

JOHN 6

The Bread and Words of Life

Other than the resurrection of Jesus, the Four Gospels share only one miracle: the feeding of the 5,000. Although a well-known narrative, this fact may be surprising to readers. All four evangelists turn to this story at a critical moment in the ministry of Jesus. For John, it is a significant narrative that points us to Jesus as the Logos who is Life.

The Bread of Life

The three Synoptic Gospels provide a succinct account of the feeding of the multitude. Thousands of people are following Jesus and find themselves in the wilderness without food (notice the Exodus overtones). Jesus asks the Disciples to feed the multitude who are then quick to remind Jesus that such a task is impossible. Suddenly a little boy and his lunch are provided by which Jesus then feeds everyone in abundance. Twelve baskets remain. These details are present in John's account, but from this basic narrative the story goes in a unique direction. The crowd quickly moves to force him to monarchy.

Jesus rejects this democratic demand and escapes by walking across the stormy sea (another one of John's seven signs). When he arrives on the other side, the crowd is waiting for him to crown him again. This leads to one of the longest monologues in John's Gospel.

The essence of the message is that Jesus is the Bread of Life (vs. 35). By this, Jesus shows that, like the Woman at the Well, the crowd wanted physical solutions to spiritual problems. That is to say, they wanted physical redemption for spiritual brokenness. They wanted to make him king so that they would never go hungry. They, however, are always hungry because they rejected him as Messiah.

John does not include a Last Supper scene. However, the language of John 6 is reminiscent of the Lord's Supper. Jesus asks the crowd to eat his flesh and drink his blood. This symbolic language required the crowd (and the reader) to trust in Jesus for spiritual sustenance. He said the same thing to the Woman at the Well, whoever drinks from water Jesus gives will never thirst again.

As Life, Jesus gives life. Thus, the story of the feeding points the reader back to the Exodus whereby God provided in the wilderness as well as forward to the cross whereby God provides by the blood of the Lamb.

The Words of Life

Jesus's rejection of kingship and drawing the crowd to repentance and discipleship leads to their rejection of Jesus altogether. By the end of the chapter, Jesus is alone with his disciples. There is no one else. In a single day, Jesus went from being followed by thousands to a mere dozen.

Jesus reminds his disciples, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." Yet despite all the rejection, Peter responds to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (vs. 68-69).

This is the explanation (from the mouth of Peter) of John's reason for including the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus, as the Bread of Life, have the words of eternal life. Thus, coming to him means life here and now as well as then and there. There is no life apart from Christ.

Or as Isaiah the prophet put it:

Come, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.
³Incline your ear, and come to me;
 hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.
⁴Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
 a leader and commander for the peoples.
⁵Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
 and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,
 for he has glorified you.

⁶"Seek the LORD while he may be found;
 call upon him while he is near;
⁷let the wicked forsake his way,
 and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,
 and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:1-7)