

CHAPTER SIX

THE TRUE BREAD

“Everybody’s got a hungry heart.”

-Bruce Springsteen, “Hungry Heart”

I love food. In fact, my mother encouraged me to start eating at a very early age. As I wander the aisles of my local supermarket, I am amazed at the sheer number of options. The snack aisle alone is a marvel of culinary engineering. Chips of all sizes and flavors, ranging anywhere from nacho cheese to cheeseburger. That’s right; here in America we create food that tastes like *other kinds* of food.

In a strange way, this trend demonstrates that food is about more than mere nourishment. It’s a taste of the good life, which is why manufacturers feature colorful logos and brands more prominently than the list of nutrients. And in many cultures, the act of eating together has a kind of symbolic quality — something that we’ve lost in an age of delivery apps and drive-thru convenience. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Louise Fresco notes that “the human is the only animal species that surrounds its food with rituals and takes account of hunger among others who are not direct relative. The table makes us human.”¹

It’s only fitting, then, that Jesus’ fourth sign is a miraculous provision of food. Interestingly, the feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. But far from being just any mean, Jesus lays out a feast that would have unique cultural significance.

THE NEW EXODUS

It’s been a year since John the Baptist first declared that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who lifts away the sin of the world.” Once again, Passover is drawing near (John 6:4), and Jesus and his follower are near the sea of Galilee when they see a crowd approaching. We’re told that the crowd included 5,000 men, though if we account for women and children, the throng could have been as high as 15,000 or more. They’d observed Jesus’ miracles of healing, and clearly wanted more.

Then Jesus, when he looked up and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, said to Philip, “Where can we buy bread so that these people may eat?” (Now Jesus said this to test him, for he knew what he was going to do.) Philip replied, “Two hundred silver coins worth of bread would not be enough for them, for each one to get a little.” One of Jesus’ disciples, Andrew,

¹ Cody C. Delistraty, “The Importance of Eating Together,” *The Atlantic*, July 18, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/07/the-importance-of-eating-together/374256/>

Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "Here is a boy who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what good are these for so many people?" (John 6:5-9)

The disciples see only scarcity. Two hundred days' wages couldn't cover the dinner bill, and the only available option was the bread and fish of a young boy — possibly a young slave. Bread was a staple of the first-century world, but barley loaves were consumed only by the lower class. It lacked both the quantity and quality to form a sufficient catering menu. Yet in the presence of Jesus, it becomes a feast:

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." (Now there was a lot of grass in that place.) So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed the bread to those who were seated. He then did the same with the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were all satisfied, Jesus said to his disciples, "Gather up the broken pieces that are left over, so that nothing is wasted." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with broken pieces from the five barley loaves left over by the people who had eaten. Now when the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus performed, they began to say to one another, "This is certainly the Prophet who is to come into the world." (John 6:10-14)

The people were more than just amazed. To their minds, Jesus hadn't just performed *any* miracle. First-century Jews would have instantly made the connection to the exodus story. When God had liberated his people from Egyptian bondage, he led them through the desert and provided them with a daily form of bread called "manna." Jewish texts predicted that when the Messiah is revealed, "the treasury of manna shall again descend from on high."² Passover was already a time when Jews would reflect on the story of the exodus. But this year, they found themselves wondering if they were looking at a "Prophet like Moses" who would herald the age of the Messiah.

Unfortunately, many Jews believed that the Messiah's reign would primarily be political, bringing an end to their exile under Roman rule. Jesus knows that the people were prepared "to take him by force to make him king" (John 6:15), so he retreats with his disciples.

Now when evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started to cross the lake to Capernaum. (It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.) By now a strong wind was blowing and the sea was getting rough. Then, when they had rowed about three or four miles, they caught sight of Jesus walking on the lake, approaching the boat, and they were frightened. But he said to them, "It is I. Do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat came to the land where they had been heading. (John 6:16-21)

Ancient sailors associated the seas with chaos and disorder. But ancient Jews may also have remembered one of their worship songs, one that speaks of a God who "delivers them, calms the sea, and brings them to their desired haven" (Psalm 107:28-30).³ It's the same God who nourishes those who "wander hungry in desert wastes" and "satisfies and fills the hungry and thirsty."

² 2 Baruch 29:8.

³ W. Hall Harris, *The Gospel of John: Introduction and Commentary*. Published online. https://bible.org/assets/pdf/Harris_GJohn.pdf

Do you see what's happening here? The fourth sign had been a miraculous provision of bread in the wilderness. Now, the fifth sign involves a miraculous crossing of water. The sequence may be a little off, but the elements are all there. Jesus is reenacting the story of the exodus, only this time the people would receive more than just another Moses. God himself had come down to earth, to lead his people out of the captivity of sin and disbelief, and to nourish and sustain them into eternal Life. His miracle is more than just a meal. It's a taste of "the good life," or what the people can truly experience if they're willing to "taste and see" that the Lord is good.

WHAT'S THE USE?

