

## The Fourth Sign: Feeding the Multitude, John 6:1-15, 22-36

1. In this passage, Jesus produces bread in the wilderness. At another, earlier time, Jesus chose *not* to produce bread in the wilderness, when tempted to by Satan (Luke 4). What's different here? What other parallels are there between these two passages?
2. The word "work" (*ergon*) appears repeatedly as Jesus explains to the synagogue crowd what the miraculous feeding meant:
  - Do not **work** for food that perishes [Jesus] (27)
  - What must we do to perform the **works** of God? [the crowd] (28)
  - This is the **work** of God, that you believe in him [Jesus] (28)
  - What sign are you performing, so that we may see it and believe in you? What **work** are you performing? [the crowd] (30)

Here "work" goes from meaning *career*, to *religious observance* (i.e., salvation by "works"), to *faith*, and finally, a (further) *miracle* to convince the skeptics.

"Work" has come up before in John, at the Samaritan well ("my food is to do the will of him who sent me and complete his **work**", 4:34), in the healing of the lame man and the ensuing Sabbath controversy ("my Father is still **working**, and I also am **working**", 5:17). In these passages, it referred to Jesus' *ministry*, paralleled with the Father's ongoing provision.

A central message of this passage is that we must not try to fill the emptiness inside ourselves with anything but Jesus. What does the spectrum of uses of "work" in John tell us about how we should regard *our* work, and our search for meaning?

3. In this passage Jesus works a miracle in order (in part) to make the point that *he* is the spiritual food which brings eternal life. Most of those present missed this point, even when Jesus explained it to them. Surprisingly, Jesus unpacks it further using a cannibalism metaphor almost guaranteed to drive them away. This approach to teaching, in which Jesus shakes loose those who aren't earnestly seeking him, is described in Luke 8 and Matt 13,<sup>1</sup> and is how Jesus goes from thousands of lukewarm followers to fewer, more serious, disciples.

Is there a good reason why modern Christians don't generally make any attempt to shake loose those who aren't fully committed to discipleship? (Optional: Discuss the first six minutes of Francis Chan's "How to Hear From God.")

4. In Phil 2:1-11, we read that Jesus emptied himself, not counting his equality with God something to be grasped—i.e., he set aside his divine "powers" in order to live as one of us. This means in part that Jesus did not have, on earth, his omniscience, and depended on God for guidance and information.

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<sup>1</sup> In 6:36-71 Jesus addresses the concern that this might shake loose some who earnestly desire Jesus but are confused or offended by his words.

We see hints of this at two places in this passage where Jesus appears to be almost taken by surprise: first, when he “looked up” and saw the multitude (4) and then in 15 when he “realized” they were about to make him king by force. Yet in the middle of this, we read that the central miracle was planned and anticipated by Jesus.

Where in your ministry do you experience this sort of hazy knowledge of God’s plans?



*Fun fact:* Readers have traditionally seen a reference to the sacrament of the Eucharist here.<sup>2</sup> The first recorded use of “sacrament” (L. *sacramentum*) for a Christian rite dates back to an early persecutor of the faith, Pliny the Younger, when describing information gleaned by torture regarding early Christian meetings: “...they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath [L. *sacramento*], not for any criminal purpose but to abstain from theft...” (the “oath” being baptismal vows).

**Other 5,000s:** the number of *Muslims killed by the Knights Templar* and Hospitallers defending Jerusalem in 1152; roughly the number of “*table talks*” Luther wrote; the size of *George Whitefield’s audience* when he spoke in Neshaminy, PA in 1739; the number of *human sacrifices* required by the Mesoamerican Aztecs at the crowning of Montezuma II; the approximate number of language groups in the world (Wycliffe); the number of *Greek manuscripts* containing a least a portion of the New Testament; the number of *Franciscan brothers* during Francis’ lifetime.

### Isaiah 55:1-3a:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

<sup>2</sup>Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

<sup>3</sup>Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

“What is it, then, that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present?

But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.”

—Pascal, *Pensées*, VII, 425

<sup>2</sup> “John 6 is not about the Lord’s Supper; rather, the Lord’s Supper is about what is described in John 6” [Colin Brown, quoted by Carson].

