

RUF Bible Study – John
Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister¹
Oct 1, 2008
John 6 – I Am the Bread of Life

Can you think of the best meal you've ever had? I can think of a few, but one of my favorite places to eat is the restaurant Stony River in Atlanta. We used to have RUF staff training near one of their restaurants, so I could eat there twice a year. Unfortunately, we've moved staff training locations, so my Stony River days may be over.

I love the steak I'd get there. It was so tender and juicy. Medium rare. They'd bring out some hot bread, tempting us to get filled before we started. I'd like to get a Caesar salad, which they'd bring out first of course. On the side was a baked potato with butter, sour cream and bacon. Someone at our table might get some broccoli or asparagus, and that would be delicious. I'd have a Newcastle or Bass Ale or a glass of red wine, and we'd talk about our lives, ministries and marriages.

I've had other amazing meals. Unfortunately, they weren't *the* meal. I've had to eat thousands of times since then. That amazing meal didn't take. It wasn't final and fixed.

We're talking about hunger in this passage. Jesus provides for their physical hunger but says all real hunger points to a deeper spiritual hunger that will never be satisfied with steak, bread, potatoes and beer.

Feeding of the Five Thousand – provision – feed?

Jesus had gotten a reputation for being someone you wanted to hang around. He healed people, and there were a ton of people who were sick. It was the Passover feast, one of the huge, important festivals of the Jewish people, where they celebrated when God delivered them from enslavement from the Egyptians.

John writes that there were 5,000 there. However, they only counted the men (the heads of the families), so there could have been 20,000 people there or more. A massive number of people. It is reasonable to think they were poor, and they certainly were hungry. Jesus wants to feed them.

This miracle stuck out in the minds of the people. It's the only miracle recorded in all four of the gospels. It made an impact in what people thought of when they recalled Jesus' life.

You may have heard what happened. Jesus took five loaves of barley bread and two fish, and multiplied them so they fed all those people. That is miraculous. Many people have tried to give plausible explanations as to why this wasn't a miracle, but they fall short, especially if you believe the text as it's presented.

And – why couldn't it be a miracle? Why is the world such a closed system? Do you believe in a God who doesn't do miracles? How does that make sense? Do you not believe in God and therefore there can be no miracles? Have you been following science, chaos theory and quantum physics? – It is not sure how things work. The “laws” of the world may not be quite as rigid as you think. In other words, maybe there are miracles already.

It makes sense to me that God could do miracles. And I think that Jesus is God. So, I think he did miracles. John certainly thinks so.

Notice, however, how, well, “underwhelming” this miracle is. Have you thought about how Jesus' miracles could be so much cooler than they are?² If Jesus wanted people to believe in him, then why didn't he heal a *bunch* of people? If he wanted people to believe in him, why didn't he do something more spectacular? Why didn't he fly over to the Roman coliseum and sky write his name, jet down into the gladiator fight, stop some lions in their tracks, and then tell everyone who he was?

I hear all the time people say they'd believe in Jesus if he just did something like that, something that was a real proof. If you point to this text or other miracles in the New Testament, they shrug their shoulders, say “eh” and it's not good enough.

Jesus' miracles are not mere power plays, and they're not meant to get us to believe. You have to see that his miracles are signs pointing to something. This sign points to the Old Testament. It points to the manna in the wilderness, the food God provided his people when Moses took them out from Egypt. Jesus and his listeners make this connection explicitly in 6:31-32, so they get it, but they don't get it.

The Jews would have known and thought that when someone started doing the signs that Moses had done that this person would be the long awaited-for Messiah, the anointed King to rule the people. So they wondered, Is Jesus that Messiah. Could he be the Christ?

That would have been a great question. But it went wrong.

¹ © Doug Serven, 2008 You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 500 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Doug Serven.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2008, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson, Hughes, Wright, Calvin and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² From Keller's sermon on this, I Am the Bread of Life

First, they were distracted by the bread. They were a hungry people, and Jesus had fed them with bread he made out of thin air. How amazing would it be to follow Jesus and never ever have to work for bread again? How great would it be to hang out with the Jesus bread factory? The people loved the bread, and they wanted to follow Jesus if he would give them more.