The well-fed crowd, of course, is not privy to the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Galilee. So they're shocked to find Jesus on the other side of the water. "Rabbi," they ask. "When did you come here?" Verse 58 indicates that at least some (if not all) of this scene takes place in the local synagogue, and it's there that Jesus answers their question by challenging their motivations:

Jesus replied, "I tell you the solemn truth, you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate all the loaves of bread you wanted. Do not work for the food that disappears, but for the food that remains to eternal life — the food which the Son of Man will give to you. For God the Father has put his seal of approval on him." So then they said to him, "What must we do to accomplish the deeds God requires?" (John 6:26-28)

At first, the people are merely looking for another religious project. Having heard Jesus' promise of eternal life, they assume that it's something that can be bought with their own obedience. Worse, they naively assume that they have the spiritual fortitude to meet any challenge Jesus might give. But they completely misunderstand that God's grace is a divine gift.

Jesus replied, "This is the deed God requires — to believe in the one whom he sent." So they said to him, "Then what miraculous sign will you perform, so that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus told them, "I tell you the solemn truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but my Father is giving you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." So they said to him, "Sir, give us this bread all the time!" (John 6:29-34)

Once again, Jesus reveals that salvation comes by believing in him. With no small irony, the people respond with a request for another miraculous sign, as if they weren't still picking the previous day's bread from their teeth. They want Jesus to reveal exactly who he was by surpassing the historic provision of manna. Jesus reminds them that it was never Moses who saved them. Every crumb of bread came from God alone — *and now God was doing the same thing through the person of Jesus*. The bread that filled their stomachs with yesterday was only a symbol of the true "bread of God" who satisfies the deeper hunger of the human soul.

Jesus' words fly right over the heads of the growing crowd. They're still looking for more bread. More manna. They've assumed that Jesus is someone who will respond to their demands. The worst part? You and I can make the same assumption.

The great revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards once wrote that “the grace of God may appear lovely and beautiful in two ways: as *bonum utile*, or what is most useful and profitable to me...[or] as the *bonum formosum*, which is a goodness and beauty in itself.”⁴ In other words, people tend to follow Jesus for one of two reasons: either he is eternally beautiful, or he is merely immediately useful.

Like the crowds looking for more bread, it's easy to try and “use” God for our own ends. We all want more “bread,” whatever exactly it is that satisfies our souls. Maybe for you, devotion to God is about gaining help with a specific problem, like your marriage or your finances. Or, maybe you've committed yourself to a religious community thinking it will help you find “the One” to settle down with and marry. Even as a pastor, there's an ever-present temptation to use my sermons as an opportunity to show off how clever or how funny I can be — seeking my own significance, and not God's. Or how about this: every election season you'll hear well-meaning people who wring their hands and say things like: “We need God now more than ever.” Why now? Why more than ever? See, if our need for Jesus waxes and wanes with the political seasons, then we reveal that we love him for being immediately useful and not eternally beautiful. Edwards goes on to explain that this is not only wrong, but spiritually damaging:

“If we merely serve God as the ‘Bonum Utile’ or what he can do for us...then we are not truly living consistently with ‘Thy will be done’ and so we can undermine his sovereignty. This may be the reason why many who profess Christ cannot fathom a God who is completely holy and sovereign.”⁵

Imagine, for a minute, a man that only loves his spouse or his kids when they serve his immediate interests. What would we conclude about the health or character of this man? That's what was happening with the crowds surrounding Jesus. They'd witnessed his miracles. Now they wanted a repeat performance. They wanted a god that would fit inside their pockets. They wanted a god they could *use*.

USELESS BEAUTY

Jesus will never be content to be our sidekick or political mascot. Instead, he wants to be our Savior. He responds to the crowds' demands by clarifying his point:

"I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never go hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty. But I told you that you have seen me and still do not believe. Everyone whom the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never send away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. Now this is the will of the one who sent me — that I should not lose one person of every one he has given me, but raise them all up at the last day. For this is the

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Complete Works of Jonathan Edwards: Christ Exalted, Sinners in the Hands of the Angry God, A Divine and Supernatural Light, Christian Knowledge, On ...* (59 Books With Active Table of Contents). Kindle Edition. Loc. 13604.

⁵ Ibid.

will of my Father — for everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him to have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:35-40)

Moses provided bread. Jesus *is* the bread. Moses pointed Israel to God. Jesus *is* God, which is why he points to himself.

Earlier, the religious experts had objected to these sorts of claims on theological grounds. Here, the crowd's uproar is much more practical. "Isn't this Jesus the son of Joseph?" they ask. They knew where he came from. They knew his family. He wasn't fooling anyone with these outlandish claims.