## **Extra questions and observations:**

1. Obs: Yet another miracle performed without faith on the part of the recipients!
2. John says Jesus was testing the disciples. Did they pass?
3. Obs: When faced with an insurmountable problem, Philip turns to money, Andrew to people, and Jesus to God. (Not quite fair, but sounds good!)
4. Obs: Even as they were serving others, the disciples themselves were served filled.

### Leader's Intro:

This is both the only miracle recorded in all four gospels, and the only chapter in John concerning the Galilean phase of Jesus' ministry which is the focus of the Synoptics (Carson).

Like the previous signs, this is challenging to read due to familiarity and structure. We are familiar with it, so we think of it as "Jesus did a miracle; he interprets the miracle metaphorically as indicating that he will feed them spiritually; most of them misunderstand his metaphor as a call to cannibalism and leave him."

Reading first the context, then understanding puzzles which we overlook help us to fully appreciate the message of this passage.

Before getting into those two elements, it's worth pointing out that this passage is used to support Calvinist doctrine, and should not. Here are responses to the Calvinist interpretation (from xenos.org):

### The following passages are interpreted differently by Calvinists and Arminians:

#### 1. John 6:37

"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

- Calvinists argue that this passages teaches irresistible grace. The individual cannot refuse God's choice, therefore *all* those given to Christ will respond.
- Arminians reply that "those given to me" in 37 are the same as those who "believe in him" in vs. 40. In other words, when God foresees that some will believe, he gives them to Christ. See that in vs. 45, those who "have heard and learned from the father" are the ones who "come to me."

#### 2. John 6:44,65

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."

- The Calvinist holds that these passages teach total depravity, unconditional election, and also imply limited atonement and double predestination. This is because:
  - "No one can come to me unless . . ." because they are totally depraved
  - "it has been granted him from the Father" or "the Father draws him" meaning unconditional election. Unconditional in this case, because the cause is the father, not the individual.
  - Limited atonement and double predestination are usually inferred from the fact that it is impossible to come to him without election. Therefore, those whom the Father has not drawn are naturally destined for judgement, and are therefore those for whom Christ did not die.
- The Arminian agrees that these passages teach total depravity. However, they argue that the father draws all men to Christ (Jn. 12:32; 16:8). They further hold that to assign the cause exclusively to the Father ignores vs. 29; 35; 40; and 47. To attribute the cause exclusively to the Father regardless of the response of the person, flies in the face of the stated will of the Father in vs. 40 that "Everyone who beholds the Son and believes in him" be saved. Finally, with regard to limited atonement and double predestination, these positions depend on the earlier conclusion (unconditional election), and therefore beg the question.

The plain reading of this passage shows that John understands no contradiction between God's act to draw his people, and the responsibility of those people to believe. This passage without a doubt supports the ideas that there is a subset of people who are elect and who are drawn by the Father. It *also* requires those people to choose to believe in Jesus;

Jesus openly blames the skeptical crowd for failing to do this, rather than pitying them for not being drawn by a force beyond their power or will. Carson: “Yet despite the strong predestinarian strain, it must be insisted with no less vigor that John emphasizes the responsibility of people to come to Jesus, and can excoriate them for refusing to do so (e.g. 5:40)” (293). Beware, though, Carson tries to weaken this conclusion by undermining the reading of John 12:32, which says that when lifted up Jesus will draw all people to himself, by saying that Jesus means all types of people, a concept which is not in that passage.

The real question is, what is the rhetorical function of Jesus’ statements about the Father drawing the elect? They occur after Jesus acknowledges their disbelief. This passage parallels the passage where Jesus explains why he teaches in parables, namely that people may *not* understand. Jesus repeatedly *raises* the bar, so that only those who are trying to pursue him will understand. His statement about the Father drawing the elect is his way of saying that this is not a dicey approach, and that those who are meant to come to him do indeed persevere. Francis Chan’s sermon *How to Hear From God* is very good on this topic and worth a listen.

Regarding the length of the passage I suggest studying inductively 1-15; 22-36. This includes Jesus’ interpretation of the sign.

