

The Scandal of the Gospel (John 6)

Introduction

John 6 is a significant turning point in Jesus' ministry. Here he ministers to the crowd and to his disciples—granting both grace and truth; food and teaching—revealing through both more of his true identity. The response is a reminder of the scandal of the gospel, the hardness of the human heart, and the overwhelming grace of our Savior.

The events of this chapter occur near the third Passover of Jesus' ministry (see verse 4). Jesus' death is now only a year away. Time is short. Jesus 'ramps up' his work and teaching. Let's travel with him.

1. Jesus feeds the crowd (6:1–13)

¹ Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Feast was near. ⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" ⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. ¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³

So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

The words “Some time after this...” clue us in that some time has now passed. The other gospel writers tell us that during this interval many significant events occurred in Jesus’ ministry including the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) and his teaching of the kingdom parables (Matt. 13). But John often does not repeat what they address, though here he repeats the story of the feeding of the 5,000.

Jesus’ previous miracles were drawing a large crowd—and now they were hungry. How to feed them? Four solutions were proposed. The first was to send them home (Mark 6:35, 36). But Jesus knew they were too weak to travel, and besides it was late in the day (Matt. 14:15). Philip proposed a second solution: raise money to buy food. Philip figured they’d need the equivalent of 200 days’ wages. But even that much would not provide enough bread to feed all the men, women, and children (Matt. 14:21). Andrew proposed a third solution, though he wasn’t sure how it would work. He found a little boy with a small lunch: two fish and five barley cakes. Jesus picked up on that with the fourth and actual solution—he took the boy’s rather miserable lunch (barley cakes were considered to be food for the poor and for animals), blessed it, broke it into pieces, handed these to his disciples, and they fed the whole crowd.

The miracle took place in the hands of the Savior, not in the hands of the disciples. He multiplied the food; they only had the joyful privilege of passing it out. Not only were the people fed and satisfied, but the disciples salvaged twelve baskets of fragments for future use. This is significant because the rabbis had said, “Great will be the punishment of those who waste the crumbs of food.” The leftovers (*peah*) were the portion traditionally left for obedient slaves after banquets were over. In this miracle there were 12 baskets (and the word here refers to small baskets) left over—one for each of the 12 disciples. The lesson is clear: Jesus is indeed God and he provides just what his servants need—no more; no less.

It is also significant that twice John mentions that Jesus gave thanks (verses 11 and 23). By that act, he reminded the hungry people that God is the source of all good and needful gifts. Instead of complaining about what we do not have, we should give thanks to God for what we do have, and he will make it go farther.

2. Jesus reassures his disciples (6:14–21)

14 After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." 15 Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. 16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, 17 where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. 18 A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. 19 When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified. 20 But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." 21 Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

For John, this miracle is the fourth ‘miraculous sign’ revealing Jesus’ true identity. It was so miraculous that the crowd thought Jesus to be ‘the Prophet’—a reference to the ‘Prophet like Moses’, for like Moses, Jesus provided bread in the wilderness (verse 31). But Jesus refused momentary popularity as ‘bread King’, and compelled the disciples to get into the boat and head across the lake toward Capernaum (Matt. 14:22; Mark 6:45). Jesus withdrew alone to a mountain.

Now on the water in the dark the disciples encounter a storm. They had shared the joy of participating with Jesus in a great miracle. But now they face danger and Jesus is nowhere to be found. As seasoned fishermen, this storm would not, in itself, have alarmed them. But what did bring great fear was the sight of a ghost-like figure walking on the water toward them. But those fears are calmed when they hear a familiar voice—and reassuring words, “It is I; don’t be afraid” (verse 20b). Perhaps they would have understood “It is I” as the proclamation of God’s name, “I AM”. But in any case, they were reassured by Jesus’ voice and presence. John does not mention (like the other gospel writers do) that Jesus calmed the storm. What he wants you to know is that Jesus’ presence calmed the disciples.

In the midst of storms we must not focus on the surrounding conditions – rather let us look to Jesus. Let us hear his voice. He is the miracle working God who in good times and bad comes to us and reassures us. I AM! I am with you. Do not be afraid.

