



Brown Community Group Discussion Guide

John Chapter 6 - Lesson 1

November 19, 2017

I. Lesson Opening Points:

The 6th chapter of John is one of the most extensive theological discussions of the bible concerning “spiritual bread” and Jesus being the “Bread of Life”. It is widely considered **a theological masterpiece** with a few simple points made in a longer more elaborate discussion.

For a little historical scene setting for the beginning of chapter 6, “bread” had long been a basic metaphor for spiritual sustenance that was established from the Old Testament. This was also a widely accepted thought from the Greeks that reflected on the idea of “heavenly food” which nourishes eternal life.

The Early church pondered deeply the meaning of religious meals in light of the prominence given to breaking of bread. John chapter 6 illustrates how these conceptions that were present in the first century should find “new focus” and direction when applied to the person and work of Jesus.

It is very important to remember that Jesus’s discourse on the “bread of life” was delivered at a time when the Passover festival was fast approaching for the Jews. John chapter 6 draws upon Jewish traditions to explain Jesus in “light of scripture” and to Scripture “in the light of Jesus”.

One of the most dominant themes of the Passover has been one of bread or manna. God’s miraculous care of his people during the Exodus and wilderness wandering was especially remembered at Passover time.

So significant was the gift of the manna in the desert that it became the pattern by which messianic bread was expected to be given in the coming age.

- Joshua 5:10-12 stated that the manna had stopped at the time of the first Passover in the promised land. Rabbinic tradition supposed that it was still being made and kept hidden in heaven (Rev 2:17) from which time it would again resume at a final Passover with the coming of the Messiah.
 - ***¹⁰ On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. ¹¹ The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. ¹² The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.***

A general outline of Jesus’s discourse would flow as follows:

- Verse 1-15 Miracle narrative of the feeding and “Bread of Life” theology
- Verse 16-24 Transition section linking both geographically and theologically; Miracle and teaching
- Verse 25-34 Bread of Life in relation to its source
- Verse 35-51 Its nature
- Verse 52-65 Its Reception
- Verse 66-71 Crisis in Relationship with Disciples

As an aside, the chapter is also the longest in the gospel of John.

II. The Feeding of the Five Thousand Vs 1-15; Miracle Narrative Setting Up the Bread of Life Theology

¹ Sometime after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish

Passover Festival was near. ⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wage to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" ⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. ¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

This is the only miracle of Jesus to be recorded in all four gospels. This marked a crossroads in the Galilean ministry of Jesus.

The importance to the early church was more significant due to the ties to the miracles in the Old Testament of 2 Kings 4:42-44 and to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. For every generation, the story records the sufficiency of Jesus to meet our every need even when resources seem insufficient.

The actual location of the miracle is difficult to determine, but presumably refers to the eastern shore of the Tiberian Sea. However, some manuscripts of Vs 1 take Tiberias not as an alternate name for the Sea of Galilee, but as a reference to the city by that name on the southwest shore of the lake, which seems to be confirmed by verse 23.

There is extreme significance of the timing of this miracle near the Passover. The Passover of course was the annual spring time observance of the deliverance of the nation from Egypt and the anticipated similar acts of divine salvation in the future. Was the multitude coming to Jesus instead of Jerusalem to possibly find him as the true Passover sacrifice?

The emphasis in this account are on abundance and on abiding. The people were given as much as they wanted until they could not eat anymore. In the end, they had 12 baskets full of bread, which represented the 12 tribes of Israel. To the people, the 12 baskets full of bread, seemed to imply that the messianic banquet was ready to be spread. As such, they identified him as the promised prophet like Moses.

Galilee was a hotbed of eschatological enthusiasm in the first century, and it did not take much to get the people going in a movement. It may be possible that this multitude was about to come and try to take him as their king, Jesus withdrew to the solitude of the mountains.

III. The Crossing of the Sea Vs 16-24; Transition Which links Geography and Theologically Jesus Walks on the Water

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷ where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. ¹⁸ A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." ²¹ Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading. ²² The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. ²³ Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the

people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.

There are hints in the Synoptic accounts of the feeding that the disciples may have encouraged the groundswell to draft Jesus as the new leader to start a revolt in the desert.

As the disappointed crowd dispersed (referencing Vs 15 about taking him by force), the disciples then eventually found themselves down by the sea. They then got into a boat and began to row for Capernaum. To add to their woes, it soon became completely dark, Jesus had not yet come to them and the sea rose with a strong storm.

