

Women's Bible Study –Winter/Spring 2018
John 6 ~ Svea Merry
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Recently, I was in a gathering of godly women, and when we were all asked to share how the others could pray for us, one of the women asked us to pray that she would see every circumstance in life as something which could drive her towards loving Jesus more deeply and knowing him more fully. Her words stuck with me for days afterwards. It caused me to reflect on what makes us hungry to know and love Jesus more. If we have that hunger, how is it satisfied? If we don't have that hunger, but want to, how do we whet our appetites? Or why do we feed ourselves with things other than Christ and feel so unsatisfied, but keep doing it over and over? And I don't just mean bad stuff, but even with good stuff. I feed off of the love of my husband and family, I feed off of friendships I have, I feed off of a warm summer day with the birds signing and the scent of flowers in the air. But all of these things disappoint at times. My husband and I have off days, friends move away or get busy with their own lives, and that sunny day gives way to February. So I ask you to ponder the question on the top of your outline, "What do you feed yourself with, hoping it will satisfy? As you consider that, let me tell you right away that we're going to see in John chapter 6 that Jesus is the one thing we can feed on that will satisfy forever.

John 6 is a great chapter with some significant elements in it. Do you remember back in the first week of this study when we discussed John's purpose in writing this book? That, as it says in 20:31, he wrote so that we may believe that Jesus is that Christ, and that believing we may have life in his name? Well, this chapter more than any other is going to flesh out what that means. It also is a chapter which incorporates another significant characteristic of John's Gospel that we haven't touched on yet. Throughout the book, John includes 7 key signs and 7 key statements that reveal Jesus as God. On the bottom of your outline page, I've given you a little table with the references for each of the miracles and each of the 7 times Jesus makes a statement starting with "I am," the name of God. This is a good week to mention this characteristic of the book because 2 of the signs, and the first of the "I am" statements occur in this chapter. I'd love for you to fill in this chart, either with your small group or on your own sometime in the next week, to identify these events and statements that John included to help us understand Jesus as God.

John 6 starts with one of Jesus's most famous miracles: how he fed more than 5000 people starting with just a little boy's lunch. This is one of the only miracles recorded in all 4 of the Gospels. It is no small thing to feed 5000 people. I think I'm doing well to feed my 4 teenagers every day, but 5000! And actually, the other Gospels add that there weren't just 5000 people there. There were 5000 men and also women and children. Scholars estimate that Jesus probably fed closer to 20,000 people in this miracle! Why do they only count 5000 men? Well, we'll see that this miracle resulted in the men wanting to come and take Jesus by force and make him their king, so the emphasis on 5000 men being present may have less to do with minimizing the significance of women and children, and more to do with emphasizing the potential for a massive mob reaction to the miracle.

So, we begin with this first section, and what I hope you will see here is the first point on your outline and that is that Jesus provides for our needs. Once again, a massive crowd is following Jesus, checking him out. And why? Verse 2 tells us they were interested in Jesus because of the signs he was doing on the sick. (Point of clarification—John almost always uses the term “sign” to mean a miracle because his whole point in writing this book is so that we have the information we need to believe that Jesus is our Lord God, and the 7 miracles he details are signs to point us to this truth.)

So here's the scenario: On this particular day, Jesus was interacting with this massive crowd in a fairly remote location. We kind of take it for granted that if we're away from home, we can find a restaurant or swing through a drive-through to get a bite to eat, but obviously a crowd of this size all looking for food at the same time was going to create a mob even bigger than Chick-Fil-A on opening day. The other Gospels tell us that the disciples wanted Jesus to send everyone away to find food in nearby villages, which is probably what they did on other days. But on this particular day, Jesus had a lesson he wanted to teach. Jesus wanted to feed the crowd himself. Now just think for a moment. Why do you think he wanted to do that? The crowd wasn't expecting this of him, and he didn't have a social obligation to come up with box lunches for his audience.

Jesus wants to meet this need for every person present and he has a plan for doing it. He turns to Philip, and the commentaries point out that he almost certainly addressed Philip because they were near Philip's hometown, and asks him where they could buy bread to feed all these people. Verse 6 says he asks this to test Philip. I'll get to that in a second, but let's look at Philip's answer first. What if you were Philip? What if you were down at the Mayo Civic Center at a convention filled to capacity, and someone asked you, where in Rochester can you go to buy lunch right now with no prior planning for 20,000 people? Even in this day and age, you can't! I think we'd say the same thing Philip said. Um, yeah, so even if I could find a place that could do lunch on the spot for, ugh, let's say 10,000 people, at \$5 a person, we're talking \$50,000, and since there's closer to 20000 people here, we're talking two-thirds an annual salary just to give everyone half a lunch. Philip's answer was pretty rational.

But of course Jesus knows the realities Philip pointed out as well as Philip did. So what's his point? Verse 6 says Jesus already knew what he was going to do, but he wanted to test Philip. Now, don't let this hit you the wrong way. This doesn't mean Jesus was acting like a crabby DMV examiner just looking for an excuse to fail Philip. No, in fact quite the opposite. When God tests you, He is never setting you up to fail or trying to catch you up in evil. James 1:13 states clearly that God does not test with evil. He has no malicious intent. God is not sitting up in heaven holding a clipboard, taking notes, and grading us to determine whether we pass or fail this Christian life. Far from it.

One of my favorite movies of all time is a movie from the 80's called “The Right Stuff.” It's an epic retelling of the development of aviation in the 1950's and the infancy of the space program. You may know that the original astronauts were all test pilots. Their role in testing a new plane was not to see if it would pass or fail as an aircraft. “Testing” a plane was all about seeing how it would respond to various scenarios. The test pilots and engineers were completely committed to seeing their aircraft developed into the best plane they could produce.

So I think it is with Jesus's test of Philip. When he says, "Philip, where can we go to buy bread for all these people?" The answer is: "Nowhere. There is no place we can go to accomplish this, and even if there were, we do not have the resources it would take to be able to provide for these people." The test, the challenge that Jesus was throwing out there, was how the needs of the multitude could be met. Philip's answer was not wrong in saying that it was impossible to meet the needs of all those people given human realities. But Jesus was about to use this miracle as an object lesson to show that the way needs get met, how people get fed, the source of what we need for life, is Jesus.

You know the story, another disciple, Andrew, brings a little boy to Jesus who has 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. And for those of you like me who like the cultural details, when you hear loaves, don't think big bags of sliced sandwich bread. Picture something like this: (photo) Barley loaves they made in the first century looked a lot more like pita bread, and the fish would have been something like small perch. Not that it matters, though. Even if they started with 5 big loaves of the best stuff from Great Harvest along with two huge poached salmon, that still wouldn't have made a dent in what was needed to feed this crowd.

Jesus takes the food, gives thanks for it, and begins distributing it. Now, he didn't just snap his fingers and food suddenly appeared in everyone's lap. Here in John it just says that Jesus distributed it to those who were seated. Mark's account of this story adds a lot of extra details for us. In Mark 6:41, it says that he gave the food specifically to his disciples who then distributed it to the people. Now why do you think he made the disciples his servers? These same men who had reacted in a very natural human way of understanding that there was no earthly way to feed all these people were about to see that there was a God way to feed all the people. Can you just imagine being Philip? Was he skeptical at first as he took in his hand what Jesus gave him and set out to give it to someone else? Was he afraid that it might not work and that he'd look like a fool? What would it have been like after what probably took the 12 disciples at least an hour to distribute the food. Were they speechless? Were there tears streaming down their cheeks? It doesn't say, but I love to wonder about these things. And when they finished, not only had everyone gotten their fill, Jesus had the disciples gather up 12 basketfuls of leftovers.

John's account of this story ends by saying that the people were blown away by this sign miracle and agreed that Jesus was the Prophet that Moses had said would come in Deuteronomy 18, and then wanted to take him and force him to be their king. But becoming the earthly king of a nation was not what Jesus came here and so it says in verse 15 that he withdrew from there and retreated to the mountain by himself.

What comes next is really interesting. John sticks in a brief little episode in verses 16–21 with Jesus walking on water. Now, I have to admit, when I first began studying this chapter, not only did it feel like it got shoehorned into the middle of this chapter, the way John tells it gives kind of an eerie overtone. When I'm studying a chapter, I often take it a couple of verses or a paragraph at a time and try to summarize what's happening in that section, and I'll be honest, the first summary I wrote of this story is "Jesus acting creepy while sneaking up on the disciples' boat in the middle of the night in a storm." But

after studying it, this story reveals one of my favorite things about Jesus, which I've listed as the second section on your outline: Jesus knows what we need.