3. Jesus teaches the crowd (6:22–71)

22 The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. 23 Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. 24 Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. 25 When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Apparently the crowd having seen the disciples leave in a boat across the lake and seen Jesus depart alone into the mountains. The next day the crowd got in some boats blown ashore and crossed to the other side where they find both the disciples and Jesus—now together. But how did Jesus get there? There was only one boat the evening before and the disciples took it. Did Jesus walk around the lake during the stormy night?

Jesus took this opportunity to teach the crowd. His ‘sermon’ probably began outdoors, and then moved into the synagogue (verse 59). His teaching concerning “the bread of life” was actually a dialogue between Jesus and the people, especially the religious leaders (‘the Jews’). We see four responses to this teaching: *seeking, murmuring, striving, and finally departing.*

a. Seeking (24–40)

26 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. 27 Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." 28 Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" 29 Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." 30 So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? 31 Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is

not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."³⁴ "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."³⁵ Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.³⁶ But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

In miraculously feeding the crowd Jesus had extended to them both mercy (in relieving their hunger) and truth (in his words). Jesus always comes full of grace and truth. However, the crowd who readily accepted the grace (food), was less than receptive to his words of truth. Jesus was for them “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence” (Isa. 8:14), and it was now coming to a point of decision. Would they believe in Jesus for who he truly is or would they not?

In his words here, Jesus goes straight to their hearts—their motives. He knew they were seeking him only to fill their hungry bellies. Would they also seek him to fill the great need in their life? Jesus’ tells them about two kinds of food: one kind for the body, which is indeed necessary; and another for the spirit, which is essential. What the people needed was the food that brings real *life*—a life that only Jesus has to give, and he gives it freely.

Once again the people misunderstood. They picked up on Jesus’ reference to *work*, misinterpreting him to mean they had to work for salvation. They completely missed the importance of his word *give*. Steeped in legalistic religion, they thought they had to “do something” to merit eternal life. Jesus made it clear that only one “work” was necessary—to believe on the Savior whom God had sent. When a person believes in Christ, he is not performing a good work that earns salvation. There is no merit in believing, for believing (which is enabled by God) is simply our accepting what God has already done for us (see Eph. 2:8–10).

The crowd was seeking Christ—but they would not accept his word. Rather they sought a sign. Indeed, “the Jews require a sign” (1 Cor. 1:22). The rabbis taught that, when Messiah came, he would duplicate the miracle of the manna (Ex. 16). If Jesus was truly sent by God, let him prove it by causing manna to fall from heaven. They wanted to “see and believe.” But faith that is based on signs alone, and not on the God’s word, can lead a person astray—Satan is able to perform “lying wonders” (2 Thess. 2:8–10).

The quotation in John 6:31 is from Psalm 78:24 which records the unbelief and rebellion of the nation of Israel. In his reply, Jesus sought to deepen the people’s understanding of the truth. It was *God*, not Moses, who gave the manna; so they must take their eyes off Moses and focus them on God. Also, God *gave* the manna in the past, but the Father is *now giving* the true bread in the person of Jesus Christ. The past event is finished, but the present spiritual experience goes on!

Then Jesus clearly identified what the bread is: He is the true living bread that came down from heaven. But he came, not only for Israel but for the whole world. And He came, not just to *sustain* life, but to *give* life! Seven times in this sermon, our Lord referred to his “coming down from heaven” (6:33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58), a statement that clearly declared him to be God. The Old Testament manna was but a type of the “true bread,” the Lord Jesus Christ.

This dialogue began with the crowd seeking Christ and then seeking a sign, but listeners soon began to seek the “true bread” that Jesus talked about. However, like the woman of Samaria, they were not ready for salvation (see John 4:15). She wanted the living water so she would not have to keep going to the well. The crowd wanted the bread so they would not have to toil to maintain life. Some people today still want Jesus only for the benefits he is able to give.

