

Discourse on the Bread of Life

John 6:25-71

John 6:25-34: The Nature of the Food that Satisfies Our Real Hunger

(25) There is a jarring disconnection between the crowd's question and Jesus' response that emphasizes the importance of what he wants to say to them. Apparently, Jesus has no time for small talk because the issues are too great. They ask a straight forward question about the time of his arrival but Jesus goes immediately to their motivation for finding him because the reason for their search had everything to do with their misguided expectations.

(26) He confronts them immediately for the poverty of their materialism pointing out that their main desire is to fill their bellies without working. They may have felt that life could become easy if Jesus was domesticated and brought into line with their earthly desires. Are they not like those who recommend faith in Jesus as a means of achieving worldly security, wealth, and status because they value earthly goals more than anything else? In North America, many television "evangelists" promote Christianity as a means to achieve financial security and wealth as primary goals and in so doing are they not like the crowd that followed Jesus?

(26 continued) Obviously, they had missed the point of Jesus' miracles entirely by their failure to see that the bread Jesus offered was on an altogether different level. Jesus had fed the many as a sign of God's desire to nourish the human soul but this truth had completely passed them by. For this reason, Jesus knew that he could do nothing for them unless their misconception of him was corrected. He is direct with them because the issue is critical. They must know who he is and the true nature of the bread he offered.

(27) Jesus has not yet, in his discourse, identified himself with the bread that gives eternal life but he tells them not to work for the bread that spoils. He continues his metaphor by telling them to work for the bread that endures to eternal life. Common sense suggests that he was not advising them to stop farming in order to provide the basic requirements needed for everyday life but he was clarifying what ought to be their ultimate concern; an obedient relationship to the loving God who has always been faithful to them as members of God's chosen people.

(27 continued) What Jesus began to teach them was not unknown to ancient Israel. The prophet Isaiah had said, "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fare." (Isaiah 55:2b) The prophet goes on to say that the bread he is speaking about is God's covenant with Israel. Therefore, Jesus is presenting himself as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant by offering what God has always desired for them; a relationship with God that nourishes the very deepest level of their being. Such nourishment only God can provide.

(27 continued) Finally, before they ask another more appropriate question, he says that God has placed his seal of approval on him so they can be fully confident that what he is saying comes from God. In ancient times a seal on a letter guaranteed that a message was authentic and that the source of message could be confidently known and trusted. Jesus is saying that his hearers can trust the truth of his message because his authority is no less than the authority of God. There is no reason for them (or us) to look elsewhere for confirmation of the truth of his teaching. It is true simply because he said it.

(28) His teaching provoked them to ask a further question; "What must we do to do the work God requires?" The question reveals an earthly logic. They want to know what they must do to earn the bread that Jesus is talking

about because men and women are always slow to realize that before God they are without merit.

(29) Jesus' answer is incredibly brief. He tells them the only acceptable response is to believe in him. At this point the content of their faith could not have been a fully realized Christian theology. However, Jesus had said and done enough for them to begin to understand and believe that he was Israel's Messiah and that by obeying him they could enjoy the benefits of a relationship with God that was anticipated by the promise given to Abraham. This is the bread that endures.

Jesus' teaching here may cause the modern reader to recall the words of the apostle; "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger of the sword?" (Romans 8:35) Then Paul writes; "No, in all of these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." (Romans 8:37) In other words, there is no event or human condition that can over turn the love of God made manifest in Christ. His love for us endures forever so we can live our lives believing that the bread that Jesus offers remains and sustains us in every situation. God's enduring love is the substance of His covenant with Israel.

(30) Again they ask a question that reveals their lack of comprehension. The crowd is unwilling to believe. They demand a further sign that will convince them that he is telling the truth inspite of the miracles he has already performed in their presence. At this point they remained blinded by their expectations of what the Messiah ought to do and the reader wonders what evidence could possibly convince them that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel.

(31) Now their question becomes more specific. They refer to the time when Moses, their hero, gave them manna from heaven. What they want is another miracle comparable to the one accomplished by Moses because they had the expectation that the Messiah would perform acts that were superiour to what Moses did. The full details of this event are told in Numbers 11.