The story, according to John, goes like this: Jesus had withdrawn to the mountain by himself, and his disciples had set off across the Sea, the Sea of Galilee, to head to the other side. But Jesus wasn't with them and now they're caught in a bad storm at night. Then, as they are 3–4 miles from the shore (and commentaries tell us that it would have been about a 5–6 mile trip across the lake to get where they were going), all of a sudden, Jesus appears walking on the water and they're terrified. In fact, Mark's account of this story says they thought he was a ghost. But Jesus tells them not to be afraid and gets in the boat with them, suddenly the storm stops and they get to the other side. Now, if you only read the story in John, it seems a bit creepy and disconnected from the rest of the chapter right? But let me add in a few details from Mark.

Remember when John told us that Jesus withdrew by himself, and the disciples went off at night into the storm without him? Well, with just that information, we might think Jesus was abandoning them when they needed him, or even worse yet, carelessly or callously sending them off alone into a dangerous storm. But stick a bookmark in John 6 and turn back in your Bible to Mark 6. Look at Mark 6:45–46. *Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.* In this account, Jesus sounds much more like the good leader he is. It is clearer from Mark that Jesus quite intentionally was sending his disciples on ahead of him, maybe even to protect them from the crowd, and that he wanted to spend some time alone praying. Now, later on your own time, reflect on that a bit, about why our Lord Jesus put such a high priority on spending time alone in prayer, but what I want to think about here is why Jesus would send his friends off into a scary, middle-of-the night storm. From John's account, it seems like Jesus is off doing his own thing and the disciples are on their own in the storm. But look at Mark 6:48. *And he (Jesus) saw that they were making headway painfully.* They weren't truly on their own. Even though he wasn't there, Jesus knew what they were facing. Friends, we too are never alone in the storm, even if it feels like Jesus is miles away. He wasn't physically with his disciples, but because he is Jesus, he still knew exactly what they were facing.

Here's where this story and the previous story about the miraculous feeding begin to come together. Just as Jesus did the miracle of feeding the people only after Philip had expressed his recognition that there was no earthly way to meet their needs, Jesus is about to demonstrate his power to meet the needs of his disciples at the moment when they know they're desperately alone. He's watched them long enough, and goes out to them, not in a boat, but by his own power, walking out to them. In fact, Mark adds this crazy detail in verse 48 that he meant to pass by them—what is that about??? I don't know, we'll ask Jesus to explain that one someday—but when they saw him and were scared, he reassured them, got in the boat, and the storm ended. Like the previous miracle story, Jesus demonstrated that he and only he has the power to provide what people need. And here, Jesus not only demonstrates his miraculous power over nature, but is also again showing the disciples that he knows what they need and he the source that meets that need.

But look at the end of Mark 6 verse 51 and 52, *And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.* What is this connection that Mark is making here between the miracle of the loaves and fishes with the disciples' reaction to Jesus walking out to them in the storm? What could they have learned from the miracle that would have changed how they experienced Jesus in the storm? What lesson is there in here for us that would change how we experience the storms we face?

The miraculous feeding of the 5000 not only demonstrated what Jesus could do, it was a sign that pointed to the gospel, the good news that Jesus is not only our source of bread, he is, as you see on the 3rd section of your outline, Jesus is our bread of life. And what we're about to see next is that there is a big jump from wanting what Jesus can provide to wanting Jesus.

Turn back to John 6. The crowd was impressed with the bread Jesus provided and wanted more. In verses 22–24, it says the next day, the crowd was again seeking Jesus, and when they found him Jesus said to them, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."*

And before we go on, I want to reflect on that for a moment. Was there anything wrong with them eating their fill of the loaves? Of course not, it was a compassionate gift Jesus wanted them to have. But what Jesus hones in on, is that their motivation is focused on what they can get from Jesus rather than on Jesus himself. And this is a trap that is really easy for us to slide into too. It's what happens when our prayer life revolves around asking God to give us what we want rather than on spending time in relationship with Him. It's when we begin to treat God like he's a cheap cosmic vending machine and expect him to deliver answers to our prayers after we give Him our two cents.

Picture this: What would it be like if a wife viewed her marriage simply as a way to benefit from her husband's paycheck? What if all she talked to him about was how many days it is until payday, and what she wants to do with his money? How satisfying would that relationship be?

In a way, Jesus was calling out the crowd for this kind of thinking. They liked the bread he gave them and they were after more, but he wants better for them. He wants them to enjoy the satisfying relationship God offers them. Look at verse 27 with me. *Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."* ²⁸ *Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"* ²⁹ *Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God that you believe in him whom he has sent."*

The people are seeking Jesus hoping to tap into the benefits of this amazing miracle-worker who could give them what sounds like an endless supply of bread and ask in verse 28, what do we have to do? And Jesus says, believe in the one whom God has sent. Believe in Jesus. But then they say something that just kills me, *"Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?"* ³¹ *Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'*

What sign do you do that we may see and believe? I want to say, were you not the ones yesterday who ate your fill of the miracle lunch??? And weren't you there in the first place because you'd heard of him doing miracles of healing before that??? And they bring up that their ancestors from the generation that wandered in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, got miracle manna, but how did that work out for them? Did that sign produce a deep, contented, and perfect faith in them?

This illustrates the point that if you're seeking God for what he can do for you rather than believing in Him for who He is, you'll never be satisfied. The impact of signs will fade and you'll be looking for more proof.

But since the people brought up this other famous miracle bread, the manna of the Old Testament, let's consider that for a minute. If you were with us when we studied Numbers last year, you'll remember that manna was a bread-like substance that miraculously appeared in the wilderness every morning as food for the Israelites. They were supposed to gather it each day, but only to take what they would eat that day, except they could gather a double-portion prior to the Sabbath. They were not supposed to hoard this bread or stash it away, and if they did, the manna would rot away. Now, why do you think God gave them their bread fresh every day? What did this teach them? He was doing this to teach them that they could depend on him to meet their every need. God didn't want them to find their security in a stash of food, He wanted them to find their security in God Himself. In the fact that He was lovingly providing for their needs on a continual, daily basis.

Jesus is ready to make a statement that ties the miracle of the manna together with the feeding of the 5000 in a really amazing way. First, look at verse 33: "For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." In other words, just like God provided the manna for the daily needs of His people to teach them to depend on Him, Jesus is claiming to be the same. Jesus is saying that he is God's daily provision for us to meet all our needs. But the people still didn't understand what Jesus was saying, and simply say, "Cool. Sounds good. We'll take the bread."

Jesus responds with a truly profound statement. He says, "I am the bread of life." He is claiming to be that which we need for life, and he is also making the first of the 7 "I am" statements I mentioned earlier. These "I am" statements are significant because, as you may recall from Exodus 3, "I am" is the name that God chose for Himself, how He wants to be identified as the self-existent God who always was and always will be. In Greek, I am is *ego eimi*, and though it isn't clear from English, when said in Greek, it was a direct reference to the name of God.

But what does it mean that Jesus is the bread of life? He is promising here that whoever comes to him will not be hungry, and then changing the metaphor, those who believe in him will never thirst, recalling what he said in chapter 4 about being living water to the woman at the well. He is using hunger and thirst as metaphors for the human need to know God. And those who come to Jesus, i.e. those who believe in him, are brought into relationship with God and their hunger and thirst to know God is satisfied. This doesn't mean there is no need for continued dependence upon him, for continued feeding upon him, but it means the core emptiness that can only be filled by God has been met.

How does this happen? Apparently not simply as a result of seeing Jesus do a miracle because verse 36 says they had seen Jesus and yet still do not believe. And here's a place where I know I am not like Jesus, because if I were him, I'd be really frustrated at them. I'd be feeling like, "Come on, you guys, you need what I have to offer you, and I have just demonstrated something which should have proven my worthiness and ability to you and you're still not getting it!" But this isn't how Jesus responds. Instead, he has full confidence and peace in his Father's will, echoing what he said in chapter 5 about being completely in step with what the Father has given him to do. He does not freak out that maybe his mission to reveal God to the world through himself won't be successful, he knows it will be. Jesus isn't angry or anxious that the people aren't understanding him, he's simply putting the truth out there and is peaceful about it, knowing that everything is in his Father's hands. Jesus summarizes in verse 40, "For this is the will of my Father that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

But like their forefathers in the wilderness grumbled about their manna, these Jews are grumbling about Jesus. In verse 42 they're completely ignoring this amazing thing that Jesus just said about how they can be brought into an eternal, satisfying relationship with God, and instead are stuck on Jesus's claim to have come from heaven, because, as they all know, isn't he just Joseph and Mary's kid?

But Jesus just continues, and I'm paraphrasing, "Don't grumble. Everyone prompted by the Father to come to me will, and anyone who believes will be given eternal life." and then he pushes them a bit further in verse 51. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

And it says the Jews were upset now because how can anyone give their flesh to someone? Not to get gory, but the word here for flesh doesn't just mean skin, it means the meat of one's body. All the stuff that covers the bones. So how can someone give their flesh away? They would have to die to do so. Jesus is making a veiled reference to the truth that his death was going to be part of this process of giving us life. He's going to get kind of graphic in his metaphor here. Verse 53: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* ⁵⁴ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* ⁵⁵ *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.*"

Ok, let's just admit it. The way he said this is really gross, offensive even, right? That's certainly how the Jews, who were forbidden by the Law to either touch any part of a dead body or ingest any kind of blood, took it. In verse 60, they were saying, "This is really hard to hear, who can stand it?"

