

Living on Bread and Water

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a seven-part series

February 28, 2016

©2016 Scott L. Engle

John 4:7-15 (CEB)

⁷A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me some water to drink.” ⁸His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food.

⁹The Samaritan woman asked, “Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” (Jews and Samaritans didn’t associate with each other.)

¹⁰Jesus responded, “If you recognized God’s gift and who is saying to you, ‘Give me some water to drink,’ you would be asking him and he would give you living water.”

¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you don’t have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water? ¹²You aren’t greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.”

¹³Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life.”

¹⁵The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!”

John 6:26–40 (CEB)

²⁶Jesus replied, “I assure you that you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted. ²⁷Don’t work for the food that doesn’t last but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Human One will give you. God the Father has confirmed him as his agent to give life.”

²⁸They asked, “What must we do in order to accomplish what God requires?”

²⁹Jesus replied, “This is what God requires, that you believe in him whom God sent.”

³⁰They asked, “What miraculous sign will you do, that we can see and believe you? What will you do? ³¹Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, *He gave them bread from heaven to eat.*”

³²Jesus told them, “I assure you, it wasn’t Moses who gave the bread from heaven to you, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴They said, “Sir, give us this bread all the time!”

³⁵Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶But I told you that you have seen me and still don’t believe. ³⁷Everyone whom the Father gives to me will come to me, and I won’t send away anyone who comes to me. ³⁸I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹This is the will of the one who sent me, that I won’t lose anything he has given me, but I will raise it up at the last day. ⁴⁰This is my Father’s will: that all who see the Son and believe in him will have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

Ever tried living on bread and water? May be we should.

Last week, we heard the story of the manna, the abundant food that God provided to the Israelites as they fled into the wilderness east of Egypt. More than a millennia later, descendants of those Hebrew slaves gathered along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee anxious to see the miracle-working teacher named Jesus. It was a crowd of thousands and Jesus asked one of his disciples, Philip, where they could buy bread for everyone to eat. They would surely need nourishment as the day wore on. [It will help to have your Bible open to John 6 as you read the rest of this study.]

Philip told Jesus that feeding the crowd would take far more money than any of them had. But a boy came forward with a few loaves and a few fish. Jesus told everyone to sit, gave thanks for the food, and then gave it to be distributed to everyone – and a few loaves became enough to feed thousands.

John's Gospel

Though written from differing perspectives and for varied audiences, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke share much material. Matthew and Luke probably had a copy of Mark's Gospel when they wrote their own. Indeed, the three Gospels are often referred to as the synoptic Gospels, meaning simply "read together," emphasizing some of their similarities.

But John's Gospel is quite different. It was the last to be written (probably the early 90's AD) and shares little material with the other three. For example, almost none of the miracles recounted in the synoptic Gospels are found in the Gospel of John and vice versa. John is very clear about why he wrote another Gospel: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus' miracles are often concrete expressions of God's kingdom. For example, in the kingdom of God there are no blind or lame, so Jesus makes the blind see and the lame walk. But in John's Gospel, Jesus' miracles are signs to his true identity. The question is always, "Who is Jesus?," and there are only two options: either Jesus is one with the Father, the Great I AM, or he is not. There's no patience for fence-sitters in John's Gospel. Do you believe or not? Will you choose the light or the darkness?

Jesus, realizing that the crowd would demand more from him, went up a nearby mountain and later that night, made his way back across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum – by foot!

The next day, the crowd finds Jesus again and he tells them that they only followed him because of the previous day's miracle. And then, he tries to take them to a whole new place. Jesus tells them that he can do better than some loaves of bread that will grow stale and old anyway, he can offer them "the food that endures for eternal life," namely himself, "for it is on [Jesus] that God the Father has set his seal" (John 6:27).

Now, I'm sure that the folks on the seashore that day were confused and mystified at this, but like the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4), they want what they think Jesus is selling. She wanted "living water" so that she wouldn't have to make the trek to Jacob's well anymore, and the crowd is surely hoping for a lifetime bread supply. All they want to know is what work they have to do to get such bread. Jesus replies that they must simply "believe in him whom he [God the Father] has sent" (6:29).

Naturally, they expect something akin to what God provided to their ancestors, bread falling from heaven. But that isn't what Jesus is talking about at all, for the manna, though God-sent, was *not* the "true bread of heaven . . . that gives life to the world."

"I am the bread of life"

The crowds are still waiting to get their bellies filled when Jesus declares to them, "I am the bread of life." Jesus himself is the nourishment needed for eternal life. This is the first of seven profound moments in John's Gospel when Jesus declares "I am the . . ." Why seven? Because it is the number that signified wholeness and completeness in the ancient world; God created the cosmos in seven days. Why is the "I am" significant? Because it is the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush (see Exodus 3).¹

¹On seven other occasions in John's gospel, Jesus makes absolute "I AM" declarations. For example, earlier in the chapter, Jesus walks on water to reach the disciples' boat in the night. They are terrified, of course, and Jesus says, "I AM; do not be afraid" (v. 20). The translation is typically, "It is I; be not afraid" as in the NRSV and NIV. But such a translation masks the literal "I am" in the Greek.

This simple statement had to rock the crowd back on its heels. Jesus, this man from Nazareth, is the bread from heaven, he says, sent by God the Father, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Jesus is the nourishment, the bread, that sustains eternal life, which neither hunger nor thirst can touch. Further, it is Jesus who will raise the dead on the last day (v. 40)!

Let's be clear here: Jesus is claiming to be much more than the miraculous manna of the Exodus. The path to eternal life lies through him. He will do what only God can do – resurrect the dead. To some, even many, who listened this must have seemed blasphemous. Little wonder then that Jesus' claims drew quick opposition (v. 41-42).

But Jesus was not through. He is the bread of life, the nourishment needed for eternal life. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v. 51). And so Jesus brings the crowd to the cross and to the deep mystery of his body and his blood. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day . . . those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (NRSV).

Abide is one of those words that we find in our Bibles, but rarely use ourselves. It translates the Greek word, *meno*, which is variously translated as "remain," "stay," "endure," "abide," and "continue." John uses *meno* to convey the permanence of Christ's relationship with his people and with each of us as individuals. This permanence is a deep, active, and very real union – we are *in* Christ and Christ is *in* us, both being favorite formulations of Paul's.

One can't miss the sacramental language here, speaking to the deep mystery of what we call Holy Communion. These words help us to understand why most Christians have seen Holy Communion as more than a mere remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. Instead, we embrace that in the bread and the cup, Christ is present. It is the bread of heaven, Jesus the Christ, who nourishes us for eternal life, who will sustain our resurrected bodies. The only question for us is this: Will we trust Jesus?

"Belief" and "Faith"

Translations, even of the Bible, can be tricky. At several points in Jesus' chapter 6 discourse, English translations use verb forms of the word "belief" to translate the Greek root, *pistis*. Jesus says, for example, "all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life" (v.40) and "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life" (v. 47). The Greek root here, *pistis*, means "faith," but because English has lost the verb form of "faith," we substitute "believe." And this creates a problem.

For many English-speakers, the word "believe" speaks mainly of the intellect; it is a "head" word. Thus, it becomes easy to see "doubt" as the opposite of "belief" and make the whole thing about whether we agree with the basic doctrine/beliefs about Jesus, as we do when we affirm our beliefs when reciting the Apostle's Creed.

But this isn't what the NT writers are getting at when they use *pistis* in a variety of grammatical forms. *Pistis*/faith is a "heart" word; "trust" is an excellent synonym. If I have faith in someone, it means I trust them. If we have faith in Jesus, we trust him in all things and with every part of our being – or at least we do our best to truly trust him.

If we still had a verb form of "faith," the two statements above would read thusly: "all who see the Son and faith in him [put their trust in him] may have eternal life" and "Very truly I tell you, whoever faiths [trusts] has eternal life."