In his reply to their impetuous request, Jesus used two key words that often appear in this sermon: *come* and *believe*. To come to Jesus means to believe in him, and to believe in him means to come to him. Believing is not merely an intellectual thing, giving mental assent to some doctrine. It means to come to Christ and yield yourself to him. At the close of his sermon, Jesus illustrated *coming* and *believing* by speaking about *eating* and *drinking*. To come to Christ and believe in him means to receive him within, just as you receive food and drink.

Note that John 6:35 contains the first of seven great I AM statements recorded by John (for the others see 8:12; 10:7–9, 11–14; 11:25, 26; 14:6; 15:1, 5). God revealed himself to Moses by the name I AM (Ex. 3:14). It means ‘the self-existent One’ who “is, and... was, and... is to come” (Rev. 1:8). Jesus’ use of the name I AM was a claim to divinity. Indeed, Jesus is God.

John 6:37–40 contains Jesus’ explanation of the process of personal salvation. These are among the most profound words he ever spoke, and we cannot hope to plumb their depths completely. He explained that salvation involves both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The Father *gives* men and women to the Son (John 6:37, 39; 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 12, 24), but these men and women must *come* to him, that is, *believe* on him. He assured them that nobody who came to him would ever be lost but would be raised at the last day. Even death cannot rob us of salvation.

b. Murmuring (41–51)

41 At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." 42 They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" 43 "Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. 44 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. 46 No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. 47 I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. 50 But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Our Lord’s statement “For I have come down from heaven” (6:38), disturbed the religious leaders (‘the Jews’), for they knew it was a claim of deity. They thought they knew Jesus, who he was and where he came from. They identified Jesus with Nazareth in Galilee, not Bethlehem in Judea;

and thought Joseph was his natural father. Had they investigated, they would have learned who Jesus really is.

The main issue of their grumbling was, “Where did he come from?” Jesus answered by using five times the phrase “came down from heaven.” He is divine—God come in human flesh.

And then Jesus explains that those who come to him are drawn to him by the Father (verse 44)—by his word (verse 45). In John 12:32 it is Christ, who draws people to himself. This is not a conflict; rather these are two ways that John makes one essential point: salvation depends on God’s initiative, not ours. Certainly humans have the responsibility to respond to God’s calling to salvation (see 5:40), but none would come unless divinely persuaded and enabled to do so.

Then Jesus calls himself “the Living Bread.” He was not claiming to be exactly like the manna in the wilderness—he was claiming to be greater. Manna only *sustained life temporarily*, but Jesus *gives life forever!* When God gave manna, he gave a gift; but when Jesus came, God gave himself and at great cost. The Jews had to eat manna every day, but the sinner who trusts Christ *once* is given life forever.

It is not difficult to see in manna a picture of Jesus Christ. The manna was a mysterious thing to the Jews; in fact, the word *manna* means “What is it?” Jesus was a mystery to those who saw him. The manna came at night from heaven, and Jesus came to this earth when sinners were in moral and spiritual darkness. The manna was small (his humility), round (his eternity), and white (his purity). It was sweet to the taste (Ps. 34:8) and it met the needs of the people adequately. The manna was given to a rebellious people; it was the gracious gift of God. All they had to do was stoop and pick it up. If they failed to pick it up, *they walked on it*. The Lord is not far from any sinner. All the sinner has to do is humble himself and take the gift that God offers.

Jesus closed this part of His message by referring to his *flesh*, a word that will be used six more times before the dialogue is concluded. Verse 51 is a declaration that the Son of God will give himself as a sacrifice “for the life of the world.” The substitutionary death of Jesus Christ is a key doctrine in John’s Gospel. Jesus would die for the world (3:16; 6:51), for his sheep (10:11, 15), for the nation (11:50–52), and for his friends (15:12). Paul made it personal, and so should we: “Who loved me, and gave himself for me”

(Gal. 2:20). We must not limit the work of Christ on the cross. He is the sacrifice not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

c. Striving (52–59)

52 Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" 53 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. 56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. 57 Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." 59 He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

Jesus words are strange to the Jews and they begin to fight among themselves over the meaning of this offensive message. Jesus had made a similar point earlier: “everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day” (6:40).” Now Jesus was reinforcing that point using a graphic metaphor about eating and drinking: “Just as you take food and drink within your body and it becomes a part of you, so you must receive me within your innermost being so that I can give you life.” Those who ‘eat his flesh’ and ‘drink his blood’ are those who see him, believe in him, and remain in him: it is they who have eternal life.

