

John 6—the Bread of Life

In John 6:2, we read that a great multitude was following Jesus “because they were seeing the signs which He was performing”. John called the miracles of Jesus “Signs” because he was teaching that these signs pointed to Jesus as the promised Messiah and the Son of God. Jesus and His twelve disciples were seeking a break from the crowds so they got in a boat and travelled across the Sea of Galilee on the north side to a lonely uninhabited place. Before long the huge crowd seeking Jesus followed along the land until they arrived where Jesus was. Being late in the day in a deserted area, Jesus took the opportunity to teach his disciples a lesson in faith. How do you meet the needs of shepherdless sheep (Mark 6:34)? Where do you go to get the resources to feed and minister to the people that God gives you the opportunity to help? In order to learn the answer, Jesus tested His disciples by saying, “Where are we to buy bread that these may eat?” Jesus knew what He was going to do, but Philip, Andrew, Simon, and the disciples were clueless. They basically said that they did not have the money to buy the food which was no where to be found anyway, and it was too late to travel to get any—meaning it can’t be done. Andrew did come up with a lad who had the paltry sum of five barley loaves and two fish, but what could you do with that? Jesus would take what little His disciples had and show them that with their obedience and faith He could use whatever resources they provided to produce what they needed to take care of the people. Jesus then instructed His disciples to have the crowd sit down on the grass in groups of 50 (Luke 9:14). By using His disciples, Jesus gave each of them a basket full of fish and bread to take to the groups of 50. Since it says there were 5,000 men, it is safe to say that with women and children there could have been 20,000 in the crowd. Therefore divide the 20,000 into groups of 50 and then divide by the 12 disciples, and you see that each disciple had to make about 33 trips back and forth between Jesus and the crowd to fill everyone up. How many trips back and forth did it take before Simon Peter and the disciples figured out the answer to, “Where do I go, in whom do I trust, and how do I get the resources I need to minister to the people?” After everyone ate their fill, the twelve baskets were still full of food.

The People’s Reaction

The people of Israel had been taught that Moses predicted the Messiah in Deuteronomy 18:18-19. Now the crowd saw Jesus as that Messiah. Moses had said that God would send a great prophet like Moses in the sense that he would deliver his people, do many miracles, and speak the Word of God. Therefore when the people witnessed Jesus’ miracles and teaching, they decided it was time for Him to also deliver them. John 6:15 says that Jesus knew the people were intending to take Him by force to make Him king. This would cause a sharp divide between the crowd and Jesus which would continue into the next day and result in a heated exchange that theologians call The Bread of Life Discourse. Jesus’ immediate reaction was to withdraw from the crowd to keep this from happening. At this point it is important to examine the purpose statements of Jesus as how He saw Himself as a fulfillment of Moses’ prophecy. In what sense was Jesus a deliverer? Jesus repeatedly taught that He came to serve, and to give His life a ransom for

many. He said He came to save people from their sin. Jesus would deliver them from their greatest problem and their greatest enemy—sin and death. The people, on the other hand, were looking for a deliverer who would restore Israel to peace and prosperity. In 28 AD, Israel was an impoverished, subjugated, conquered people being ripped off by Rome, and also their own corrupt religious leaders. They wanted Jesus to lead them, free them from Rome, make them a great nation again, and give them all the material possessions they dreamed of. Therefore, since Jesus' purpose was different from theirs, in Verse 15 we read that Jesus “withdrew” from them.

The Bread of Life

After the great miracle of the feeding of the 5000, Jesus did another really cool miracle that night just for His disciples by putting them in a boat on the sea all night hopelessly rowing against the wind. When they were totally exhausted and ready to give up after rowing for like 8 hours against a strong wind (sounds like my life), Jesus came walking to them on the water and delivered them to the other side in the vicinity of Capernaum. That morning the huge crowd was desperately searching for Jesus, and finally found Him at Capernaum. The excited crowd questioned Jesus as to where He had been and when had He arrived, all with the attempt to find out why He was so elusive to a crowd who wanted to make Him king. Jesus explained their motivation in John 6:26-27. They were seeking Him for all the wrong reasons. They wanted Him to provide for all their physical, temporal needs, but He came to provide for their spiritual needs. They were seeking Him because He had done “signs” (miracles), but they failed to see what the signs signified—that the Savior had come. Jesus then proceeded to carry on a back and forth dialogue with the crowd in an effort to divert their attention to the spiritual realm. Nevertheless, they continued to relate everything He said to their materialistic needs. Jesus told them not to “work” or seek for the kind of food which perishes, but to seek the food which endures to eternal life. This play on words involved the context of the crowd running around the lake seeking after Jesus to create for them more bread, but He was telling them that they should be seeking Him to provide salvation. They, still clueless, asked about what sort of work they should be doing, and Jesus revealed that it's not so much what they did, but what they needed to believe, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”

In John 6:30-31, the crowd issued a challenge to Jesus to prove who He was by giving them a sign. In fact, they wanted Him to provide their daily bread miraculously like Moses had in the wilderness with the manna from heaven. Jesus would then use the image of bread as a metaphor to reveal what He came to do. Bread was an excellent symbol because for all of recorded history, bread has been the staple food that every civilization has eaten. It is referred to as the “staff of life”. All over the world for thousands of years, everyone has taken grain of every kind and ground it into flour and added water and other ingredients to make dough to cook and eat on a daily basis. In the history of Israel after the Exodus, the people wandering in the wilderness depended each and every day on the bread from heaven that God provided which they called “manna”. The crowd following Jesus thought that would be a good beginning if Jesus would duplicate Moses' feat as a sign that He was the prophet Moses had promised. Jesus tried

to redirect their attention by telling them it wasn't Moses, but God who gave them the manna from heaven, and now God had given them a better "bread out of heaven" referring to Himself. In fact, from v.32-58, I count about 12 times that Jesus repeated to the crowd that He was sent by God from heaven to give them life. When they replied, "Super, give us this new kind of bread"; Jesus blew their mind by saying in Jn.6:35, "I am the bread of life...but you have seen Me, and yet do not believe." In verse 40, He lays out the will of God along with how they must respond, "that everyone who beholds the Son of God and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I myself will raise him up on the last day."

Another recurring theme in John 6 is the crowd's progression of unbelief which is rooted in their disappointment in Jesus. They want Him to be a conquering king to lead them to peace and prosperity, and they don't realize that first and foremost Jesus came to fix their real problems of sin and death. Even though Jesus repeatedly (8 times) told them they needed to believe in Him as He really was, they actually became more and more removed from Him. In verse 25-40, they were clueless, but after Jesus informed them of the truth they became argumentative and grumbled, and in v.52-64 they were offended and disagreeable; and in v.66 they rejected Him and withdrew. I was thinking about Jesus' methodology, because every other religious leader would have toned it down rather than lose their audience all together. It really seems that Jesus was confrontational in order to reveal their unbelief, and confirm the truth about Himself. After Jesus thinned the ranks, He turned to the only audience He had left, the twelve, and in v.67 said, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" I remember the first time I studied this I held my breath wondering if these clueless disciples would fall away also. Peter's response seems to show even their reluctance to believe in the real Jesus as opposed to who they had hoped for, yet at least Peter knows three things: 1. Only Jesus has the words of eternal life. We can't quit the only one who has all the truth. 2. Jesus is the Holy One of God. They believe and know through experience that Jesus has come from heaven to speak the Word of God and carry out God's plan of redemption. Even if His words are troubling, there is nowhere else to go for answers. 3. They believe in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. That is Peter's assumption at least, but he does not realize that Judas actually does not, so Jesus corrects him in v.70. We can see three types of "disciples" in John 6, those who follow out of curiosity and self interest, but fall away easily; those who cannot quit because they are totally committed, and one who has never believed but will not leave because he has a hidden agenda.

The Real Jesus or the Fake Jesus ?

As we study the three kinds of disciples in this story, we notice that the largest group has a thoroughly wrong view of who Jesus really is. Their view is dominated by materialism and self interest. They are just like the "name it and claim it" group in today's church, those who like the "prosperity gospel". Their fake Jesus wants us to be healthy and wealthy. When the real Jesus starts talking about sin and condemnation and His blood being shed, they want no part of that. This causes an uneasiness for the reader of John 6 as we must ask ourselves, "To whom can we identify, the crowd or the eleven committed disciples?" As Peter correctly said, what is at stake is eternal life.

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