

John 6:22-40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 6 verses 22 to 40. On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread, after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum seeking Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, Rabbi, when did you come here? Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal. Then they said to him, What must we do to be doing the works of God? Jesus answered them, This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent. So they said to him, Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness. As it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. Jesus then said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. They said to him, Sir, give us this bread always. Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me, and yet do not believe.

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

Following the feeding of the 5,000 in John chapter 6, the multitude followed Jesus to the other side of the sea. His feeding of the 5,000 had caused a stir. This was a time of messianic fervor, and Jesus was a man who seemed marked out to be the leader of the people. The crowd, many of whom probably lived in poverty, thought that following this wonder worker around, a man who was able to multiply loaves and fish, would be a way to enjoy food and security. This man was clearly destined to be a king or something. If they joined his mission as soon as possible, they might receive some of the benefits, perhaps the power and the influence that might arise from it. Jesus challenges them on this front. Although they've eaten their fill of the loaves and the fish, they did not see the sign.

They just saw the material benefit of eating the loaves and fish. They never really perceived what was being communicated through the miracle. The sign is not just the great act of power. He tells them not to labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, the food which the Son of Man will give. This might again recall the conversation with the woman at the well back in chapter 4, where Jesus speaks about living water that is to be distinguished from the physical water in the well. The person who drinks of the water in the well will thirst again, but the person who drinks of the water that Jesus will give, the water of the Spirit, will never thirst again. The food that Jesus promises here is food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give.

The Father has set his seal upon the Son of Man, perhaps referring to the Spirit, marking him out as his anointed servant. We should here recall Moses' conflicts with the wilderness generation, who looked back with fondness upon their time in Egypt when they ate their fill of bread.

[3 : 58] In Deuteronomy chapter 8 verse 3, the Lord through Moses told the Israelites that he let them hunger and fed them with manna, so that they would learn that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Like the wilderness generation before them, the multitude here are focused upon the physical food. They don't perceive the sign, nor the lesson in faith that the Lord is teaching them. The people respond by asking what they should do to do the works of God. This might be a question of the kind, what must we do to inherit eternal life? The question emphasizes the commandments of God in their plurality, and also the works of God as those that are required by him. Jesus responds by redefining the key terms and the question. Instead of the works of God as the works required by God, there is the work of God, the singular work of God. And the work in question is not just a work that people are doing for God, it is, while people are doing this work, a work wrought by God in them.

Jesus' answer also makes clear that what the Lord requires of them is not primarily a diverse assortment of good deeds, but it is a singular work focused upon believing in the one that he has sent, in Jesus himself as the Son of Man. That act of belief, loyalty and commitment is the one integrating work that holds together everything else. Responding to this claim, the people now challenge him to produce a sign. Perhaps strange, as he has already multiplied the loaves in their presence, what else is he expected to do? They focus on the example of Moses in particular, our fathers ate manna in the wilderness, as it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. Okay, you're the prophet like Moses, the prophet who was supposed to come into the world. Moses, the former prophet, gave us manna in the wilderness. You should do something similar. Jesus' response to them is an unpacking of their statement, and an unpacking of words concerning the manna from Exodus and the Psalms, pushing them to recognize something more going on. They attributed the bread given from heaven to Moses, but it was not actually Moses who gave that bread, but God gave the bread from heaven. And that bread is not the true bread. The true bread from heaven is the one that the Father sends down, the Son. He is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Already in the book of John, we've seen things described as true. There's the true vine, there's the true light, there's the true worshippers that will be established. Christ is presented as the one who brings the reality that was always anticipated, the reality that the signs pointed forward to. He is the substance, the reality, the one that the signs foreshadowed. The manna was always something that anticipated the greater bread that would come from heaven. The manna was bread from heaven, but the true bread from heaven is Jesus Christ himself.

[6 : 38] He comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Now Jesus is within this context working off the background of reflection upon the character of wisdom. Wisdom comes down from heaven. Wisdom is associated with bread and food. We might think about wisdom's feast in Proverbs chapter 9. She invites people to taste of her bread and wine. Jesus might be playing upon that, along with a tradition of reflection upon wisdom in intertestamental literature. Christ's claim that the one who comes to him shall not hunger and who believes in him shall never thirst, might recall the conversation with the Samaritan woman. However, the people that he is speaking to here do not believe him. There's a failure on their part to perceive what's taking place. Consequently, Jesus takes up the story of the manna that they reference and twists it to show that far more is going on in that story. That story was never merely about an earthly leader, Moses, providing material food for a people as a sign that he was anointed by God. It was a sign that anticipated by God's action a greater gift, a greater manna, that would come in the future. And that manna is seen in Christ. He is the fulfillment of wisdom, the one who has come down from heaven. He's also the fulfillment of the law. The law was also described in a way associated with bread. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The law, the words that proceed from the mouth of God, are seen as something that is like bread that we can eat, that gives strength and sustenance and even delight.

We can live by such bread. Jesus' response to his interlocutors here is one that takes their words about the manna and unpacks and reveals a far more glorious picture that was always anticipating something greater that is now in effect. Already in this chapter, we've seen allusions to an exodus pattern. It's played out in the crossing of the Sea of Tiberias, in the leading of the people, a great multitude through the wilderness, in sitting down on the mountain to teach, dividing the people into groups and then miraculously feeding them. However, the pattern of exodus at work in Jesus' ministry is not just a repetition of the former exodus. It's an escalation. There's a movement towards something anticipated by the first exodus that exceeds it. This is the true bread from heaven.

Christ is the one who is not merely repeating what Moses did in the wilderness. He is bringing the reality that was always looked forward to. This passage is clearly reminiscent of other points in the gospel where Jesus presents himself as food and drink. He is the one who provides wine at the wedding feast.

He is the one who promises water that will mean that those who drink it will never thirst again. And the illustration of the manna brings another aspect of Christ to the foreground. Like the manna, Christ comes down from heaven. He has come from the Father. He is the one who is sent on a mission.

He has an existence that precedes his earthly life. He comes down from above and as he does so, he brings the life of the Father down to earth. That heavenly origin of Christ, although it is something that we do see in the synoptics, is far clearer in the gospel of John. This is one of the strongest declarations of Christ's source from above and also of the place to which he will return.

[9 : 44] He has been sent on a mission by the Father, a mission to give life. The Father, as we see in verse 39, commits people into the charge of the Son and the Son preserves them and leads them to eternal life.

The Son will not lose anyone who has been committed to his charge. In the wording of verse 40, we might also have a recollection of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, where he compares himself to the serpent that was raised by Moses in the wilderness. Those who looked at the bronze serpent were delivered.

In a like manner, those who look on the Son of Man and believe in him will have eternal life. They will receive the life of the Spirit, anticipating and serving as a down payment of final resurrection. And on that great last day, they too will be raised up.

A question to consider. Jesus here speaks of looking on the Son and believing in him as a statement of what faith is and involves. In the gospel of John, and even in this very chapter, faith and what it involves are described in several different ways. What other examples can you think of? And how might these give us a fuller, orbled understanding of what faith is?