

Thru the Bible: Gospel of John: Bread of Life Discourse

Review: Feeding of the 5000 (6:1-15)

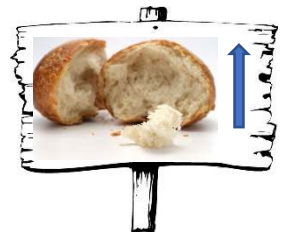
The Bread of Life Discourse (6:22-71): A unique feature of John's gospel is the inclusion of long discourses or monologues which often follow an encounter or discussion between Jesus and others. Sometimes, it's even unclear where Jesus' words end and John's own theological commentary begins (e.g. John 3:5-15 versus 3:16-21). Whereas all three Synoptic Gospels have the feeding of the 5000 story, only John includes a long discourse based on the feeding which draws out the Christological implications of the miracle – what does this event reveal about the identity and nature of Jesus, and what decisions do Jesus' hearers/readers need to consider as to their personal acceptance or rejection of who he is (belief/unbelief)?

Setting of the Discourse: Later in the discourse John tells us that Jesus and his disciples (a larger group than the twelve) are in the synagogue of Capernaum, where Jesus is teaching, presumably on the Sabbath (6:59). Because it is near the time of the Passover, it is not unlikely that the scripture reading designated for that Sabbath was part of the OT manna story, which Jesus then explains in relation to his own vocation, destiny and relationship with the Father.

A. Jesus as the Bread from Heaven (6:22-40): The day following the feeding miracle, some of those who “ate their fill of the loaves” (6:26) sought Jesus out and found him in Capernaum. Here, they engaged him in an increasingly hostile discussion about his work in relation to the works of God.

1. Signs, works and the bread of God (6:25-34): In this first stage of the discussion (level 1), Jesus is trying to move his hearers from a physical and literal understanding of the feeding experience to the deeper significance of the miracle of the loaves and fishes as it pertains to his nature and identity.

- Bread that perishes versus bread that endures for eternal life (6:27):
- On him [the Son of Man] God the Father has set his seal (6:27):
- The “works” of God versus the “work” of God (6:28-30):
- Jesus correcting their biblical interpretation (6:31-34):



2. The 'Bread of Life' and eternal life (6:35-40): We now come to second stage (level 2) and the first of seven “I am” statements in the gospel, which are based on OT declarations of the unique authority of Yahweh and his exclusive role as sovereign Creator. It is crucial to see the intentional parallels to previous divine assertions in the Scriptures to fully appreciate what John is emphasizing concerning the relationship between Jesus and God the Father, which should come as no surprise, considering how he started the Gospel: “The Word was God” and “all things came into being through him” (1:1-3).

- “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 41, 48):
- The “will of the Father” (6:38-40):
- Eternal life and resurrection (6:39, 40, 44):

“*Eternal life* is the quality of life, sharing the inner life of Jesus, that is on offer at once to anyone who believes. *Eternal* tells you what sort of life it is, as well as the fact that it goes on after death: it is the life of the **age to come**, the new life which God has always planned to give to his world. But the form this life will take in the end is not that of the disembodied spirit that so many people today assume is what Christians think about life after death. The eternal life that begins in the present when someone believes, and continues in the future beyond death, will eventually take the form of the **resurrection** life already spoken of in 5:25-29. The entire story John is telling is designed to end with Jesus pioneering the way into this newly embodied life, and the promise of the present chapter is that this life will be shared by all who taste of the living bread.” **N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone*, 83-84**

B. The Response of the Jews (6:41-59): In this third stage (level 3), the disbelief and grumbling of “the Jews” parallels the unbelief and complaining of the Israelites against God and Moses in the wilderness. And, as with the OT community, Jesus speaks here of a faithful remnant who recognize the Father's chosen messenger and both hear *and obey* God's teaching, quoting Isa. 54:13, “And they shall all be taught by God.”