This passage has been used by some traditions to insist that partaking in the Eucharist is necessary for eternal life, but this is an abuse; see Carson. There may well be a reference to the Eucharist here, but it is not primary, as attested not least in that the primary *listeners* didn’t know of the Eucharist. There *are* echoes here, as you would expect from John:

- To the Passover meal: the timing, just before the Passover, as well as the parallels to the manna, and John the Baptist’s referring earlier to Jesus as the Passover Lamb, support this allusion
- In 35 Jesus’ “I am the bread of life” is the first of seven “*ego eimi*” statements: he is the Bread of Life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way the truth and the life, and the true vine. (There are two other expressions with “I am” which aren’t structured quite the same, in 8:18, 23.)
- 6:35 echoes Isaiah 55:1-2 (and following):

Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.  
<sup>2</sup>Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.

- In v. 9 the small boy is referred to with the same term used by the LXX for Elijah’s servant in 2 Kings 4:38, where he assists his master with a miraculous feeding.
- The crowd themselves identify Jesus as the Prophet of Deut 18:15-19

All that said, let’s address the context, and the head-scratching elements of this passage.

**Context:** Since this miracle is described in all of the Synoptics, we can use them to flesh out the context. Jesus has recently learned of his cousin John’s beheading, and at the same time during this time his popularity in his Galilean ministry is peaking. Furthermore, this event occurs shortly after the 12 have been sent out to preach the kingdom, heal the sick and cast out demons. They have come back, stoked, and Jesus is just sitting down to debrief them, when the crowd shows up. So Jesus spends all day preaching and healing, and only then does he decide it’s time to feed the crowd. Recall also that the Passover is nearing, so the people were already thinking in terms of blood, flesh, lambs, and unleavened bread, as well as Moses who delivered Israel from bondage—it’s an intensely nationalistic celebration.

Jesus turns to the 12 to put the problem on them. Jesus could have administered the miracle directly, but he deliberately works through the 12. Given their recent experiences, they surely were tingling with anticipation that he would make food rain from the sky. Not quite—while the mechanism isn't described, we can image the baskets being passed but never emptying, and the crowd only very gradually realizing what has happened.

This passage shows more than one eye-witness aspect, including the green grass (which it is around Passover), and Jesus' appeal to Philip, who, being from Bethsaida, was familiar with the region.

**Puzzles:** Why feed them and then steal away, knowing they surely would want to be fed again? Why put the disciples on the spot when they clearly would have no idea how to handle the situation? Why teach by means of a metaphor which no one, surely, got, prior to his explanation? Fundamentally, why work so hard to drive the listeners away? And in the process embed so many allusions for those who *do* persist?

What follows is Gary's teaching on this passage, which has some nice quotes and a very clear approach to the central point of the passage.

## Introduction

We come now to the fourth miracle recorded by John, in which Jesus feeds a multitude. This miracle took place near what we call today the Golan Heights. Read 6:1-14 (6:10 is an eye-witness comment; Jesus fed them through his disciples [Mk. 6:41]).

This was a *bona fide* miracle. The "miracle" was not the boy's generosity shamed many of the rest into sharing<sup>1</sup>—this makes all 4 gospel authors liars. Jesus supernaturally multiplied five dinners rolls and two sardines to feed as many as 10,000 (6:10 says there were about 5000 *men*) hungry people to the point that they pushed their plates away. This is why the people responded the way they did (6:14): "If he can feed us this way, he can also defeat the Romans" (6:15).

But while it was a real miracle, it was more than a miracle. Like all seven of the miracles John records, this miracle helped real people by meeting their real physical needs (hunger). But it was also far more than that; it was a "sign"—an "attesting miracle," meaning that its ultimate significance is not in the miracle itself, but in what it reveals symbolically about Jesus' unique identity and ability to meet humanity's spiritual needs (read Jn. 20:31). In this case, Jesus clearly explains the meaning of this "sign" when he meets these people the next day at the synagogue in Capernaum.

