

The Gospel of John

Text: John 5-6

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 85-98

Summary of John 5

John 5:1-18 presents readers with the first example of overt rejection of Jesus in John's Gospel. Concern over Jesus' violation of the Sabbath (by healing the paralytic) escalates almost immediately into a resolve to kill Jesus. The "Jews" in John 5:1-18 make Jesus their enemy and begin to persecute him because he challenges religious law and their authority and power. Indeed, the religious leaders' defense of the sabbath law is the defense of an entire system of religious practice. Jesus responds by equating his work with God's work. **If God is working, Jesus will keep working.** The religious leaders interpret Jesus' words as blasphemy, a capital offense (Lev. 24:13-16), and seek to kill him. The rejection of Jesus in this story, then, is a rejection of new and unprecedented ways of knowing God and the life of faith.

The remainder of the chapter (5:19-47) is an extended theological discourse by Jesus. Extended discourse is one of the distinctive features of John (see also chapters 13-17). The discourse responds to the criticisms of the Jews in verse 18. Although Jesus has declared God his Father, he now makes it clear that the Son does not act on his own (vv. 19-20). Everything that Jesus does has been modeled for him by God. Jesus now claims the importance of "hearing his word," a theme that continues at the end of this chapter and into chapter 6, where Jesus aligns his word with the words of Scripture. As we shall see, **the one who hears Jesus' words and believes the one who sent him has eternal life.**

The Bread of Life (John 6:1-71)

Background: John 6 marks the beginning of a new section in the Fourth Gospel narrative (6:1–10:42). John 5 marked the completion of the first cycle of Jesus' ministry, from the manifestation of Jesus' glory to the rejection of that glory, and in John 6 the cycle begins anew.

Notice also that this scene occurs near the time of Passover (6:4), the second of Jesus' public ministry (the first in 2:13). Passover is a Jewish festival and meal that celebrates their deliverance from bondage in Egypt and God's provision for them during their long journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Jesus will now take this Jewish table right of Passover and turn it into what we call the Lord's Supper.

A. The Feeding of the Five Thousand (6:1-15)

1. As previously discussed, **John's Gospel contains seven signs** that are strategically placed to direct our faith towards Jesus. These are seven miracles, but John always calls them *signs*. John says that these signs are given that they might point our faith toward Jesus, and as we place our faith in Jesus, John says that we will have life in his name (see 20:31).
2. So far we have seen three of the seven signs: **water turned to wine** (the kingdom of God moving from exclusive purity codes to inclusive table fellowship), **the healing of the royal officials' son** (Jesus is the Word of God sent to heal us), and **the healing at the pool of Bethesda** (Jesus is doing the Father's work, *now*).
3. **The feeding of the five thousand is the fourth of the seven signs.** It points us to Jesus as the bread of heaven. In this sign, Jesus reveals the beauty of infinite, eternal life that is made possible through him. He points to new possibilities made available in the kingdom of God. Because when God is reigning and ruling, there is always more than enough—and even more to be shared!

Read 6:1-15. What does Jesus suggest that he and his disciples need to do for the great crowd that has gathered around them (v. 5)? Why might this have sounded a bit crazy to the disciples?

How might Andrew have felt when he brought the boy and his meager lunch to the attention of Jesus?

4. The exchange between Jesus and his disciples prepares for the miracle in several ways. Philip's and Andrew's responses communicate how daunting the size of the crowd is and thus the huge quantity of food that would be required to feed them. More important, the disciples' answers show how conventional ways of thinking cannot comprehend in advance what Jesus has to give. Conventional expectations offer no solutions to the crowd's needs; Jesus alone knows how to meet those needs.
5. Verses 14 and 15 narrate the results of the miracle. In v. 15 Jesus displays his omniscience by knowing in advance the crowd's intent. The people's desire to make Jesus king by force confirms that the people's response cannot be trusted.

The five thousand being fed by Jesus knew about Moses and quickly make the jump from Jesus being a "prophet" to "Messiah"; in other words, to "king." How does the reaction of the crowds (v. 15) show that they don't really understand what these terms mean to Jesus?

6. **The kingship of Jesus** is an important theme in the Fourth Gospel. Israel's desire for a king is part of its messianic expectations, the hope for a **second David**. Jesus will be "king" in the Fourth Gospel, but he will be king according to his definition of kingship (18:36-38), not forced to fit the world's definition. This theme reaches its resolution in the crucifixion narrative of John 18-19.