And then, they also wanted to make him the wrong sort of king. It says in 6:19 that the people wanted to take him by force and make him king, so Jesus got out of there. The Messiah they were looking for was someone who could take those magic powers and drive the hated Romans to the sea. They wanted action, and they wanted it now. They wanted politics to go their way. They wanted the economy to go their way. They wanted moral issues to change and go their way. They wanted Jesus to fix all their problems.

But Jesus had a different view of what their problems were, and he would not allow himself to be co-opted by their agendas, however conservative, religious and moral they might be. He left them there.

See how Jesus helped the people though. Yes, they missed the sign, but he did show compassion on them and provide for their basic needs. It's a call to us to help others. To show mercy.

George Mueller did that. He and his wife lived in England in the 1800, and he decided he wanted to help orphans there. No one was doing that, and this is before the plight of the orphan even was recognized in the public eye. He decided he would never ask anyone except for God for money, fully trusting in God alone to provide for his ministry. God did provide, and it has been estimated that over 10,000 people were saved from the streets by his ministry from the five orphanages he built in his life.

That is taking something out of nothing and helping people. Jesus models this and empowers this. Too often we have been too slow to help. We have worried too much about the economy and our 401K plans and stock options, and not enough about how to sacrifice and help people.

I recently read a quick blurb about a man who has a job but chooses to live out of the back of his truck in California. Every week, he cashes his paycheck and buys a trunk full of food. He slowly hands it out to other homeless people throughout the week, telling them about Jesus and Jesus' love for them.

Jesus provides for the poor. He cares for the poor. He did and does do miracles that show force not his blatant power, but the qualities and make up of his kingdom. He has a kingdom where those who hunger and thirst will be filled. Are you participating in his kingdom?

Walking on the Water – presence – fear?

After the crowd presses in on Jesus to try to get him to be their Sugar Daddy President instead of their Savior, he withdraws, and then sends the disciples away on a boat onto the lake. It was a dark and stormy night.

The particular lake there is known for some pretty bad weather, bringing in waves that can capsize boats. Although several of the disciples are fishermen, they can't control this boat. Have you ever been on a boat that feels like it's about to tip over? It is seriously scary. You feel so out of control and helpless. You wonder if you're going to die.

At one point, Jesus walks out to them in the middle of the storm. Again, you might be able to twist and turn this so it couldn't be an actual miracle because you're a priori ruling out miracles. But if you're open to them, then this could happen. It's another sign miracle. Very cool to the disciples, but not that amazing outside of their world. It's connected to another Old Testament Moses miracle – when God parted the Red Sea so his people could pass through and away from the Egyptians.

Jesus had sent them out in the boat in the first place. It was his idea for the trip. They could have blamed him for their troubles.

Are any of you mad at God for something like this? You feel like you've tried to follow Jesus and his instructions, and he has sent you into the storm. You have done what he says, and he has made you lost your bearings so you feel like you're going to drown. You have obeyed his wishes, and now where the heck is he in this mess?

Maybe it's in your singleness you feel this way. There are so many other people who look so happy, and here you are trying to obey Jesus with chastity with your body and it just seems like you're drowning in loneliness.

Maybe it's in your dating life. You are trying to obey Jesus with your body and your heart, but Jesus doesn't seem to be there and be blessing things. You don't feel happy after all.

Maybe it's with your ministry. You are trying to obey Jesus and love people around you, invite them to hear the gospel, share your life with them. So why does it feel like death to you? Why doesn't it make you feel good?

We get confused when Jesus sends us into the storms. He does send us. But it's important to know that he is there. He is present in the storm. He comes up to them in the midst of the gale winds, and he says, "It is I. Do not be afraid." They were afraid. They were certainly afraid of the storm. But they very well may have also been afraid of whatever it was walking toward them in the boat – a ghost? A monster? What *is* that?

Jesus gets close and talks to them, assuring them it's him and not to be afraid. They are so grateful to have him there with him. They were glad to take him in the boat.

My friend and pastor Brad Anderson told the story of when his young, toddler daughter got lost in the maze at the McDonald's play place. She became disoriented and started wailing in fear. Brad called out to her, and that helped. But then he crawled up into the netting and into the tube, and everything was okay. She was still in the same place, but her dad was there with her.