(32-33) Jesus corrects their presuppositions by going to the heart of the matter. He simply tells them that it was not Moses who gave Israel the manna; it was God and with this assertion he goes on to drive home the very point they are failing to see because of the blindness in their hearts. Follow Jesus' logic. Moses was a prophet that God used to sustain his people in the wilderness but he (Jesus) is superior to Moses because the bread that God gives is Jesus himself. He is greater than a prophet, including Moses, because a prophet only brings the message whereas he is the message.

(34) Their interest is tweaked but the rest of the conversation reveals that they still do not understand. However, some spiritual interest is present in their question to be sure so Jesus takes the opportunity to get right to the heart of the matter.

John 6:35-40: Jesus is the Bread that Satisfies

(35) "In a society which has which has experimented to the point of satiation with every form of material, physical and spiritual palliative to fill the inner emptiness of its heart, Jesus invitation comes with a wonderful relevance ..."
 (Bruce Milne, page 111) The Lord's teaching in response to their question indicates that there is an ache or longing in the human heart that only he can satisfy. He is the answer to the needs of the human heart.

(35 continued) For the people he was encountering bread was the basic staple of life. Likewise, it is basic for every culture and in this way he has pointed out that what he says has universal application. This truth runs counter to the politically correct notion that there is a relative truth contained in all religions that can provide for the deepest longings of the human spirit. In this discourse Jesus has said something unequivocal; he alone is the true bread and there is no other.

(35 continued) The modern reader should recognize what this conversation reveals about the nature of faith. Jesus' audience has had no problem with what he has done. For them the difficulty lies in the claims that he makes for himself. Similarly, our willingness to believe is not centered on the credibility of Jesus' miraculous acts but it does have everything to do with our willingness to say yes to his divine nature.

(36) In this statement Jesus indicates the human condition. We are not capable of acquiring faith on the basis of what we observe. These men and women have witnessed several powerful acts of Jesus but they have not been able to see behind the physical dimension to the real spiritual meaning because they are in the darkness and unable to understand. (1:5b) What follows in the discourse can be the only answer to men's unbelief. Now Jesus goes on to say that men and women are moved to faith by God himself because faith is not the product of observation, speculation, intelligence, natural spiritual capacity, or the unaided human will. Were it not for what Jesus is about to say, faith (trust in something you know to be true) would be a human impossibility.

(37) Jesus asserts God's sovereignty in drawing men and women to himself because only His sovereignty is able to bring light to the darkness that blinds men and women and makes faith impossible. Care must be taken to carefully rule out the false implication that preaching and Christian witness are unnecessary; it is the hearing of the Gospel that creates the faith that the Gospel requires as a response. Through the proclamation of the Good News God first gives what he asks - belief that the Gospel is true along with the willingness to trust it and nothing else.

(37 continued) The reader must also be careful to avoid the conclusion that some are not given to Christ because they are predetermined to reject the truth that is presented. This is not what Jesus is saying. John has already made it quite plain that the Gospel is a universal one and he repeats this

truth at the very end of his Gospel through the symbolism of the net. It contains every kind of fish in the sea and remains unbroken.

(37 continued) Admittedly, there is a mystery to faith that John does not attempt to solve. Why the words of Jesus arouse faith in some but not in others he does not explain. However, those who embrace the words of Jesus as truth and learn to trust him as the answer to their deepest longings do so because they are given to Christ by God. Furthermore, in verse 37b, Jesus makes it plain that the will of the Father and his will are a unity; he will never turn away those given to him by the Father.

Again, the notion that there are those who are rejected by God eternally must be rejected as an intention of God. Jesus means that his Father is at the beginning, the middle, and end of our salvation so we can never claim that our faith is the result of a superior insight, a more developed moral sense, or a spiritual capacity not possessed by others that moves God to favour us over others. We are entirely without merit and were it not for God's gift by which He brings us to His Son, we would remain faithless and die in our trespasses and sin.

(38) Jesus assures his listeners that the work he does is eternally the will of his father.

(39-40) Before the crowd inserts another question into the conversation, Jesus clearly states what His Father's will is. His desire is to raise everyone to eternal life. God, in Christ, desires nothing less than to call every person out of their disbelief into an acceptance of the Son and thereby enjoy all the benefits that membership in His kingdom provides.

