far in John we have seen John the Baptist testify that Jesus is the Lamb of God, Jesus gather disciples, turn water into wine, have deep conversations with religious leaders and Samaritan women, he has healed a lame man and has shown that his authority comes from the Father. Yesterday Jesus fed 5,000, then walked on water in the middle of the night to evade those who would force him to be king. Today, as Jesus explains the significance of the sign of the bread and fish, a change takes place. To this point individuals have questioned, but the crowds have followed. Today Jesus’ hard teaching will stir up and scandalize the crowds, and even many disciples will become disillusioned and leave.

How is it that this claim, “I am the bread of life,” will stir up such controversy? Let’s find out.

OPEN IT

1. How does the smell of bread make you feel? What’s your favorite bread?

READ IT

John 6:22-71

EXPLORE IT

2. What is the setting of the passage?
3. What does Jesus say is the actual reason the crowds came to look for him?
4. What Old Testament event does Jesus tie to the miracle he had performed the previous day?
5. How do the crowds respond to Jesus' teaching?
6. How do the disciples respond to Jesus' teaching?

APPLY IT

Scholars are pretty unanimous in the view that John 6 intentionally evokes the Exodus, which was the central formative story for Jewish identity. The feeding of the 5,000 takes place near Passover (v.6), the miracle of the bread would invoke the manna God provided, even Jesus walking on water has connections (crossing the Red Sea), and as we will see, Jesus' teaching has connections to God giving Israel the Law. This was more than just a story from Israel's past. Karen Jobes explains:

The exodus of the Israelites from Egypt was the seminal event of Israel's history still commemorated today in the feast of Passover. That experience of exodus and travel from Egypt to the Promised Land was marked especially by the deliverance from the angel of death, by crossing the Red Sea, by God's provision of manna in the wilderness, and by the giving of the Law of God at Sinai. John 6 significantly engages each of these four Old Testament concepts to present the significance of the incarnation of the Son of God in the man Jesus. In these early chapters of John's gospel, we find hints of the violence that will end Jesus' life (3:14; 6:51). Because Jesus is "the Lamb of God" (1:29, 36) and the events of John 6 occur near Passover, readers cannot help but infer that Jesus' death will be a sacrifice similar to those offered at Passover and with an efficacious protection from death to those who partake of the sacrifice as suggested by the death-defying blood of the first Passover lamb.

...

Passover also held future-looking hopes of national restoration. Just as God had brought the Israelites out of Egypt and constituted them as a nation, first-century Jews celebrated the hope that one day they would again be an independent nation free from the occupation of Rome. In the first century this hope interpreted prophecies found in Isaiah 53 (the Suffering Servant), Isaiah 54 (the rebuilding of Jerusalem), and Isaiah 55 (the eschatological messianic banquet).¹

This background provided Jesus fertile ground to show who he was and how he is both fulfilling and transforming the Jewish story into something much different and bigger than what the crowds expect. John tells the story in a way that his later audience (and us today) will see who Jesus is and be challenged by the radical claim of Jesus.

- 7. The crowds originally followed Jesus because he healed the sick (v.2), they chased him down because they had been fed (vv.22-26). At the same time, they recognized on some level that he was a teacher with an important message (vv. 14, 25). How is it possible for us to both follow Jesus on the one hand and get caught up in the "bread and circuses" on the other—at the same time? How do we guard against the latter?**

¹ Karen H. Jobes. *John Through Old Testament Eyes*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 133-135.

8. The crowd that followed Jesus was likely quite poor (barley loaves, v.9, were the bread of the poorest people), so the food Jesus provided was not just a nice surprise but likely something they needed. Obviously, Jesus was not indifferent to their needs or he would not have fed them in the first place. What does his response to them in vv. 26-27 tell us about our ability to let even the things we need cloud what is truly important?
9. We in the modern west generally do not have the same kind of material needs that the crowds who followed Jesus had. How does our relative affluence (compared to them, not one another) impact our ability to hear what Jesus is saying in verse 27? Is it easier or hard for us? Why do you think that?

Verses 27 is, in many ways, the turning point of the passage, one which can be easy for us in the modern world to miss, but which was truly revolutionary for that moment. Jesus claims that the people following him should work for the food he will give them—food that endures to eternal life—and that God has set his “seal of approval” on him. These are huge claims. Then, when they ask for a list of things to do (v.28), he tells them to believe in him.

Here his charge against the crowds is that the ‘sign’ of the feeding . . . is meant to lead you to the true food: the food the son of man will give (verse 27), the food which *is* Jesus himself (verse 35). What matters is not just what Jesus can do for you; what matters is who Jesus *is*. Only if you are prepared to be confronted by that in a new way can you begin to understand what he can really do for you, what he really wants for you. . .

The question of who Jesus really is now comes to the fore, and will steadily dominate the discussion both in this chapter and in those to come. First, he is the one upon whom the Father has set his seal (verse 27): God, like a goldsmith with a hallmark, or like a king with his great seal, has stamped this person with the mark that declares not only where he comes from but that he carries his authority. What Jesus is doing, in other words, bears the marks that say: this is the kind of thing that, in Israel’s scriptures, God himself does.

