

4

The Bread of Life

John 6:1—8:11

a Feeding the Multitude (6:1-13)

Jesus . . . took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted.
—John 6:11a

Apart from the Resurrection, Jesus' feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels. The apostle John was probably familiar with some of other accounts of this event by the other Gospel writers. As an eyewitness, however, he added some revealing details concerning Philip and Andrew's involvement. The fact that John retold a story that was probably already well known is an indication of the impact this miracle had on people.

According to Matthew, Jesus

retreated from the crowds to a remote place after hearing of the execution of John the Baptist (see Matt. 14:13). The apostle John noted that Jesus withdrew by crossing the Sea of Galilee, the name by which the lake was known during Jesus' day (John 6:1). By the time John wrote his Gospel account, the lake was called "the Sea of Tiberias," named after the Roman emperor who reigned during Jesus' earthly ministry.

Although Jesus sailed to the

The Sea of Galilee



other side of the lake to be alone with His disciples, a multitude of people kept following Him. Many of them had seen Jesus miraculously heal the sick. Some probably wanted to be healed of an illness themselves. Others no doubt were curious to see Him perform more miraculous signs. Still others may have believed He was the promised Messiah and wanted to witness the deliverance of God's people from foreign oppression (vss. 2, 3). Whatever their motives, Jesus had compassion on them when He saw them. Matthew said that Jesus showed His compassion by meeting them and healing the sick among them (see Matt. 14:14).

John noted that this event occurred near the time for the Jewish Passover Feast (John 6:4). Evidently the crowd flocking to Jesus grew as Jewish pilgrims eagerly joined the throng on their way to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. When Jesus saw them, He asked Philip where they could get bread to feed such a large number of people. Philip was a good person to ask about the availability of food since he was from nearby Bethsaida and would know the area well (see 1:44). But Jesus also wanted to test Philip—He already knew what He was about to do (6:5, 6).

Ask Yourself . . . *How has Jesus tested me recently?*

Philip's answer to Jesus' question expressed the impracticability of such a task. Eight months' wages (about two hundred denarii) would

not be enough to give everyone just a bite (vs. 7). A denarius was a day's wage for an unskilled laborer or a soldier at that time. Two hundred denarii was far beyond the financial resources of their band. In effect, Philip was saying to Jesus, "Your suggestion is impossible to carry out!" Perhaps after the miracle was accomplished, Philip better understood how God could accomplish the impossible. No matter how insurmountable an obstacle may look, we can always find comfort in the fact that God is able to accomplish the impossible.

Andrew, on the other hand, brought someone to Jesus who had something to offer. Though Andrew wondered how this problem could be solved, he had enough faith to at least take the first step (vss. 8, 9).

Ask Yourself . . . *Does God want me to take a first step of faith in any particular direction?*

This little boy Andrew brought to Jesus was undoubtedly poor. Barley bread was the cheapest kind of bread at the time, and the boy's seafood was probably just a couple of pickled fish not much bigger than sardines.

Seeing that His disciples were at a loss as to how the people could be fed, Jesus took charge by instructing His disciples to get everyone to settle on the grass on the hillside (vs. 10). John numbered the men at about five thousand, but women and children were also present (see Matt. 14:21), so there could have been ten thousand to fifteen thousand people there that day.

As they were all sitting, Jesus blessed the food with a prayer of thanksgiving. He then handed the bread and the fish to His disciples, who distributed them among the people until they were all fully satisfied (John 6:11). The Lord had miraculously multiplied the boy's tiny offering. In the same way, God is able to multiply whatever we have to offer Him, as long as it is offered in faith.

After the people had eaten, Jesus told His disciples to gather the fragments that were left on the ground so that none of the food would go to waste. This instruction would not have seemed unusual to His disciples since it was customary for servants to pick up and eat the leftovers after a Jewish feast. There were enough remaining pieces of bread to fill the baskets of the twelve disciples, who had served the multitude (vss. 12, 13).

John 6:14-24 in Brief

After Jesus fed the multitude, the people wanted to force Him to be their king. The kind of king they wanted, one who would overthrow Israel's oppressors, was not in God's plan. So Jesus retreated into the hills to be alone with His Father.

The disciples did not see Jesus again until they were on a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. As gusty winds made the waters rage, they saw Jesus approaching them. At first they were terrified because

He was walking on water, but His words calmed them and together they reached Capernaum. After the people discovered that Jesus had returned to His hometown, they rushed to Capernaum to look for Him.

b Giving the True Bread from Heaven (6:25-40)

Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." —John 6:35

When the people found Jesus, they asked Him when He had arrived in Capernaum. They were confused about how Jesus got to the other side of the lake since He had not embarked on the boat with His disciples (vs. 25). They were obviously unaware that Jesus had joined His disciples by walking on the water.