You need Jesus in your storms. You need to know of his presence. You need to know you are not alone. And, that you weren't alone – you weren't alone in the hospital bed, in that room that night, in the house that day, when she said that, when you got that call, last weekend, when he dies. Jesus is there. His presence is important for you, even if you don't fully understand him or the storms at the time. Are you afraid? Look around for Jesus and try to hear his voice.

I Am the Bread of Life – person – follow?

Since we're covering such a large and important passage in this chapter, we can't delve fully into each topic as is warranted. There could be 15 sermons from this chapter. It's chock full of important teaching for us. Alas, we press on.

Jesus was followed. The people woke up, realized Jesus had gone, and they went looking for him. When they found him they asked, How did you get here? That's question that has two meanings and two answers. I think they're meaning to ask, "Dude, you were on the other side of the lake yesterday. How in the world did you get all the way over here in the midst of that storm last night?" They were wondering if it was another miracle.

But Jesus answers a different question. He tells them how he got there, from heaven, and what he was doing.

This is where (6:26ff) Jesus rebukes them for only wanting him to be an endless bread machine. You seek me not because you understood the signs, but because you ate your fill of bread. He tells them he has come for something different. He has come to give them eternal life, for he has come from God.

How can they get it? Jesus gives one of his longest sermons here, a full explanation of who he is and why he's come.

He explains to them that they are looking for bread and manna. But don't they realize that everyone who eats bread becomes hungry again? That everyone who ate that manna in the wilderness eventually died anyway. Bread doesn't save you. But bread is important. It's a staple of life, especially among the poor.

Jesus says I Am That Bread. Though we've seen Jesus say the words, "I am" a few times in the past, this is technically considered the first I Am statement. In 6:35 he says, *I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

Jesus is using all of what has happened in the feeding of those people to point out to them they all have a hunger that is not satisfied by merely eating. It's a metaphor for something else. We all have hunger.

Now, in the midst of your parties, the smiles and the absence of apparent suffering, you may not recognize your hunger very quickly. It's there. People recognize it. It's a yearning for more, even when we have so much. "We now have, as average Americans, doubled real incomes and double what money buys. We have espresso coffee, the World Wide Web, sport utility vehicles, and caller ID. [On the other hand] we have less happiness, more depression, more fragile relationships, less communal contentment, less vocational security, more crime (even after the recent decline), and more demoralized children."³

This is why so many of you are so unhappy. You have so much, and yet your true hunger cannot be satisfied. Your grades are never ever good enough. Your achievement can always, always be added to. Your resume pales in comparison to someone else's. There is a prettier girl who enters the room. A funnier guy comes up the group.

Deep in there you know there is something wrong, there is a hunger lurking that cannot be satisfied.

What do we do? Some of us try to *ignore it* – but the inner ache only intensifies, until we are numb and listless like a starving child. Some of us⁴ try to *hide it* – we use small talk; we make courteous replies; we mask it with our incessant busyness. Some of us try to *feed it*, especially with entertainment – for example, why else do we spend insane amounts of hours in video games and pornography and achievements?

But this is like feasting hunger by eating Sour Patch Kids. I love Sour Patch Kids and can eat bags and bags of them. Unfortunately, while I enjoy that at the time, it makes me feel sick eventually. If your diet consists only of Twizzlers, you will die even though you're eating. Last year Lynn Barnett said he could eat 10 boxes of CheezIts for a month – but we don't want to have to visit him in the hospital.

If you eat junk food, you break down and get sick. You're not taking care of your real hunger.

Jesus asks us to look under our hungers and find the one who will finally and eventually satisfy that hunger. There is a food that is deeper and imperishable. It's not sex or approval or recognition or achievements. Because those things will always require more work from us.

Jesus says he is the Bread of Life. He is imperishable. To this poor people who need bread, he's telling them that without him, they will die. It's vital. He is the one who will bring you into relationship with God. He is the one who can help you stop working so hard to be right with God and others. He is life. Jesus says that whoever believes in him will live forever.

Jesus understands this is difficult for us. It's not an easy conversation. He says that you must be drawn by the Father in order to get this life (6:44).

