



JESUS' DEITY REVEALED · THE LESSON OF THE LOAVES · JOHN 6:1-15 ·
03/04/2018

MAIN POINT

Through the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus shows us that He is the Bread of Life and will meet the basic needs of our lives.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What do you think of when you hear the word “needs”?

Which things would you count as basic needs? Are spiritual needs basic?

Are spiritual needs more important than physical needs? Why or why not?

The word “need” is a common one, and rightfully so. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the word is always used rightly. For some, needs refer to what is most essential to human survival—food, clothing, and perhaps shelter. For others, the category of needs stretches further into having access to formal education, living in suburban housing, and acquiring the latest technology. Some might describe needs in terms of relationships, romance, and spirituality. So the term “need” might vary in precise meaning from person to person. For Christians, our belief in the God who made both the material and immaterial creation—physical and spiritual reality—shapes how we define needs. God does not tell us to actively neglect or harm the physical body for the benefit of the soul, neither others’ or our own. As some have said, “It’s hard to hear the gospel when your stomach is growling.” We will see in John 6 that the spiritual and the physical are to coexist with one another; as Jesus will demonstrate, the two are more related than we sometimes think.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Akin to His discussion with Nicodemus about the new birth in John 3, Jesus liked to use things from the natural world (i.e., bread) to communicate a spiritual truth about Himself or His kingdom (i.e., only Jesus truly satisfies). As the Father distributed manna to Israel under the ministry of Moses (see Ex. 16; Num. 11), so now through Jesus’ ministry the Father distributes bread to the crowd. Both the Father and the Son care about people’s bellies. The Father provided bread after delivering Israel from physical and spiritual bondage in Egypt. Here in John 6, Jesus—the Bread of Life provided by the Father—cares for the crowd’s hunger as He looks toward delivering God’s people from bondage once and for all. God provides for our basic needs, physical and spiritual, and we see this most concretely in Jesus.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JOHN 6:1-3.

Why is it important to keep in view what the phrase “after this” refers to?

What did this previous “sign” indicate about Jesus’ relationship to the Father (see 5:17-18)?

Why were the crowds following Jesus, according to verse 2? Why do you think John and the other Gospel writers distinguish between the disciples and the crowds?

How might this passage speak to our understanding of evangelism? How might it speak to our understanding of discipleship? How should we differentiate between these two areas?

Following Jesus means more than coming to Him in order to see miracles or to have our stomachs filled. Disciples are those who follow Jesus not only because of His works, but also because of His words and because of who He is (see John 6:66-69). Jesus then turns to highlight for His disciples who He is by feeding the crowd of 5,000.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JOHN 6:4-11.

How might Jesus’ identity speak to why Jesus is able to feed the 5,000?

How does Jesus use the crowd’s need for food as an opportunity to teach His disciples about His divine identity (see especially v. 6)?

What does Jesus’ concern about the people’s hunger reveal about how He prioritizes physical needs?

Without naming someone specific, when have you seen someone wrongly ignore a physical need in order to meet a spiritual need? How does Jesus’ example here correct this type of mistake?

Jesus gave the disciples the specific task of finding food for the crowd. He not only taught them to trust Him to provide in ministry, but also to trust Him to provide for their own physical needs in the meantime.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JOHN 6:12-15.

What do you think is the significance of there being precisely 12 baskets of food? What should we conclude about Jesus' ability to meet our needs as we minister in His name (see Matt. 6:33)?

What is the crowd's response to Jesus' miracle? What do you think is the significance of the title "the Prophet" (cf. Deut. 18:15)? How can we today become guilty like the crowd of forcing would-be political saviors into office? Why is such a desire misplaced?

This passage shows that we can respond to Jesus in the wrong way, even in declaring him to be the Messiah (i.e., "the Prophet"). We can misidentify Jesus as primarily a political Savior when in truth He came to save us from something more threatening than Roman oppression, namely the penalty of sin. If we misunderstand the nature of Jesus' ministry as recorded in His first coming, we misunderstand who He is as the Bread of Life come into the world.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Why should we, like John, distinguish between the "crowd" and the "disciples"? Why does being a disciple of Jesus mean more than showing curiosity about Jesus and His works or finding ways that He can meet our needs?

Why is it dangerous to enjoy the gifts that Jesus gives us more than enjoying Him as the Gift?

Jesus was mindful of a "teaching moment" in which He could illustrate His identity to His disciples. How can we learn from His example to be mindful of ways to teach others about who Jesus is?

Are there any circumstances or situations in your life right now in which you are doubting God's ability to work?

Is there anything going on in your life in which you have concluded there is too little for God to work with?

PRAY

Close your group time in prayer. Thank God for being all that we need. Pray for the power to believe and experience that Jesus truly satisfies more than anything else in this world.

COMMENTARY

JOHN 6:1-21

6:1-4. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four Gospels. Jesus had crossed to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee at a time when the Jewish Passover feast was near. If we accept John 5:1 as a Passover, the reference in 6:4 would be the third Passover observance recorded in this Gospel.

This is one of those several examples in John where we see the miracle-message method of Jesus' ministry. Paul told the Corinthians that Jews required a sign, and John reminded us that a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick (6:2). Some scholars estimate there may have been as many as seven thousand to ten thousand people, since verse 10 talks about five thousand men. As we shall see, this chapter is about faith, but these people wanted food. Jesus talked about spiritual relationship, but the crowds were interested in physical showmanship. They focused on the lunch, not the love; on their bellies, not their beliefs.

Our passage first centers on people in need. As we have already seen, starvation is a stark and unpleasant reality in our modern world. Ten percent of the world's babies die before their first birthday, and one of every four children suffers from malnutrition. Yet the problem of spiritual hunger is even more severe. Like the people gathering on the mountainside in Galilee, millions today need the living bread that only Jesus can provide.

The introduction of the Passover is always significant in the chronological pattern of John's Gospel. He contrasted the rejection in Jerusalem at the end of chapter 5 with the magnificent scene of thousands coming to hear Jesus speak on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. This body of water actually has four names in Scripture: The Sea of Galilee and the Sea of Tiberias both identified here in our text; the Lake of Gennesaret in Luke 5:1; and the Sea of Kinnereth (Num. 34:11). Today it is generally called Lake Kinneret, but students of the Bible have difficulty calling it anything other than the Sea of Galilee.

6:5-9. Remember that Jesus had been doing more miracles than the three John has recorded for us so far. Many people followed him because of their interest in his power and his teaching. This crowd would have been greatly enlarged because of the number of visitors to Palestine for the Passover. Jesus had led his disciples out to this solitary place to have some private teaching time with them, but the crowds followed. Mark tells us in his account that Jesus had compassion on them and taught them late into the day—and he also saw their need for food.

From a picture of people in need we move to a picture of the disciples in confusion. Philip's reply is so typical of what we might say. He looked strictly at the human dilemma, considering only his own resources, and pronounced that the situation was hopeless. This whole inquiry was instigated by Jesus' question: Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat? It is typical of John to remind his readers that Jesus already knew what would happen next (v. 6). At first we wonder why Philip was singled out, but then we remember he was a native of Bethsaida, possibly the closest town. If a local convenience store had been open at that hour, Philip would have known about it. Nevertheless, Philip did a quick assessment of what it would cost for each one to have a bite!

But Andrew had a plan; this fellow-citizen of Bethsaida found a boy carrying a lunch consisting of barley loaves and fish. Like Philip, Andrew had no idea what use that pittance would be. John's record offers so many interesting observations, not the least of which is that the two fish Andrew found were definitely small. The word *opsarion* is used only by John, and it emphasizes the insignificance of these tiny sardines.

Two things surface in this portion of our text. First, we see that Jesus Christ was all-sufficient for any need even when his disciples were in confusion. Second, the purpose of the miracle seems clear: to instruct the disciples, to lay a foundation for the sermon on the bread of life, and to feed hungry people.

6:10-13. Like Moses' ancient rod, Samson's donkey jawbone, and David's sling, this simple lunch shows again that seemingly useless things can become important in Jesus' hands. He alone is all-sufficient. Everyone was satisfied, and each disciple had his own personal basket of leftovers as a reminder of the Master's power. The identification of the number of men appears in all four Gospels. We can only guess what the total number of people might have been. Some estimates reach as high as twenty thousand people. What a wonderful picture John paints of Jesus holding those five small barley loaves in his hands as he gave thanks. The verb is the word from which we get our word eucharist, though this was a simple mealtime blessing, not a religious ceremony.

But why the command to gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted? Obviously the ample provision is important (Jer. 31:14), and surely a special focus on the role of the disciples. All of them probably doubted that anything could be done to feed this vast number of people. Philip and Andrew just happened to be on the spot to respond publicly.

6:14-15. No one could deny the miracle, especially those who had enjoyed lunch. Many people were drawn back again to questions posed to John the Baptist in 1:21, particularly the reference to "that prophet" promised by Moses. But Jesus would have none of their political pressure brought on by full stomachs. He slipped again into the hills for rest and worship. Mark told us that he "dismissed the crowd" (Mark 6:45), and John told us that he withdrew again to a mountain by himself. He would be no political messiah hustled into battle with the Romans to regain Palestine for Israel.

This passage marks one of the high points of Jesus' popular favor. Since the promise of Deuteronomy 18, the Jews had looked for another Moses, for the great Prophet sent from God. And who better to fulfill that prophecy than this Jesus who gave them a new kind of manna? But the crowd's limited view of the prophet's message and ministry seemed to exclude his spiritual mission. They had no understanding of suffering for sinners and death for forgiveness.

No. Jesus could not accept the popular movement to make him king. The people were ready to offer him worship, but it was false worship. This was one of the things Satan had promised during the temptation in the wilderness—Jesus' own people wanting to make him king.

6:16–18. The Sea of Galilee lies six hundred feet below sea level, and the prevailing winds still blow from the west. According to John, his disciples went down to the lake. But both Matthew and Mark specify that Jesus sent his disciples away. We see here a lesson in authority for the disciples. Several of them were fishermen, and this east-west route across the lake toward the town of Capernaum would not have been unfamiliar. But it was dark and the waters were treacherous. This miracle also appears in Matthew 14:22–33 and Mark 6:45–52. Presumably, Jesus had set a time and perhaps even a place where he would meet them on the west coast of the lake.

6:19–21. The distance across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee is about five miles, so they were more than half way across when they saw Jesus walking on the water. He knew their problems with faith and fear; Mark tells us he had been watching them (Mark 6:48). This was no ghost, no mystical apparition brought about by their terrified emotions. His words are so like the Lord: It is I; don't be afraid.

This miracle revealed Jesus' authority to the disciples and his purpose of ministry to the crowds. The requirements for help in their distress were simple enough—recognize their own need and take Jesus into the boat. That has not changed much in our day. But just seeing Jesus and recognizing him were not enough; they had to take him into the boat. As we shall see in our continuing study of this chapter, intellectual assent must be accompanied by spiritual appropriation and personal commitment to gain eternal life, or—as in this case—to gain physical safety.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

John 9:1-41