Jesus refused to answer the people's question. Instead, He dealt directly with their motives for seeking Him. Since Jesus had provided them with a miraculous meal, they wanted more. They were so focused on satisfying their physical needs that they didn't even consider the spiritual implications of this miracle. Jesus admonished them not to put a priority on material desires, which have no lasting value, but to work

for the spiritual food that He provides. Because the heavenly Father had placed His seal of approval on the Son, this spiritual food was guaranteed to produce the eternal results He was promising (vss. 26, 27).

Jesus' listeners misunderstood what He was talking about. When Jesus mentioned "work," they thought of rules and regulations they must regularly keep in order to earn God's favor. They asked Jesus what works they must do to receive this food. Only one "work" was necessary—that was to believe in the one God had sent, Jesus Christ (vss. 28, 29).

After all Jesus had done, it seems incredible that these questioners would demand another sign to prove that He was the Son of Man, that is, the Messiah. After all, Jesus had performed many miraculous signs before (vs. 26), which included the healing of their sick (see Matt. 14:14). In fact, the sign they suggested was giving them the same kind of manna that their ancestors lived on in the wilderness before they entered the promised land. But didn't Jesus do just that when He fed the multitude? Apparently they wanted a long-lasting supply of manna from heaven that would feed their entire nation. Jesus fed them with earthly bread. They wanted Jesus to at least duplicate Moses' feat before they would believe in Him (John 6:30, 31).

Ask Yourself . . . *What signs of God have I witnessed?*

Once more Jesus had to correct His interrogators. It was not Moses who gave the manna from heaven to their ancestors, but God. Further-

Callous Capernaum

Capernaum was a town in the district of Galilee on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The town was large enough to have a customs post (Mark 2:14), a military garrison (Matt. 8:5), and a synagogue (John 6:59). Little is known of its origin and demise except that it flourished as a predominantly Jewish settlement from the first century B.C. to the seventh century A.D.

Though Capernaum was Christ's home and headquarters during His Galilean ministry, and though Peter and some of the other disciples had their families there, the citizens of that town rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Their unbelief prompted Jesus to predict Capernaum's destruction (Matt. 11:23, 24; Luke 10:15).

more, the manna that God gave in the Sinai wilderness was not the bread of life. In fact, the true bread of God is the Messiah, who comes from heaven to offer eternal life to the entire world (vss. 32, 33)

The people asked Jesus for the bread of God, probably not really believing that He could provide such a staple. In a way, their request was like the request of the woman at the well, who flippantly asked Jesus for living water so she could be relieved of the task of fetching water. In the same way, the people wanted a never-ending supply of bread (vs. 34). Materialistic self-interest was behind both requests. Even today the world's interest in God (when it does appear) usually does not extend beyond meeting material needs.

Jesus' response is the first of the seven "I am" declarations in John's Gospel that point to Christ's divine nature. Jesus told the people that He is the bread of life. Only in Him can a person find the sustenance necessary to nourish one's soul. His statement, in fact, was an invitation for them to come to Him and place their faith in Him. All who did would never be spiritually hungry or thirsty again (vs. 35).

Despite all that Jesus had done and all that He had said to them, the people still did not believe in Him. His promises meant little to them. What Jesus had to offer they did not want (vs. 36).

Those who come to Christ have been given to Jesus by God. Whoever comes to Christ will never be

turned away. Jesus came down from heaven to do the will of the Father. Six times in this context Jesus mentioned that He had come from heaven to indicate His divine origin (vss. 33, 38, 41, 50, 51, 58). His mandate was unambiguous. His purpose was to save and to raise up (from the dead) those who had placed their trust in Him. His ability to resurrect the dead would be the final proof of His God-given authority. He would not lose a single person His Father had drawn to Christ. Everyone who looks to Jesus and believes in Him will ultimately be saved at Christ's appearing (vss. 37-40).

C Eating the Bread of Life (6:41-59)

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

—John 6:51

The disbelief of the crowd now surfaced as they murmured among themselves their skepticism about Jesus' claim to be God's bread from heaven. In effect, they said to one another, "It's incredible that Jesus has the audacity to claim divine origin when we know His parents, Joseph and Mary." Evidently some of them had known Jesus for years as the son of a carpenter from Nazareth. Their cynicism compelled them

to oppose Him (vss. 41, 42).

Jesus chastised the crowd for their grumbling. Their disbelief was not unexpected, however, for unless God draws people to Him, they will show no interest in belief (vss. 43, 44). To support His statement, Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, who said, "They will all be taught by God" (vs. 45; see Isa. 54:13). Everyone who seeks God and truly listens to Him will eventually be drawn to Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do I usually sense that God is drawing me to the Lord?*

The Lord said to Moses that no one could see the face of God and live (see Exod. 33:20). No person except the Son has seen the heavenly Father. Jesus was describing to His hearers the intimacy that exists between the Father and the Son. This intimacy gave Him the authority to speak as He did (John 6:46).

Once again Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you" (vs. 47) to emphasize what He was about to say. He wanted to make it absolutely clear to His listeners that He would give eternal life to those who put their faith in Him. Once more He declared to them that He was the bread of life. The manna God gave the Israelites in the desert provided only temporary nourishment. Those who ate the bread of life that comes from heaven, that is, those who trust in Christ, would never die in the eternal sense (vss. 48, 49).

Though both the manna and Jesus had come down from heaven, only Christ, who stood before them,

What Is It?

After the Lord delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, Moses led them into the Sinai desert, where they bitterly complained that they would die of hunger. The Lord miraculously provided food for them. When the people first discovered this food, they asked, "What is it?" (Exod. 16:15), which in Hebrew is the word *man*. In Greek, this word is translated *manna*.

The food appeared on the ground every morning, except on the Sabbath. If it was left overnight, it became wormy and rotten. On the day before the Sabbath there was a double portion, which lasted for two days. Apparently it looked like white frost and tasted like honey. Manna could be ground and baked into wafers. The whole nation of Israel subsisted on this bread from heaven for the forty years in the wilderness until the Israelites entered Canaan and lived off the fruit of the promised land.

could provide and sustain eternal life. Jesus defined what this bread from heaven was—His body. Jesus predicted that He would sacrifice that body so that others might live. Indeed, anyone who partook of His body—that is, absorbed the life of Christ into their own—would live forever (vss. 50, 51).

The literal (and obviously unintended) interpretation of what Jesus said was grossly offensive to the Jews who heard him. The idea of actually eating Jesus' flesh repulsed His opponents. Jesus did not make it any easier for His offended detractors, for He told them even more explicitly that they must also drink His blood in order to gain eternal life (vss. 52, 53).

Jesus' statement was loathsome to the Jews because the law of Moses had forbid them from ingesting any blood when they ate (see Deut. 12:23). The penalty for breaking this law was to be treated as an outcast (see Lev. 17:10-14).

Having stressed the negative consequence of rejecting His teaching, Jesus stated the positive result of obeying Him. The Son of Man provided the only sustenance by which one can truly live. In fact, His flesh and blood bestowed eternal life to those who partook (John 6:54). Some see this as an allusion to taking Communion, or at least to what Communion represents.

Ask Yourself . . . *What do I usually think about when I partake of Communion?*

For the rest of this discourse, Jesus used a word for "eating" that conveyed the notion of feasting with enjoyment. When we take Christ into our innermost being and abide in Him, we do so with great pleasure.

Real food and drink, according to Jesus, was His flesh and blood. To His questioners, the real food was the manna in the wilderness. Those who partake of Jesus' food abide in Christ and He in them (vss. 55, 56).

Once again Jesus emphasized His mission. The Father had sent Him to give life. Apart from the Father, Jesus has nothing to offer. Apart from the Son, we have no life. Furthermore, Jesus lives to do the Father's will. As believers we live to do the will of Christ (vs. 57).

Jesus ended His discourse by returning to the original demand of His questioners. They had referred to the manna that their ancestors had eaten in the wilderness, but Jesus noted that their ancestors had died. The manna sustained them only temporarily. The bread that had come down from heaven and stood before them, however, offered them eternal life. The challenge was now before Jesus' listeners. Would they partake of Jesus by believing and living in Him, or would they turn their backs and walk away, rejecting the bread that God was offering to the entire world (vs. 58)?

Interestingly this dialogue occurred in the synagogue in Capernaum, a place where the Jews went to worship God and seek His will (vs. 59). This time, most of them failed to do either.

John 6:60—8:11 in Brief

Since Jesus' statements were intolerable to most of His listeners, they rejected Him. Even some who had followed Him turned away. His closest disciples, however, did not leave. Peter, speaking for the Twelve, confessed his belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus replied by telling them that He had chosen them, even the one who would betray Him.

Jesus continued His ministry in Galilee for a little while longer, until He went to Jerusalem to attend the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.

There He amazed the people with His teaching. Some put their faith in Him, but the chief priests and Pharisees plotted against Him. They failed in their attempt to arrest Jesus, however, for the time was not right for His Passion to begin.

The account of the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53—8:11 was omitted in some early manuscripts. Nevertheless, its theme and style are in harmony with the character of Jesus as it is revealed in the rest of the Gospel. We can accept this account as historical and a powerful example of Jesus' compassion for the humiliated sinner.