Second, the demand that God is making on them—the crowd realize that Jesus is pointing out that they can’t just expect bread on demand, that if this really is a heaven-sent renewal movement there will be a new standard to which they must sign up. This means that God is making a demand on them, and it is this: that they believe in Jesus. No new exposition of the detailed commandments of the law; rather, a command which, if it is to be obeyed, will require a change of heart.

It will require, in particular, the recognition that in Jesus, and in everything he is doing, the same God is at work who was at work in the Exodus story.²

10. Why do we tend, like the crowds, to look for lists of things that we have to do as our default way of relating to God?

² N.T. Wright. *John for Everyone Part 1: Chapters 1–10*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 79–80.

11. What does the interaction between the crowd and Jesus in verses 26-29 tell us about the relationship between working and faith, especially in light of the ironic statement in verse 27 to work for food that the son of man (Jesus) will give? (Many scholars see a direct connection to Isaiah 55, especially verses 1-3, which may help you answer.)

The crowds don't balk at Jesus' claim to have the seal of God, but in effect say "prove it." You would think that he had already proven enough, but they ask him to do it again (vv.30-31. "as it is written" could refer to Ex. 16:4, Neh. 9:15 or Ps. 78:4-5. Likely it is intended to evoke the idea broadly).

They implicitly request more bread to prove that Jesus is as great as Moses and sent by God.

Manna became a symbol of the messianic age when "they will eat of it in those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time" (2 Baruch 29:8).³ This expectation is also reflected in Revelation 2:17, where "someone like a son of man" (Rev. 1:13) will offer the hidden manna. Jesus takes the opportunity afforded by the feeding of the five thousand to show himself as the source of that promised manna.⁴

12. Are you ever tempted, like the crowd, to tell God "Prove it!" even after you have seen him work? Why do you think that is?

³ 2 Baruch is a Jewish religious text from the late first century or early second century. It is not Scripture but gives us a glimpse into how at least some Jews were thinking around the time of Jesus.

⁴ Jobes, 128-129.

13. Reread John 6:32-33. How can we, like the crowds, be tempted to think too small about God's "true bread from heaven"?
14. What does this episode, especially Jesus' response in v. 36, tell us about our desires for signs and their ability to lead us to belief?
15. Though verses 35-51 contain some of the most challenging of all Jesus' teachings, they also include great promise—"whoever comes to me I will never cast out," I will "I shall lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day" (that/it in this case is people). How should we be reassured instead of repelled by this? Do you struggle with this idea? Why or why not?

16. The crowds didn't struggle with God's choice, but with Jesus' claim that he came from heaven (see vv. 41-42) because they knew that this was a claim to being more than a prophet who was better than Moses or the Messiah. This was a claim to divinity. How does this claim still bother people today?

Like their ancestors in the wilderness, the crowds grumbled at the bread God offers. Jesus pushes them harder—“And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v.51). When they complain again he pushes them even harder (vv.53-58): eat my flesh and drink my blood. The image is gruesome, and was especially abhorrent to Jews because the Law forbade drinking blood (Lev. 17:11, Dt. 12:23). Today, we tend to read these verses in light of the Lord's Supper or Communion. While it is likely that John has some desire to connect this event to the Lord's Supper, Jesus hadn't instituted it yet. Jesus has just spent a great deal of time telling them that he offers a better sort of bread, a better manna, that “whoever believes has eternal life” (v.47), and he will say “the flesh is no help at all” (v. 63) so clearly he is not saying “make sure that you take communion.” Jobes offers insight:

The origin of the ingestion of the word of God in the Old Testament tradition may have begun when Ezekiel ate the scroll containing God's words (Eze 2:7-3:3). In later Jewish tradition manna from heaven came to symbolize the Torah and Wisdom tradition that God's people were to ingest and make part of themselves, fueling their lives. And so what appears as perhaps a bizarre metaphor to English readers, to eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood. Did have antecedent concepts [precedent] in Judaism. The strange twist is that here it is being applied to a person, a person who is the Word of God.⁵

17. How does the idea of Jesus as the Bread of Life we must consume challenge you? How are you ingesting him, making who he is and what he taught a part of who you are?

⁵ Jobes, 135.

- 18. If “you are what you eat,” what does the metaphor of ingesting Jesus tell us about what our character should be as Christians? What does it say about the care we should place on the kinds of spiritual nourishment we receive?**

This teaching of Jesus was hard for the crowds, even for many disciples (v.60, note that Jesus had many more disciples than the 12, see v.67). There is so much here—accepting that Jesus is more than a good religious teacher but actually God, that God alone is responsible for drawing people to himself, that Jesus is THE way that we can have true spiritual nourishment—salvation.

Often the teachings of Jesus will be hard. They will require us to give up our expectations and desires, even ones that seem right and good to us (the crowds after all were seeking the Messiah’s Kingdom, they just didn’t understand what it would be). Yet Jesus draws us, sometimes even including betrayers. Peter at once acknowledges the difficulty of Jesus’ teaching and the need to accept it in verses 68-69. It almost seems that he offers the response in a plaintive or wistful tone.

- 19. How can we emulate Peter in this case, being at once honest with our doubts and struggles as well as believing that Jesus, the Holy One of God, has words of life?**