Jesus then says something shocking – that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have this life. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."

³ David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* - I found this from RUF cm David Jones.

⁴ This paragraph comes from David Jones' sermon on this passage, adapted slightly.

This is imaginative, in-your-face language to us, and it would have been to the Jews listening to Jesus as well. The kosher laws were all in place, and those were strict about eating blood – absolutely forbidden. Here is Jesus talking about drinking his blood and eating his flesh. What could he possibly mean?

Two things. First, I think there is a connection to the Lord's Supper. Jesus isn't talking about the Lord's Supper directly, but John has that in his mind as he describes this incident. When we come to the table in the Lord's Supper, we are coming to Communion. To peace with God through the violence done to his Son. To union with God through the breaking of Jesus. To life with God through death. You should care about the Lord's Supper. You should go often to the table and think about feeding on Jesus' body and blood. That should nourish you in a way that grows in significance and importance in your life. I know I didn't care at all about the Lord's Supper when I was growing up. Not through college. Not in my early twenties. I could have taken it or left it.

That's not true now. I sense more the wonder and amazing nature of what is happening there as I renew my covenant with God, commune with Jesus spiritually.

Because what happens there is what Jesus is talking about in the passage. Have you ever thought about why we don't explain the Lord's Supper, and then describe it, set it out and just look at it? If it were just a memorial of Jesus' death and resurrection (which I don't think it is just a memorial), then why do we eat it?

Because there is something about eating. Eating means it truly becomes a part of you. It gets in there and makes you.

Jesus says he is the bread of life. If you believe in him, if you take him into you, if you unify with him – then he abides in you (6:56).

I can't fully explain that. I can't fully define that for you. We love definitions, but Jesus is giving us pictures, images and metaphors about himself.

What should our response be? I can see three here so let's use those.

Some of the people start grumbling along the way. They don't like it. They like the miracles, and they like it when Jesus does what they expect. But when he starts to talk about himself as the Bread of Life, they grumble. Do you grumble about Jesus? He's okay, but let's not get carried away. Jesus was a good teacher and all, but people that think he saves them, ugh, they're annoying... Do you grumble about Jesus as Savior and the one who fulfills a deeper hunger?

Another response would be just leaving. It is chilling to read John 6:66, "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him." People saw all this, heard all this, and walked away. You could possibly say that Jesus preached the "worst" sermon ever. He went from a possible 20,000 people down to 12, and even one of them was bad (Judas). You can imagine the disciples were not happy. They wanted to be a part of the big deal of Jesus. They wanted to be on the new Number One team. They were hoping Jesus' ministry would take off, catch hold and capture the people. It seemed like it was working. 20,000 people showed up! They were on their way.

Then Jesus started preaching. And it all went wrong. He killed the group with his downer message. He lost the crowd with all the death, blood and nastiness. He wouldn't work their agendas, and he wouldn't give them what they wanted. So they took off.

Have you left Jesus? Has he disappointed you in what he's all about? Is he talking about and preaching things that are too hard for you to do? Many people do leave Jesus. They walk with Jesus when it's easy. They leave Jesus when it's easy. They return to Jesus when it's easy. So where is conversion in that? Is that really a changed heart and love for Christ, or is that just always doing what is easy?

There is the third option of faith. Jesus turns to the disciples and asks them if they're going to go too. He's gotten down to 12 people, and it looks iffy for them. Peter doesn't give the strongest answer to Jesus even then: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Then he does follow it up with something of faith: "You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." They believed. Having seen Jesus walk to them in the midst of the storm didn't hurt. They had seen and known his presence.

What is faith then?⁵

It's not just an emotional response. The people here had a great emotional response to Jesus and his miracle. The emotional energy in the crowd must have been electric. But that wasn't faith.

Some of you think your crying, and your good feelings about songs or a certain preacher or a book is faith. It's not. Emotions can be worked up and manipulated.

Faith isn't just following the crowd either. Judas is a prime example of this. He was even one of the group who gave the right answer (Peter speaking for the group). He had good company. He was around Jesus. He did things for God. But he didn't believe. You aren't a Christian because you had a good Christian family, or went to a Christian high school or youth group. That's not faith.