Read 6:25. Jesus' response (6:26) cuts through their small talk to the heart of the issue. They haven't tracked him down because they seek understanding of the spiritual significance of yesterday's miracle, but because they want another free lunch. They don't view him as the REVEALER OF TRUTH, but rather as a MOBILE McDONALD'S. In the dialogue that follows, Jesus keeps trying lift their eyes to see the meaning of the miracle, while they keep trying to extract another free lunch. Jesus begins by giving them a solemn warning and a fantastic offer . . .

### ***The Warning: "Don't try to satisfy spiritual hunger through non-spiritual means."***

Read 6:27a. Is this a prohibition against working for a living so they can provide groceries for their families? Is Jesus reminding them to be sure to buy bread with preservatives so it doesn't mold quickly? No, he is speaking figuratively to warn them (and us) against the tendency to try to satisfy spiritual hunger through non-spiritual means.

We are physical beings and we live in a temporal world, so we need food, rest and shelter. We also "need" recreation, comfort, work accomplishment, romantic relationships, aesthetic and sensual pleasure, etc. But this is not all that we are. We are also spiritual beings—created in God's image and needing above all else a personal relationship with God. This relationship with God is the only integration point around which all these other things find their rightful place. And if this relationship is not in place, all of the perishable food in the world is not enough to keep the hunger at bay.

This is why no amount or combination of this "food" will ever satisfy this spiritual hunger. This is why the American Dream inevitably turns into the American Nightmare. This is why the basic ideology behind American advertising is a soul-destroying lie. This is why "mid-life crises" ("Is this all there is to life?") are spiritual crises (QUOTES<sup>2</sup>). And so Jesus, out of love, issues this warning and immediately follows it with an amazing offer . . .

## ***The Offer: "I'll give you spiritual food that will fully satisfy your spiritual hunger."***

Re-read 6:27b. Jesus is echoing an Old Testament passage with which they were familiar (read Isa. 55:1-3a). He is saying, "I'll give you spiritual food that truly satisfies and lasts forever." But they are so intent on getting more "perishable bread" that they don't understand his obvious meaning. (Sound familiar?)

Read 6:28. Jesus is offering this food as a gift, but they think they must earn through their good works. Read 6:29. Jesus says they don't need to earn it; they need only believe in him (we'll come back to this later).

Read 6:30. This is a pretty stupid question, since they had just seen him perform a miracle so great that they wanted to make him King. What they really want is another free lunch (read 6:31): "Hey, Moses was the BREAD MAN *every day*—how about it? What have you done for me lately?"

But Jesus refuses to do another miracle feeding, because this would only reinforce their wrong mind-set. This is why God in his love often refuses to grant our requests for things like the LOTTERY, a NEW LOVER, that GREAT PAYING JOB, etc.—because this would only help us keep looking in the wrong places . . .

Instead, he continues to correct their thinking (read 6:32,33). Moses only gave their ancestors *manna*, which perpetuated physical life (*bios*). But God is offering them true spiritual ("life" is *zoe*) food—the very life of God itself.

Their request (6:34) is still for temporal "bread," but it gives Jesus the opportunity to make a block-buster claim . . .

## ***The Claim: "I am the sole source of spiritual life."***

Read 6:35. Bread was the essential food of the ancient Mid-East—just as it is today in many cultures. No bread, no physical life. Jesus isn't saying just that he *brings* the bread of (spiritual) life; he *is* the bread of life.

This is the explanation of the "sign." Just as Jesus alone could provide them with physical food to satisfy their physical hunger yesterday, so Jesus alone can provide the world with spiritual life to satisfy our spiritual hunger.

What a breath-taking claim! Notice he does not say: "I am one of many valid breads of life." He says: "I and I alone am *the* bread of life." Jesus claims that he himself is the *sole* source of spiritual life, that he *alone* fully satisfies our spiritual hunger and thirst. This claim forces us to deal with him differently than any other religious founder, because none of them has ever made such a claim as this (e.g., BUDDHA; MUHAMMAD). Why is Jesus the bread of life?

*Because he alone is God-incarnate* (Jn. 5:21). Unlike other religious founders, who claimed only to have discovered a way to God, Jesus claimed to be God and therefore able to directly impart spiritual life to others.