Jesus replied, "Do not complain about me to one another. 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 will all be taught by God.' Everyone who hears and learns from the Father comes to me....I tell you the solemn truth, the one who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that has come down from heaven, so that a person may eat from it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats from this bread he will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:43-51)

Jesus emphasizes that salvation is the fulfillment of God's divine purpose. We don't have to get caught up in debates over "free will" to hear the electrifying good news of the gospel. When I had no appetite for God, he was already at work drawing me to his table. When I was faithless, Jesus Christ was faithfully submitting his flesh on my behalf. That's what it means for the Father to draw us near. Just as God sent manna for the nation's daily provision, so too does the Father send the Bread of life into the world for our eternal cure. He insists that I eat food of which I am not worthy, so that I can experience Life. Let's not forget that at the very next Passover, Jesus gives the world his "flesh" in a far more literal way by laying down his life on the cross. This is the eternal, all-glorious message of the gospel, but as long as we keep thinking about Jesus as someone who merely solves our earthly woes, this message falls on deaf ears, just as it did the crowds.

Then the Jews who were hostile to Jesus began to argue with one another, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood resides in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who consumes me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the bread your ancestors ate, but then later died. The one who eats this bread will live forever." (John 6:52-58)

It's natural to think that Jesus is referring to the bread and wine of communion, but this may go further than the symbolism allows. Following Jesus means that we *digest* his teachings. More than that, it means that we savor and enjoy them. The language of eating and drinking is used elsewhere to ecstasy of a party-goer (Matthew 24:38). Here, Jesus is saying that to truly understand the gospel is to savor it for the true depth of satisfaction that it brings. It means moving beyond seeing Jesus merely as something useful, and finally coming to see him as eternally beautiful. Jonathan Edwards brings out the contrast this way:

“If we serve God as the ‘Bonum Formosum’ or Who He *is* as the holy and beautiful and sovereign God...then there is nothing he cannot ask of us. We must recognize that God is Most Holy, Beautiful, and His Sovereign will is the best for us, come what may, as hard as it may seem, because we can confidently cry: ‘They will be done!’”⁶

Are you truly satisfied in God? Is he your deepest joy and delight, or is he merely there for help when you need him the most? “What’s to be done with this useless beauty?” sings rock star Elvis Costello. And as long as we insist on seeking out something “useful” we’ll follow the same path as the crowds: confused and hostile to the dynamic claims of Jesus Christ. But beauty has no real “use.” Beauty isn’t a means to an end. It’s joyous and satisfying in itself, especially when attended by Goodness and Truth. That’s what Jesus seems to be saying, here: *Don’t follow me expecting me to be a means to your earthly ends. I am the end. I am the true Bread. Don’t come to me expecting more blessing. Come to be expecting more of me.* To see Jesus as useful means that we reduce the gospel to another religious project. What must I do to get more “bread?” But to see Jesus as beautiful means that we understand that in every circumstance, Jesus is what we truly need, and the only way to nourish our deepest hunger.

“THERE IS NO OTHER”

Jesus, standing in the synagogue, had just thrown down the gauntlet. Earlier, he experienced rejection from the religious experts. Now, the same crowds that were ready to make him king by force were just as eager to slink off into the distance. Even today, there are many who are incensed by the hard sayings of Jesus. In our age of showmanship and megachurch spectacle, it might amaze us that Jesus is so willing to let the crowds to walk away. He knew from the beginning that this would happen, but surely it must have broken his heart when the moment arrived. So he turns to face the remnant who stayed by his side:

After this many of his disciples quit following him and did not accompany him any longer. So Jesus said to the twelve, "You don't want to go away too, do you?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God!" Jesus replied, "Didn't I choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is the devil?" (Now he said this about Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for Judas, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.) (John 6:66-71)

The painful irony is that Jesus couldn’t even count on these twelve in the long-term. For now, Jesus’ closest followers understood something altogether basic. It was never the bread that they needed, but the “words of eternal life.”

Today, we do ourselves — we do *God* — a great disservice by taking his words too lightly. Like food itself, we’ve become accustomed to a kind of consumer “drive-thru” Christianity, settling for sound-bites and spiritual morsels rather than experience the impressive feast that Jesus sets before us. And in so doing, we’ve turned Jesus into something safe, tame, and domesticated. Jesus wants to be so much more.

⁶ Edwards.

In his beloved *Narnia* series, C.S. Lewis tells a story that echoes that of John 6. Jill, a young girl, is searching for water when she comes upon a stream:

“Although the sight of water made her feel ten times thirstier than before, she didn’t rush forward and drink. She stood as still as if she had been turned into stone, with her mouth wide open. And she had a very good reason; just on this side of the stream lay the lion....

‘If you’re thirsty, you may drink.’

...the voice was not like a man’s. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in a rather different way....

‘May I—could I—would you mind going away while I do?’ said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

‘Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?’ said Jill.

‘I make no promise,’ said the Lion.

‘Do you eat girls?’ she said.

‘I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,’ said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it....

‘Oh dear!’ said Jill, coming another step nearer. ‘I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.’

‘There is no other stream,’ said the Lion.”

“There is no other.” No other path, no other source of life. “To whom shall we go?” the disciples ask. True life begins when we realize that there is no other name on heaven and earth that will satisfy our hungry hearts, and no other “bread” that can raise us to Life.