Battling the sudden squall for 3-4 miles, the disciples finally came across Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat.

When he reached them, they were frightened from 1) possibly the raging storm, 2) Jesus had suddenly come upon them in the night on the sea or 3) they were anticipating a rebuke of their role at the feeding. Or it could have been a sort of holy awe evoked because of Jesus supernatural powers.

Jesus relieved all of their anxieties, no matter their worries. This is what Jesus always does to comfort and love. It is not clear whether this was intended by John to be understood as a miracle or not. They might have been much closer than they realized when the storm subsided. It was approximately 3 to 4 miles across the western arc from Tiberias to Capernaum.

Theological thoughts:

- Walking on the sea is left ambiguous in John's account as compared to Matthew and Mark. It is not mentioned in Luke
- The preposition on (epi) may just as clearly mean "by" or "beside" and is used this way in verse 16 (to the sea) and verse 21 (at the land). If this is the rendering, then Jesus would have walked along the coast up to Capernaum and was spotted along the shore by the disciples.
- When interpreting whether a miraculous event was intended, the whole story is treated with brevity and a minimum of theological elaboration. John seems to have little or no interest in the storm itself as a threat to the disciples or the power of Jesus. Faith does not seem to be an issue from this text and the incident is not called a "sign". Even so, the text does not have anything that denies this is a miracle, it is just not as prominent as in Mark or Matthew.
- It is possible that John included this story in the text at this point since 1) It helped explain how Jesus got from across the lake and 2) Due to its symbolism to the Passover and context of the entire chapter
- The Exodus from Egypt involved a crossing of the sea and made possible when a strong wind caused the waters to rise and part. Psalm 78 connected this passing through the waters with the giving of manna, to which John 6 discusses in depth. The Passover deliverance of the people was seen as a testimony to the personal guidance of God himself:
 - ***Psalm 77:19-20 - Thy way was through the sea, they path through the great waters; yet they footprints were unseen. Thou didst lead they people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron***

All of this certainly mystified the people, no matter what the disciples thought. The people had participated in the feeding on the other side of the sea, realized that the disciples had departed without Jesus in one boat available and supposed that Jesus had stayed along in the mountain overnight. The next day however they realized that Jesus must have made his way to Capernaum, they all then left seeking Jesus.

IV. The Source of the Bread of Life, Vs 25-34

Jesus the Bread of Life

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

²⁶ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." ²⁸ Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." ³⁰ So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?" ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' ³² Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."

Jesus sensed superficiality in their response and he rebuked them with a pronouncement that cut to the heart of their inward condition. They had not sought him due to the meaning of the signs that pointed to his true significance, but because they had eaten their fill and were hungry again.

Jesus's accusation sharply defines two opposing views of the goal of life. Man is primarily a spiritual being who lives by insights, convictions and intangible values. To others he is primarily a physical being engaged in the lifelong struggle to survive. Jesus demonstrating that he cared for their physical being was evident, but his message that he was the Bread of Life which endures to eternity is the real message.

Key Theological Point of John Verses 1-34

- Every person is created with unfulfilled physical appetites, but nothing is as urgently required as you may think you need. Anything tangible in this world, whether it is food, drink, sex, possessions, will only satisfy transient fulfillment. All men will experience this sense of incompleteness as a result of his efforts to find satisfaction in earthly things. This provides the basis on which he may be prompted to search for heavenly things that bring everlasting satisfaction to life.
- Man's search for fulfillment and the meaning of life can only be found in whom God the Father had set his seal of approval, coming down from heaven where he provided the kind of food which endures eternal life
- The crowd, as most people, were more interested in eating a loaf of bread to satisfy a physical need over Jesus and eternity. Jesus was contrasting between men laboring for that which perishes and the Son of man giving that which endures throughout eternity.
- The act of belief is the antithesis of self-seeking religious activities. God acted to give men salvation in Christ. The grace through faith approach leaves men not less but infinitely more responsibility, for now they must respond in obedient love to the Son who bears the seal of having been sent by God rather than striving to a set of regulations prescribed in their religious beliefs.
- Jesus in this chapter redefines the relationship of faith to works and at the same time pointed to himself as the source of enduring spiritual sustenance, the Bread of Life.

The crowds request for signs, seems crazy less than 24 hours after the miracle of the feeding. Surely this miracle would seem sufficient to convince even the most skeptical.