Do I trust Jesus? Do I trust that what he says is true? Do I trust that he loves me and gave his life for me? Will I entrust to him all the messiness and mistakes of my life? These are the sorts of questions to ask ourselves.

Let's feast!! Feeding Thousands with Loaves and Fish More than a miracle – also in John 6

There is only one miracle story that is told in all four Gospels. It is the story of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people with just a few loaves and fish. In John's Gospel it provides context for Jesus' revelation that he is the bread of life. As God fed the freed Israelites with manna, so Jesus has fed the multitude.

On the surface, this miracle story is pretty simple. A huge crowd has gathered and there is enough food only for a few. Jesus tests his disciples by asking how the crowd will be fed. Typically enough, the disciples don't have a clue. So Jesus takes the loaves and fish, blesses them, and then distributes them. Miraculously, there is enough to feed fifteen or twenty thousand people. The crowds take the miracle to be a sign that Jesus is the "prophet who is come into the world," the one who can teach in God's name.

But we would be mistaken if we understood this story to be about no more than Jesus' astounding powers. Instead, this is a profoundly rich story that taps into the very core of the Christian faith. There is more going on than we can do justice to in this brief study, but here are a few keys:

- John notes that this miracle happened during Passover, which celebrates the Exodus of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt. Thus, John introduces the theme of the Exodus and God's provision for his people which figures so prominently in this chapter.
- Jesus knows what he is going to do to feed the crowds, but he wants to know if Philip, Andrew, and the other of his close disciples know. Have they begun to grasp the source of Jesus' power and, hence, his identity? Evidently not. Rather than understanding that Jesus is about to do something that will reveal God's glory, Philip and Andrew respond with practical concerns about how much it would cost to feed so many. Throughout the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, even his closest disciples have great difficulty truly grasping who it is that they follow.
- John's Gospel was written late in the first century. The Christian community had shared the Lord's Supper for decades. Jesus' taking of the bread, giving thanks, and distributing it is clearly evocative of the sacred meal shared by all Christians.
- Just as Moses instructed the people to pick up all the manna, Jesus makes sure that all the uneaten fragments are gathered up. Truly, God not only provides for our most basic needs (like food) but does so to overflowing!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

John's Gospel can be a challenge. It isn't as action-oriented as the Gospel of Mark nor are the large teaching sections as neatly laid out as in Matthew. Yet, when you read the Gospel of John, the deeply moving depth of this witness to Jesus Christ is impossible to miss, even as we struggle to understand. Jesus' discourses often seem repetitive and abstract. "What is he saying?" we ask in puzzled wonderment.

My suggestion is that you try a slow, reflective reading of a manageable portion. For example, slowly make your way through chapter 6, from which today's study was drawn. Ask yourself questions, as you try to make your way deeper and deeper into the story. How does the feeding of the thousands with a few loaves (v. 11) set up what follows? There is no Last Supper scene in John's gospel – could Jesus' breaking of the bread here be such a moment? How does the story of Jesus walking on water fit into this chapter? We can connect the manna story easily, but what makes Jesus the "true" bread of heaven? How does Jesus contrast himself with the story of the manna in the wilderness? As Jesus goes on, how closely does he identify himself with the Father? Wouldn't the Jews think that it is God who is to resurrect? Can you see what makes some of his fellow Jews so angry? Can you see that Jesus *is* blaspheming unless his claims are true? As Jesus takes the crowd deeper into the mystery of his flesh and his blood, what do you think the crowd was making of all this? Would it only make sense, such as it does, to someone living post-cross, post-resurrection?

John's Gospel begs to be chewed over and gnawed on. Take and eat, indeed.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 26:26-30 Isaac throws a banquet for the leader of the Philistines to seal a treaty.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Judges 14:10-17 Samson's marriage feast.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Chronicles 7:1-11 Solomon throws a fourteen-day feast to celebrate the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Thursday, John 2:1-12 Jesus and Mary go to a wedding feast in Cana.</p>
<p>Friday, John 7:37-52 Jesus calls the people to drink the living water.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