Read 6:51. He speaks of two breads—or actually, two reasons why he is the bread of life. Jesus is the life of God made available to us—and ("also") he is available to us because he will (future tense) "give his flesh." This is the language of substitutionary sacrifice.



It was the Feast of Passover (6:4). Review the setting and instructions for the Passover Feast. This ritual symbolized our dilemma (deserving God's judgment because of our sins) and God's solution—that he would one day provide a blameless Substitute whose death would pay for our sins (cf. Isa. 53).

Jesus is declaring himself to be the true Passover lamb (see also Mk. 10:45; Lk. 22:19,20). His perfect life qualified him to die in our place, to pay for our sins against God—so that we can receive God's spiritual, eternal life as a free gift. So Jesus is the sole source of spiritual life *because he alone pays for our sins*.

Once again, they don't get it. Read 6:52: "Great, we come out for another fish sandwich and the guy starts talking cannibalism." "Come on, Gladys. We're gonna find another church." But Jesus presses his claim—and the *condition* for receiving his offer . . .

### ***The Condition: "You must personally receive me and my death for your sins."***

Read 6:53-58. What does it mean to eat his flesh and drink his blood? Let's be clear first about what it *doesn't* mean:

It does *not* refer to animistic cannibalism (get victim's vitality & valor by eating his heart). This wide-spread religious idea is foreign to the whole Bible. Furthermore, Jesus has been speaking figuratively throughout this whole passage.

It does *not* refer to communion (receive spiritual life through ongoing observance of Eucharist). There is no mention of communion in the context. To import it into the passage is eisogesis, not exegesis. Furthermore, the aorist tense in 6:53 suggests that this is once-for-all rather than ongoing.

Rather, Jesus is explaining what it means to believe in him. He has already made it crystal clear that the condition for receiving spiritual life is to believe in him (see 6:29,35,47). Comparing 6:40 to 6:54 makes it clear that believing in him is equivalent to eating his flesh/drinking his blood. Jesus uses this graphic image to explain what kind of belief he is talking about. He's saying it is not enough to mentally assent that he is the Messiah, or that he alone contains the life of God, or that he died for our sins. He is saying that we must *personally receive him and his death for our sins*.

*Just they had to eat the bread the day before.* Would it have been enough for them to calculate the calories and carbs—and "believe" that that bread could meet their nutritional needs—but not actually receive it into their bodies? No! They had to personally eat the food so that its life could be assimilated into their bodies.

*Just as the Israelites had to eat the Passover lamb.* This was the way God called on them to express their belief that he would deliver them from his judgment through this sacrifice. They had to personally appropriate this sacrifice.

In the same way, it is not enough for you to merely "believe" that Jesus is God's Son, able to forgive you and give you spiritual life now and eternal life in the future. If your belief stops here, you will miss out on the bread of life! You must personally receive Jesus into your heart and his death for your sins. Only in this way can the life of God be assimilated into your being.

Have you ever made this decision? You've got everything you need to do so. You know "perishable bread" doesn't satisfy, your heart longs for the "spiritual bread" Jesus offers, you understand that his death already paid the purchase price. All that stands between you and experiencing Jesus filling your soul is this decision. Simply call out to him and ask him for it . . .

## For Discussion

Jesus is the supreme multi-tasker. He could simultaneously teach the multitudes and train his disciples. Now that you know the meaning of this “sign” to the multitudes, what do you think it was supposed to teach his disciples?

Jesus could have materialized the food directly to the multitudes, but he chose to feed them through the disciples. This is a picture of God's plan to give the bread of life to a lost world through Christians.

In the midst of their own hunger, Jesus calls on the disciples to feed the multitude. As they do so, they discover that there is abundant food for them (12 large baskets - *kophinoi*). Jesus is teaching us that it is as serve others (especially share the gospel)—even in the midst of our own needs—we will find him meeting our needs and filling us with his life.

Does anyone know where Jesus taught this explicitly to his disciples (see Jn. 4:34)?

Has anyone experienced this lately?

## Footnotes

**1** See William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), pp. 114,115.

**2** " . . . you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1, p. 43. "What is it, then, that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself." (Pascal, *Pensees*, VII, 425.

## Notes

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