

JOHN — WEEK 8

I AM THE BREAD



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A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

After He feeds the 5000 people are literally chasing after Jesus. He checks their enthusiasm with some tough teaching about the true bread of life that comes down from heaven. This confuses many, especially when Jesus says that the bread is His flesh, and everyone has to eat this bread and drink His blood to have eternal life.

Good. Jesus wants this to only make sense later. This group includes too many lightweights anyway.

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1 John 6:22–29

On the following day, when the people who were standing on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other boat there, except that one which His disciples had entered, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with His disciples, but His disciples had gone away alone—however, other boats came from Tiberias, near the place where they ate bread after the Lord had given thanks—when the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they also got into boats and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, “Rabbi, when did You come here?”

Jesus answered them and said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.”

Then they said to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”

Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”

Jesus’s criticism of the crowds is valid—and important. Sure, people are hungry, but what’s going on here is light years more important than a meal. Jesus didn’t feed them so that they wouldn’t starve; He fed them so that they would realize who He is.

But all this is in a kind of time-release capsule. The crowds aren’t supposed to totally figure out who Jesus is just yet. He needs to make it to the cross first. After that, then the light bulbs can come on.

So, Jesus speaks in terms that often only become clear later. That’s what happens here when He says, “*Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life.*”

They take both the words “labor” and “food” literally and that gets them way off track. So, they ask, “*What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?*” (Note, “labor” and “works” in this passage are the same word in the Greek—*ergazomai*.)

Jesus’s answer changes their question—“*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.*”

They ask how they can *work the works of God*, meaning the works God approves of. Instead, Jesus interprets “*the works of God*” literally, meaning God’s works.

Jesus just loves changing the subject.

Could there be any clearer statement of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone? Our faith is “His works.” When we believe *in Him whom He sent*, we are “working” *the works of God*.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. — Philippians 2:12

2 John 6:30–34 (ESV)

So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

The crowds want to see a confirming sign, even though they saw Him feed the 5,000 just yesterday. They’re not impressed by miraculous food production. Moses did that six days a week for decades.

So, Jesus sets them straight. That wasn’t Moses (which should be obvious anyway since it was *bread from heaven* and Moses was down here.)

But their big error isn’t misunderstanding where the bread comes from; it’s misunderstanding what Jesus means by bread. He makes the distinction clear by adding the word *true*. He’s talking about *the true bread from heaven*.

That *true bread from heaven* is Jesus Himself. “*For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*”

Sounds good to them, so they say, “*Sir, give us this bread always.*” Okay, except for their saying, “*always.*” Do they want a daily ration of *the true bread from heaven*?

This word “*always*” appears in other translations too. The word in Greek is “pan-tot-eh,” which is defined simply as “at all times.” So, this can’t be explained by some obscure idiom in the original language. They simply wanted this to be given to them at all times.

That means they don’t understand what Jesus meant when He said, in verse 27, “*Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you.*”

They want Him to give them this bread “*always*”—over and over. But this bread is *the food which endures to everlasting life*.

You only need to receive this bread once.

The “*always*” issue is how we know that this passage is not a reference to communion. In some ways, it sounds like a reference to communion, and later passages will sound even more like communion.

He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. — John 6:56

But we receive communion over and over. It represents the body and blood of Christ, but it’s only a representation.

The food which endures to everlasting life does not perish. You don’t need to receive it over and over.

3 John 6:35–42

And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven.” And they said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”

Jesus will be crucified for the blasphemy of claiming to be God, but the first claim here might be even more extreme. What could, “*I am the bread of life.*” possibly mean?

The answer is in the very next sentence—if they can understand it. “*He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.*” The words “hunger” and “thirst” don’t refer to literal eating and drinking, but to the broader concept of our craving for that which gives life.

If they can get past the analogy, the next few sentences are the whole gospel in a can. They’re even reformed theology in a can. “*All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.*”

Unfortunately, the people can’t get past the analogy; they can’t even get up to the analogy.

They’re stuck on where Jesus is from.

That isn’t as unreasonable as it sounds. Everyone sees everything through the lens of their experiences (sometimes called their worldview). That’s how every living being functions. We know some things from experience, and we learn new things through new experiences (including listening to teaching) and the information contained therein.

But when that new information doesn’t fit into the framework we’ve already established, our world-view is challenged. When that happens, there are two possible outcomes: either our worldview changes or we reject the new information. Most people are naturally closed minded and instantly choose the latter.

But by asking the question, “*Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, ‘I have come down from heaven’?*” these folks show that they are not closed minded.

At least they’re trying.

4 John 6:41–52

The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven.” And they said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”

Jesus therefore answered and said to them, “Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father. Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”

The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?”

The Jews are wondering how Jesus could have come down from heaven when they know His parents. Jesus overhears this “murmuring” and answers it seemingly by ignoring it. Instead, He turns back to the issue of Him being the bread. Now he explicitly claims that this bread (Himself) is to be eaten.

The Jews’ question, “*How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?*” serves a very important function in this passage; it shows that we didn’t misunderstand what Jesus said.

Because we are reading a translation of the Bible, we must always be mindful of the possibility of mistranslation or misunderstanding. Language idioms can be, shall we say, interesting. In fact, we’re reading a translation of a translation. Jesus wasn’t speaking in Greek; He was speaking in Aramaic.

But because of the crowd reaction, we know that what Jesus said in the original tongue must have meant what it sounds like in English.

He really did say that.

Okay then. So, answer the question. “*How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?*”

He can’t, literally. It’s a metaphor. In hindsight, with the cross in the rear-view mirror, we know that Jesus “giving” us His flesh is giving up His flesh on the cross, and “eating” it means receiving it. But the people hearing this don’t have that perspective.

I often wonder what it would have been like to have walked with the incarnate Lord. It would have been an awesome privilege.

Yes, but awesome doesn’t mean easy.

5 John 6:53–62

Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.”

These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum.

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?”

When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, “Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?”

Every time the disciples ask a tough question Jesus responds with something even more confusing.

This passage is part of Jesus’s response to the Jews wondering how He can say He came down from heaven. They know His parents and where He’s from.

His “I am the bread” response is, technically, a proof that He came down from heaven, but only when it makes sense (after the resurrection). Right now, it just sounds like He’s ignoring the question.

Why is Jesus being so cryptic? He makes this sound like cannibalism. The creep factor is off the charts.

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?”

No one can understand it—not yet anyways.

But then Jesus jumps back to topic A (Him coming down from heaven) and says, “Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?”

The ascension will settle this for sure. Then everyone will understand that He descended from Heaven.

Jesus is making it incredibly hard to be a disciple. Why? What’s the point?

This is boot camp. The coming war will be even harder. He’s culling out the lightweights. The Lord did the same thing at the end of Deuteronomy as He prepared the Israelites to enter Canaan.

What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart. — Deuteronomy 20:8b

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How do we "work out our salvation with fear and trembling"?
2. How often should we take communion?
3. What's the shortest possible statement of the gospel?
4. If you had been there when Jesus said this, how would you have reacted?
5. Have you ever been confused where you just had to put your confusion on hold and move on?

Items for prayer: