

BaptistWay Bible Series for December 31: Jesus is our sustainer and hope

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Jesus is our sustainer and hope

• John 6:1-15, 25-35, 48-51, 66-69

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A Spanish proverb suggests “With bread and wine you can walk your road.” A Christian interpretation of the proverb sees beyond the literal to the deeper spiritual truth. The journey of life requires the sustenance of food and drink. Likewise, the spiritual journey is sustained by the bread and wine represented in God’s gift of Jesus and in the bread and wine of Communion with God and the community of believers.

Jesus sat at the well with the Samaritan woman and offered “living water.” Then, after the miracle (or, for John, the “sign”) of feeding the multitude, he offers the “bread of life.”



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These “signs” are parables in themselves, of course. Yet, just like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman before them, the people who witness or hear about the miracle of a free lunch for 5,000 fail to see beyond the surface to the deeper significance of Jesus’ words and actions.

In John 6, the Gospel writer continues the central theme that Jesus is the Son of God who came into the world as God’s supreme gift to sinful and broken humanity—and that this gift of salvation is available to anyone who believes.

A mixed following

The multilayered story continues to unfold dramatically. Jesus’ popularity is taking off. “A large crowd” (v. 1) now follows him wherever he goes. These are “miracle chasers” drawn by the sensational and spectacular more than the spiritual.

As the huge crowd begins to gather, Jesus turns to Philip and asks, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” (v. 5). The question seems ludicrous and Philip replies in kind, pointing out (perhaps with considerable sarcasm) that six months’ wages wouldn’t be enough to purchase take-out for the crowd.

But the storyteller wants us to know something deeper is going on here and

lets us in on the fact that Jesus' question was not only to "test" Philip (v. 6), but also to create a bigger "teachable moment" for the disciples and all other would-be followers (then and now).

The feeding of the 5,000 is at one level a story of Jesus' compassion. At another level, it is a story about the power of God in the person of Jesus. In the face of an absurd impossibility, Jesus dramatically demonstrates the transformational possibilities of meager resources—a boy's lunch—when placed in gratitude and trust into the hands of an infinitely resourceful God. At yet another level, it is a sign that points to Jesus' identity and mission as the Son of God.

In response, the crowd is so worked up, they are ready to anoint Jesus as king (v. 15). Jesus, however, sees the dark lining in all the euphoria and adulation. Recognizing most people are following him for the wrong reasons, he does two things.

First, he gives the crowd the slip and retreats to be alone (v. 15)—an important insight into the pattern of Jesus' spirituality (and a lesson for anyone who seeks to live like Jesus). Second, he begins to challenge the misperceptions of his identity and mission, calling people to a deeper understanding and commitment (vv. 25-35).

The exchange between Jesus and the crowd (vv. 25-35) echoes the literal-versus-spiritual conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. To the woman at the well, Jesus contrasts water that temporarily quenches one's thirst with "living water" that quenches the thirst for God and leads to eternal life. Now, the One who has just produced a miraculous meal for 5,000 (complete with leftovers) tells the crowd God is able to provide nonperishable, genuine soul food that "endures for eternal life" (v. 27).

This "bread of life," Jesus declares, is Jesus himself. Again, as he does repeatedly in John's account, Jesus emphasizes the nature and the source

of this gift. God is—and always has been—the source of life both physically and spiritually. Like the manna that sustained the Hebrews in the desert, the gift of Jesus as the “bread of life” also comes from heaven, from the same God. Significantly, Jesus’ bold affirmation that he is this “bread of life” is repeated three times in this account (vv. 35, 48 and 51).

Mixed reactions

Still thinking in a literal sense, the crowd knows a good thing when they hear it: “Sir, give us this bread always!” (echoing the response of the Samaritan woman, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty”). In a poor society where provision of the daily necessities of life could never be taken for granted by most people, their preoccupation with never having to worry about such things is understandable.

While the crowd doesn’t “get it,” their simple, unsophisticated response is at least closer to the truth than the religious leaders whose response is to complain about such audacious—and blasphemous—claims from this son of a simple Galilean carpenter and his wife (vv. 41-42). The plot continues to thicken. On one side are those who jump on the bandwagon for the wrong reasons, eager to get in on the benefits of this wonder worker. On the other are those who feel threatened by Jesus and begin to conspire against him.

Rather than sidestep the growing controversy, Jesus adds fuel to the fire with a short speech about eating his flesh and drinking his blood—images that were strange, shocking and even offensive not only to his detractors but to “many of his disciples” who were perplexed by such talk. While “this teaching is difficult” (v. 60), Jesus only adds to the mystery, noting that “the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life,” yet another echo from the conversation with Nicodemus about “water and spirit.”

The result of such talk is predictable. “Many of his disciples turned back”

(v. 66), a sobering thought that should not be lost on anyone who reads John's account. Even with Peter's affirmation, "You have the words of eternal life" (v. 68), the chapter ends ominously with Jesus' response that even among his chosen twelve "one of you is a devil" (verse 70).

Discussion questions

- What are the material "signs" that Christians today may expect from God as evidence of God's presence and provision? In what ways do we still want a "God-on-demand" who is at our beck and call?
- If we dare to preach and live the gospel as Jesus did, would it lead many in our churches to "turn back"? What are the claims of the gospel that would lead to a negative response?
- In what ways does the "Bread of Life" continue to be a rich metaphor for the Christian community?