The language is designed to make us sit up straight and take notice and think about the meaning behind it. And I don't think Jesus was fearful over how the people would react because he already knew who would believe in him and who wouldn't. But it doesn't change the fact that believing in Jesus is the only way to receive eternal life. And this brings me to the final section on your outline, to whom shall we go?

When God provided the manna for His people in the wilderness, which Jesus is now equating with Himself, what was He teaching them? To depend on Him to meet their daily needs. Jesus is saying here that we need to feed on him for our daily needs. We believe in him for eternal life with God, and we need to continue to feed on him for meaningful life.

There are some parallels to what Jesus is saying here with what he will say one year later at the Last Supper about bread as his body and wine as his blood, but the commentaries are quite consistent in saying that John 6 is not about the Lord's Supper; rather, the Lord's Supper is about what is described in John 6 which is this idea of metaphorically feeding on Jesus as we express our belief and remembrance of his death which gave us life.

But what is this life and is eternal life really something to be desired? Some of you may be thinking, life is hard. Is it really such a great thing to live forever? But this idea about eternal life is not just about living forever, it is so much more. There are two Greek words that can mean life. The first is *bios* from which we get our word, biology. This word means that something is biologically alive as opposed to ceasing to exist in death. Fortunately, this is not the word the Bible is using here. Instead, the word used here for life, *zoe*, has much more significance. It also means to be alive, but more-so, to have a life filled with happiness, exuberance, and vitality.

Let me paint you a picture. One of my favorite places to be is at Fort Wilderness, our church's family camp. We have gone every summer now for 12 years, and it is always a highlight of our year. There are many things I love to do there, but one of them is to grab a kayak and paddle out onto the lake by myself and just float around for a while with the sunshine on my face, the waves gently lapping at the boat, and listen to the sounds of God's creation around me. On the day I took this picture, I texted it to a friend who was coming a day late to camp to get her excited and captioned this picture, "This is the life." Yep, this feeling of satisfaction, this experience in life when you're filled with joy and peaceful contentment is the kind of life Jesus offers. See, it's so much more than just being alive. It is living. And eternal? This too means more than we often realize. This sense of life being eternal isn't just that it goes on forever, it is that it is limitless, unconstrained. Jesus is offering us life that in him is satisfying, abundant, and boundless. This is what he means a couple of chapters later in John 10:10 when he says that he has come that people who believe in him may have life and have it abundantly. Isn't that fabulous? Isn't that what we're so often striving for?

Friends, this life only comes through belief in Jesus. Belief that isn't just mental assent to the fact that there is one true God. As it says in James 2, even the demons believe that. This is belief that says, "Jesus, I am all in, I believe that what you said is true and I give you my life. I trust you to provide all that I truly need and I want to receive your bread, your living water, to sustain my life now and forever."

But not everyone will believe. Even many of the people who were present to see these miracles didn't believe. Sadly, in this last section it says that many of his disciples, and by this it means followers of Jesus in general rather than the specific 12 who were closest to him, turned their back on Jesus and no longer walked with him because of their offense

at his words. But Jesus doesn't react with shock or hurt, in fact he says in this last section that he knows some will not believe, and even makes reference to the fact that even one of his own chosen 12, Judas, would betray him to his death in one year's time.

But Peter offers a glimmer of hope. When Jesus asks his Twelve in verse 67, "do you want to go away as well?" Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." Peter's right. To whom else could we go for the kind of life that Jesus offers? He is the only one who can feed thousands of people with 5 loaves and 2 fish, he is the only one who knows the storms we face and meets us in them. But it's not just about what Jesus can do for us, it's about believing in who he is. He is our manna, our daily bread. Believing in him is the only way we can have life with God, and this life, oh, this life that isn't just believe biologically alive, this life he promises us is the only thing that can daily satisfy our hunger and thirst for God.

Do you remember my friend's request I mentioned at the beginning who asked for prayer that she might see all of life's circumstances as opportunities to love and understand Jesus more deeply? That thought, combined with the truths in this chapter, has been a huge blessing to me. It has become my daily prayer that each day, Jesus would be my food that he would be what I depend on and where I turn for what I need. And as I have been praying that, my love for him has grown. I would like to challenge you to make that your daily prayer as well. Let's start by praying right now...

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