John 6: 41-51: The Destiny of Those Who Believe

(41-42) Now they are angry and in utter disbelief as to the claims Jesus has made. At this point they remain entirely earth bound in their reaction and

they are certainly not willing to pursue the nature of unbelief. The truth of who he is eludes them because they are unable to look beyond his earthly roots. "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" How can he have come down from heaven? They are no different than the people today whose notions of reality discourage them from accepting the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection as real events that provide the only means by which their deepest longings can be satisfied.

(43-44) Again Jesus does not answer the question that they have asked. He knows that there is no direct answer that will finally satisfy them because they are looking for reasons to believe that satisfy their own preconceived notions. An important aspect of faith is revealed here. Often people put God "in the dock" (C.S.Lewis) and demand from Him the evidence they require for faith. If faith required the approval of the intellect as a beginning point then faith itself would be subject to reason and reason would become the norm. Pascal said it well. "The heart has its reason that reason cannot know."

Jesus elaborates further on the nature and source of faith. Understanding, and trust in what Jesus has said is made possible only because the sovereign will of God desires to draw all men and women to the truth of His Son. Again, Jesus promises to raise up all who believe in him.

(45) In order to drive his point home Jesus appeals to the prophets to show that what he has said is in complete conformity to the faith of the prophets and with their own scriptures. One prophet Jesus has in mind may be Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 31 the prophet writes of a new covenant that God promises to make with Israel. After reviewing God's faithfulness in the past he says that one of the features of this new covenant is the fact God will teach His people directly by putting the law in their minds and writing it on their hearts. This teaching will be so effective that there will be no need for one neighbour to teach another. (31:33-34) However, they have failed to see that

they are resisting what the prophet said by their unwillingness to see that his words are now being fulfilled in Jesus.

(46) In this verse Jesus announces again what he had already said to Nicodemus. (3:13) He is greater than the prophets because, unlike them, he has a direct vision from God. The authority for what he is saying is contained in him. He is the only one who has seen the Father and this fact is the foundation of everything that he has said.

(47-51) Before the crowd interjects another question, Jesus says clearly for the first time that he is the bread of life. (48) He then contrasts the bread he offers with that given through Moses. His bread is a superior. Those who ate Moses' bread were nourished for a time but this bread was unable to sustain life eternally. He tells them that those who eat the bread that has life in itself will live forever.

The reader can reflect on what Jesus demonstrated by the feeding of the five thousand and the discourse that has followed the miracle. Jesus does more than satisfy the day's hunger. Because he will give his life on the cross (51) they will be raised on the last day so long as they 'eat the bread' (trust in his atoning death) that he offers.

John 6:52-59: The Real Food for Life

(52) They have found his words so highly controversial that they begin to argue not with Jesus but amongst themselves. Their question indicates that they have taken Jesus' words literally. They do not perceive that he is speaking metaphorically and spiritually so his teaching seems absurd. In order to remain faithful to their dietary laws animals had to be killed in a certain manner and all blood had to be drained away before the animal was eaten. For this reason, Jews would have found Jesus' language highly objectionable so on a human level their question is understandable. However, they should have known that Jesus, as a Jew, could not have been

speaking literally for the reasons stated above. Realizing this should have led them to comprehend his words at a metaphoric and spiritual level.

There is little doubt that the language Jesus used in this chapter was intended to orient their thinking in such a manner as to connect him with their own historical experience as Jews. They knew that God had intervened in the past to save Israel so now in Jesus God is intervening again for their benefit and for all of mankind as well. In the past God took them from slavery to the Promised Land and now He completes His work by taking them (if they obey) from disbelief to faith.

(53-54) Jesus responded to them by becoming even more explicit. The terms “flesh and blood” refer to the sacrificial system and faith is like eating and drinking. Therefore, Jesus is telling them that they must come to live by his coming sacrificial death as the only means by which they can be reconciled to God. By trusting in his atoning death they will be able to realize the destiny that is found in him.

(55-58) Before Jesus left the synagogue he explained the profound benefits of faith. Those who trust in his life and death enter into an intimate relationship with him. He lives because the Father “feeds” him and in the same way those who believe in him gain access to that same nourishment. Jesus brings this part of the discourse to a conclusion by repeating what he has said before; “... he who feeds on this bread will live forever.”