B. Jesus Walks on Water (6:16-24)

1. **Water** is traditionally a symbol of chaos, over which God alone has power. When Jesus walks on the sea, it becomes apparent that he, like God, can calm the chaos of the sea. As Jesus walks on water, calming the chaotic and showing again how he shares fully in God's work, he says, "**I AM.**" These words make a direct connection with the name of God.
2. **This story illustrates the truth of John 5:19-20: Jesus shares in God's work and identity.** Jesus reveals himself to his disciples as one with God, sharing in God's actions, identifying himself with God's name, speaking God's words.
3. This story contains the most dramatic self-revelation of Jesus to this point in the Gospel; yet it occurs in the solitude of his disciples' fears. Jesus will not allow his grace to be controlled by the crowd's desire for glory, and so he hides himself. But he will not hold back his glory from those in need, because this is his mission: to make God known (1:18).
4. **Jesus walking on water is the fifth of the seven signs.** It intends to point us to Jesus as the one who removes our fears, ensures our safe passage, and reminds us that God has been, is, and will be our rescue.

There are many times when suddenly it seems the wind gets up, the sea becomes rough, and we struggle to make our way through. But if we listen, through the roar of the waves and the wind, we may hear a voice that says, "I AM THE LORD—do not be afraid!"

How might we prepare now to take Jesus on board the next time the sea becomes rough for us?

C. Dialogue and Discourse on the Bread of Life (6:25-71)

1. When the crowd catches up with Jesus on the other part of the sea, the initial conversation centers on the topic of food. The hungry crowd asks for more bread, but Jesus' words focus attention on food as something more than that which satisfies physical hunger (v. 27). The food that endures for eternal life, like the living water (4:14), comes only from God.

What is wrong with the crowd's motivation for following Jesus?

What specifically does Jesus say that God wants from the people (v. 29)?

2. **"Eternal life,"** as we have seen in the Gospel, does not speak of immortality or a future life in heaven, but is a **metaphor for living now in the unending presence of God.** Food that endures for eternal life points to nourishment in the ongoing presence of God.
3. **The crowd questions Jesus by quoting Scripture: "As it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" (v. 31)** — thus comparing Jesus and Moses. In the rest of the conversation Jesus engages the crowd by interpreting this quotation of Scripture.
4. The crowd begins to grumble when Jesus identifies himself as this bread in verse 35. Just as the Israelites grumbled against God in the wilderness, so the Jews grumble against Jesus. Like Moses, Jesus is "sent by God," and the people's response to him is a sign of their lack of trust and understanding. Yet like Israel in the wilderness, those who trust in God will be led to new life in Jesus.
5. **Verses 51-58 introduce language reminiscent of the Lord's Supper.** The phrase "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life" (v. 54) would have reminded early Christian readers of this meal. Jesus, the life-giving bread, is available to Christians in the Lord's Supper, and it is through eating his flesh and drinking his blood in the Lord's Supper that the believer is able to share fully in this food.

How do you respond to Jesus' words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood?

How does participating in the Lord's Supper somehow mysteriously nourish us (vv. 55-58)?

Why was this message so difficult for the earliest disciples to hear?

6. **To share in this meal is not to remember or commemorate just one particular event, but is to share in all of Jesus' life, including ultimately his death.** Participation in the Lord's Supper creates a relationship between Jesus and the believer (6:56) that contains within it the promise of new life (6:57).
7. **The Lord's Supper is a meal of celebration, of sharing in the abundant presence of God in the world.** By moving the theological presentation of the Lord's Supper into the life of Jesus, John suggests that participation in Jesus' flesh and blood belongs to all days of Christian life, not just "special" days, because it embodies the possibilities of new life with Christ.

Points for Home

1. The feeding of the five thousand is a sign that points us to Jesus as the bread of heaven. Jesus reveals the beauty of infinite, eternal life made possible through him. When we love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and when we love our neighbor as ourselves, we discover that there is always more than enough—and even more to be shared.
2. Jesus walking on water is a sign that points us to Jesus as the one who removes our fears, ensures our safe passage, and reminds us that God has been, is, and will be our rescue
3. Jesus is the “bread of life.” All who come to him will never be hungry, and all who believe in him will never be thirsty (6:35). As we eat his flesh and drink his blood in the Lord’s Supper, we share in the life-giving food.
4. To share in this meal is not to remember or commemorate just one particular event, but is to share in all of Jesus’ life, including ultimately his death. As you eat with others this week, consider your relationship with the Living Bread. Are you willing to offer yourself for others?

Sources:

Gail O’Day, *The Gospel of John*

Gail O’Day and Susan Hulen, *John*

Robert Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*

N.T. Wright, *The Gospel of John*