And faith isn't believing in faith. Some people are so obsessed with their faith that they think that is faith. Faith has an object. If you are sinking and someone throws you an anchor, that won't help. You will sink no matter how hard you hold on to it. But if someone throws you a life buoy, you will be saved. Your embrace matters, it is involved, but it is not the thing itself.

What is faith?

⁵ A compilation of thoughts from Rev. Ricky Jones' sermon on this passage.

Jesus says faith is coming to him. (6:35). It's returning home. It's being embraced by God. It's being drawn by God and seeing your food isn't satisfying any more and he can satisfy you instead.

Faith is trusting in Christ, or believing in him. (6:35). It's throwing yourself on him. It's understanding and knowing him as you walk with him.

Faith is feeding on Christ. It's having him in you and you in him, not in an intellectual way, but in a loving way. It's the difference between studying food and *eating* food. Between knowing about nutrition and eating. Jesus becomes a part of you and your life. Feeding on Christ means you go to him for your needs and allow him to meet them for you.

Jesus is telling us there is a Bread of Life, but that bread is a person. He must be broken up and taken in so we can have life and satisfaction.

If you're not a Christian, then do you feel the inner ache for something more. Jack Higgins is a world famous author who has made millions of dollars and lives a life of luxury. He was recently asked what he wished someone had told him early in life, what advice he wished he'd been given. He said, "I wish someone had told me that when you get to the top, there's nothing there."⁶ Have you felt that yet? I'd ask you not to ignore it but to recognize it, own up to it and see it for what it is. It could be the thing that points you to the true bread.

If you are a Christian, perhaps you feel like you aren't truly experiencing Jesus as the Bread of Life. You might be trying to get Jesus to do things he simply won't do. To run your agenda, like the Jews wanted Jesus to be the certain type of Messiah they wanted. To cram him into the way you think your life should go. Let him be who he is. Give up that way of thinking about him, and come to him as a Savior, as the Bread of Life.

And feed on him. Stop snacking on junk food which ruins your appetite. He is sufficient for you, and he will satisfy you.

You don't have to have incredible, perfect faith. Since the object of our faith is what matter, we can have weak faith or strong faith and it's still faith.

The story is told of a man who moved up into the far, far north in the summer. When winter came, he had never experienced anything like that before. He couldn't believe all the snow and the frigid cold. One day while hiking, he had to cross a fairly wide river. He took off his pack, and started to inch out on the ice, slowly crawling on his belly, being careful not to get too far.

Then he heard a rumble. He was afraid, but he was too far to scramble back. He hugged the ice, said his prayers – and out of the woods came a man on the horse who took off across the river without hesitation.

The point isn't "Have stronger faith!" It's that both the crawling, scared man and the man on a horse crossed the river. Because of the ice. It was the ice that saved them from the waters.⁷

Many of you have weak faith. That's okay. Trust in Christ. Some of you have a strong faith. That's wonderful. Trust in Christ. Others of you have no faith at all. Feed on the bread of life for your soul. Have faith in Jesus. Believe in him.

Jesus, I Come

- 1. Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus, I come; Jesus I come.
Into Thy freedom, gladness and light, Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of my sickness into Thy health, Out of my wanting and into Thy wealth,
Out of my sin and into Thyself, Jesus, I come to Thee.*
- 2. Out of my shameful failure and loss, Jesus, I come; Jesus, I come.
Into the glorious gain of Thy cross, Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of earth's sorrows into Thy balm, Out of life's storms and into Thy calm,
Out of distress into jubilant psalm, Jesus, I come to Thee.*
- 3. Out of unrest and arrogant pride, Jesus, I come; Jesus, I come.
Into Thy blessed will to abide, Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of myself to dwell in Thy love, Out of despair into raptures above,
Upward forever on wings like a dove, Jesus, I come to Thee.*
- 4. Out of the fear and dread of the tomb, Jesus, I come; Jesus, I come.
Into the joy and light of Thy home, Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of the depths of ruin untold, Into the peace of Thy sheltering fold,
Ever Thy glorious face to behold, Jesus, I come to Thee.*

⁶ From David Jones's sermon

⁷ From Ricky Jones' sermon