Jesus is speaking about the faith-union by which a mutual indwelling of Jesus and his people is established. John speaks elsewhere of this as ‘abiding’ in Christ (15:4). Paul speaks of it as being ‘in Christ’. Jesus likens this union to his union with the Father—complete dependence and oneness.

d. Departing (60–71)

60 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" 61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend

you? ⁶² What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! ⁶³ The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. ⁶⁴ Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. ⁶⁵ He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." ⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. ⁶⁷ "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." ⁷⁰ Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" ⁷¹ (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)

Many of Jesus' disciples stumbled at this truth—they began to 'grumble'. Jesus asks them "does this offend you?" The Greek word for offend is "scandalize". Indeed the gospel is to many a 'scandal.' These Jews stumbled over the fact that Jesus claimed to come down from heaven (meaning he was God). They also stumbled over the idea that they had to eat his flesh and drink his blood to be saved. But if they stumbled over these two matters, what would they do if they saw him ascend back to heaven? (verse 62).

Jesus explained that his language was figurative and spiritual, not literal ('the flesh counts for nothing'). What he's talking about is spirit and life (verse 63). Jesus is the living Word become flesh (1:14). And whoever hears his word and believes the one who sent him has eternal life (5:24). Jesus was talking now with them about powerful, profound spiritual realities.

But the result was that most of his disciples abandoned him at this point. They returned to their old lives, their old religions, and their old hopeless situations. Jesus is "the way" (14:6) but they would not walk with him. This was no surprise to the Lord, because He knows the hearts of all people.

When Jesus asked the Twelve if they also planned on leaving him, Peter spoke up and declared their faith. Where else could they go? "You have the words of eternal life." Peter got the message! He knew that Jesus was speaking about *the Word* and not about literal flesh and blood.

Peter was one of several people who declared their belief that Jesus is the Son of God (see 1:34, 49; 3:18; 5:25; 9:35; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31). His only mistake was to speak for the entire group. Peter was sure that *all* of the Apostles were believers, which shows how convincing Judas was.

Conclusion

A clear presentation of Jesus in the fullness of grace and truth through a declaration of the Word of God always leads to a sifting of the hearts of the listeners. God draws sinners to the Savior through the power of his Word. Those who reject it reject the Savior. Those who receive it receive the Savior and experience the new birth into eternal life.

Have you admitted your need and accepted your Savior? Do you constantly feed on him—receive him and embrace him? He will never turn you away. He will satisfy the longing of your soul for all eternity. To him be all praise!

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This issue continues a series in the gospel of John with material from *The Bible Expository Commentary* by Warren Wiersbe, *The New Bible Commentary*, *The Parable of Joy* by Michael Card, and *The Gospel of John* by F.F. Bruce.

GROWING in our RELATIONSHIP with the TRIUNE GOD

Relate ... Ask (compare) ... Pray

John 6:11, 12 "Then Jesus Took the Loaves"

What material difference does Jesus make in your life?

John 6:26, 27 "The Food That Endures"

Who do you work for?

John 6:32, 33 "Bread from Heaven"

Read Matthew 6:31-33.

John 6:35 "I Am the Bread of Life"

How is Jesus like bread?

John 6:41, 42 "Do Not Complain"

What scripture does Jesus quote?

John 6:51 "Down from Heaven"

What happened in the wilderness?

John 6:54-57 "How...?"

Do your questions ever get in the way of your faith?

John 6:63 "This Teaching Is Difficult"

Why do some still believe?

John 6:66-68 "Do You Also Wish to Go Away"

What is the difference between Peter and Judas?

Please see Sermon Series Study Guide: John #7