1. Doubting the Incarnation (6:41-42): Like Nathanael in John 1, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” – Jesus' hearers can't reconcile what they know of his family background with his emphatic claim of divine origin, despite the miracle they witnessed and partook of.

2. Recognizing Jesus as the “living bread” (6:48-51): The real issue is accepting Jesus as a permanent fulfillment to the problem of human hunger and thirst at a deeper level than the physical. This existential need for God was recognized even in the original manna story: *“He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna...in order to make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” Deut. 8:3*

3. Digesting Jesus’ Hard Words (6:51-59): *“This bread is my flesh [sarx]...Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (6:51, 53).* Why might these repeated statements be offensive to Jesus’ Jewish listeners, and in what ways could they be misunderstood or misinterpreted by later readers?

a. Blood as the symbol of life and the divine prohibition against eating blood:

“If anyone of the house of Israel or of the foreigners who reside among you eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for as life, it is the blood that makes atonement” Lev. 17:10-11

“We should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from what has been strangled and from blood. For in every city...Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues” Acts 15:19-21

b. The denial of Jesus’ flesh in early Christian heresy (Docetism):

- *“This is the one who came by water and **blood**, Jesus Christ, not with water only but with water and **blood**....These are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the **blood**, and these three agree” 1 John 5:6-8*
- *“And they [docetists] abstain from the eucharist, because they deny that the eucharist signifies the **flesh** [sarx] of our Saviour Jesus Christ; in their eyes he had no **flesh**, so the eucharist is meaningless to them...for them life in Christ is purely spiritual” Ignatius to the Smyrnans 6-7*

c. Pagan rumors of Christian cannibalism: “Take, this is my body...This is my blood” (Mark 14:2-23)

*“For I myself, too, when I was delighting in the doctrines of Plato, and heard the Christians slandered, and saw them fearless of death... perceived that it was impossible that they could be living in [such] wickedness and pleasure. For...who that counts it good to feast on human flesh, could welcome death that he might be deprived of his enjoyments?...For having put some to death on account of the accusations falsely brought against us, they also dragged to the torture our servants...and by dreadful torments forced them to admit those fabulous actions...about which we are the less concerned, because none of these actions are really ours. For why did we not even publicly profess that these were the things which we esteemed good, saying that the mysteries of Saturn are performed when we slay a man and...drink our fill of blood, as it is said we do.” Justin Martyr, **Second Apology**, ch. 12*

C. The Response of the Disciples (6:60-71): The clear and unambiguous statements of Jesus concerning his authority and relationship with God the Father now become the turning point even for many of his own Jewish followers, who are offended by the “blasphemous” implications of his teaching. This “parting of the ways” may also speak to divisions in the church of John’s day over the incarnation of “God in the flesh” (sarx). As there were 12 baskets of bread left over from the feeding, now there are only 12 disciples (who represent the new Israel) left who reaffirm their belief in the truth of Jesus’ identity.

Application: *Why such a negative strong reaction - we might ask? To something that, if true, effects one’s whole worldview!*

1. The problem of presuppositions: We all grow up with certain biases and presuppositions which are affected by the individual circumstances of our upbringing, experiences and education. These become the triggers for our reactions to new ideas and different perspectives. And unfortunately, this can contribute to unhealthy divisions in the church, which mirror the increasing partisanship we see in our current culture. How can we foster *unity* without settling for a bland *uniformity*?

2. The importance of diversity: Over time, people who listen to one voice gradually tune out all other voices and eventually think they have a monopoly on the truth. They stop being listeners and learners, and instead of weighing many voices and making balanced judgments, they unquestionably follow and depend on their favorite preacher, teacher or politician. As leaders and teachers, we should encourage our people to listen to opposite points of view and give them the resources and training to be able to cultivate discernment and make their own judgments on debated or questionable matters.

*It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others. Charles Spurgeon
Wonderful things in the Scriptures I see, many of them put there by you and by me”*