John 6:60-71: The Cost of Discipleship

(60) Many of his followers also had great difficulty with what Jesus said about himself. They have understood what he has claimed but they are unable to accept it as truth. In recent years, certain scholars have written that the claims the apostles made for Jesus are the product of their own imagination and that what they wrote would not have been understood by him. This controversy sets the Jesus of history up against the Jesus of faith

and it argues that the early church added another layer of theology on top of Jesus that goes far beyond anything he taught about himself. (i.e. Jesus own self understanding) In other words, Jesus was a simple Nazarene teacher who was made into much more by the early believers. Such a point of view seems incredulous because it would mean that the early church made something up without any basis in Jesus' own teaching that could only offend their Jewish reader's. Why would they not create a mythology that would be more readily accepted and less controversial?

The reader can be fully confident that what John is reporting comes from Jesus himself. As the church proclaimed its message it experienced horrific persecution and even martyrdom without abandoning the faith of the apostles. What individual in their right mind would suffer and die for what he knows is a made up fantasy.

(61) Jesus asked if what he has said has been offensive to his disciples. (He knows that it has.) Taking verse 64b into consideration, his knowledge of their thoughts is known supernaturally.

(62) The meaning and purpose of what he says in this verse is somewhat ambiguous in terms of its meaning and purpose. If it is a reference to his coming crucifixion and resurrection then Jesus was warning them that the problems they have had with what he has said and done so far pale in comparison to the difficulties that will arise when the Messiah is crucified before he is raised to life again by the Father. Their messianic expectations certainly did not prepare them for a Messiah who suffers, dies on a cross as one who is cursed by God, (Galatians 2:13) before being brought back to life. Another interpretation is possible. Jesus may have been telling them that their difficulties will be answered by his coming resurrection and that this event will reduce the offensiveness of what he has said about himself. For this writer, the first interpretation seems the most natural.

(63-64) In verse 64 Jesus is talking about how men and women acquire faith. He says that the flesh “counts for nothing” but he does not mean that the physical world is a barrier to spiritual truth and he is certainly not recommending an asceticism that denigrates the value of ordinary physical life. He could never mean this given the fact of the incarnation wherein the word has become flesh. (i.e. physical) The notion that the flesh is intrinsically evil is a direct contradiction of the incarnation.

“Flesh counts for nothing” in this sense, means that human beings, because of the fall, are rendered incapable of perceiving the truth of what he has said. Truth can be understood and embraced as truth only by the action of God’s Spirit upon the human heart and will. Sadly, some still do not believe.

(65) Here Jesus wraps up everything that he has said about the source of faith. He is the master teacher so he knows that this point needs repeating. When the disciples asked him to explain the meaning of the parable of the sower, Jesus told them that the secrets of the kingdom had been given to them and that their understanding would grow to an even greater understanding. (Matthew 13:11-12)

(66) Jesus’ discourse created a crisis because his teaching ran counter to what many wanted to hear and the result was that many abandoned him.

(67) Jesus uses this occasion to test those that had remained by asking them a question; “You do not want to leave too, do you?” They have no choice but to clarify their position.

(68) Peter responds, speaking on behalf of the others. His response is begins with the affirmation that there is no other one except Jesus because he has the words of eternal life. Peter’s response reveals his understanding that what Jesus has said is intended to draw them to him personally. It is not Jesus’ teaching that saves them. Rather, it is the fact that he is the living word and in him there is eternal life. Jesus has not given them a superior

philosophy but a personal relationship and in this relationship they find the bread that satisfies completely. Peter's confession reminds the modern reader that faith is more than a theological conviction. We are not saved because our theological furniture is properly arranged. Just because we understand the doctrine of justification by faith does not mean that we are justified sinners. The purpose of understanding is to draw us confidently to the one who really does save. Peter gets it!

(69) Peter confesses that Jesus is the "Holy One of God." He has used an expression that can only apply to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

(70) The discourse comes to a conclusion when Jesus reminds Peter that the confession he has just made is not the result of his own insight. Peter, like the others, has been chosen by him but even this fact does not guarantee loyalty. One of them will be a betrayer.