

The Bread of Life Sermon

Eric D. Huntsman, Easter Conference 2006

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever. (John 6:54–58)

Interpreting the Discourse

- Sacramental, using the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to interpret it
- Metaphoric, seeing in the sermon a description of Jesus' role and the believer's response to Him
- Primarily symbolic while acknowledging that Jesus and John could well have intended the imagery to be applied to the sacrament

Sacramental or Symbolic?

- “How do men eat the Lord’s flesh and blood? Is this literal or figurative? Does it have reference to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper or to something else?”
 - Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 358.

Christology

- Understanding *the person* and *the work* of Jesus as the Messiah or Anointed One
- Original Audiences
 - the crowd whose members had been present at or heard about the miraculous feeding of the Five Thousand (6:26–40)
 - a specific group that John identifies as “the Jews” (6:41–59)
 - Jesus’ followers, both a general group of disciples and His innermost circle of the Twelve (6:60–71)
- Each of these groups misunderstood in some way either *who* Jesus was or *what* His mission was, allowing Jesus to expand the meaning of the discourse with each group
- Understanding the particular lessons needed by each of these original audiences leads readers of the sermon in every age to a better understanding of Jesus and His mission

Historical

- Proximate to one of the two or three Passovers mentioned by John (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55; possibly 5:1)
- Only one not at Jerusalem
- East of the Sea of Galilee (Luke 9:10 places it near Bethsaida north and east)
- Crowds followed him because of healing miracles

Literary

- Part of a larger literary unit including the Feeding of the Five Thousand (6:1–15) and Walking on Water (6:16–21), which provide important interpretive clues (John 6)
 - Narrative transitions, miracle stories, the discourse itself
- After Jesus' fulfillment of the Sabbath (John 5), including Healing of the Lame Man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1–16) and Discourse on the Divine Son (5:17–47)]
- Before Tabernacles (John 7–10), including Discourse on the Life-Giving Spirit (7:16–52, with interruptions) and Discourse on the Light of the World (8:12–59)

Passover Symbolism

- Deliverance
- The crossing of the Sea
- Miraculous feedings in the wilderness
- Giving of the Law
- The saving role of the paschal lamb

Feeding of Five Thousand

- Only miracle besides the resurrection in all four gospels
- Reminiscent of Jehovah's feeding Israel with manna in the wilderness
- Matched contemporary messianic expectations
- Led to a desire to make Jesus king (6:15)
 - The crowd suffered from an overly political interpretation which in actuality presented a false christology of *who* the Messiah would be (a political ruler) and *what* He would do (deliver them from Herodian rule and Roman occupation)

Walking on Water

- John emphasizes this fact by employing the formula “I Am” (Hebrew *ʾánî hû`*, Greek *egō eimi*) even more explicitly than do Matthew and Mark
- Jesus’ control of the raging sea and bringing his disciples safely to shore manifests as the one exercising the power that the Hebrew Bible attributes to Jehovah alone (Job 9:8; 38:16; Hab. 3:15)
- Passover context: “Just as the Lord ploughed a path for Israel through the sea, leading them to freedom from bondage, so Jesus, when he walks on the water, shows that as Messiah he has power over the seas . . .” (Bertil Gärtner, *John 6 and the Jewish Passover* (1959), 18)

Structure of the Discourse

- Narrative Transition: the People, or *ho ochlos*, Follow Jesus (6:22–25)
- Words to the Crowd (*ho ochlos*, 6:26–40; presumably at the dock or outside in Capernum)
- Words to “the Jews” (*hoi Ioudaioi*, 6:41–59; in the synagogue at Capernaum)
- Words to His Followers (disciples and then Twelve, 6:60–71; presumably after leaving the synagogue)

Bread Come Down from Heaven (6:26–34) Words to the Crowd

- Corrects the crowd's incorrect expectation of *who* the Messiah would be
- Begins with a discussion of manna and the miraculous bread of the preceding day's miracle
- The correspondence between manna and *Torah* and "eating the word of the Lord" (Jeremiah 15:16; Ezekiel 2:8, 3:1)
- "For the bread of God is [he] which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world" (6:33)
 - the Aramaic or Hebrew original is not preserved
 - Greek *ho katabainōn* can either be taken substantively as "he who comes down" or in agreement with the preceding "bread" (*artos*)
 - the multitude may have heard "the bread of God is *that* which came down from heaven"

"I Am the Bread of Life" (6:35–40) Words to the Crowd

- Teaches *why* Jesus came into the world
- "And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." (John 6:35)
- Jesus defines the Father's will and work for Him by saying, "And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day (6:39)."

Murmuring of “the Jews” and Jesus’ Response

- John’s description shifts to a group he calls *hoi Ioudaioi* or “the Jews” (6:41, 52)
- The sudden change of tone and markedly sharper rhetoric in 6:41–59 strongly suggests that Jesus was focusing His attention on a new, more hostile audience

Bread Come Down from Heaven (6:41–50) Words to “the Jews”

- Focuses largely on the issue of *who* Jesus is
- Their “murmuring” resulted directly from Jesus’ claim that He was “the bread that came down from heaven” (6:41), which identified Him as the Son of the Father
 - see preceding Discourse on the Divine Son, 5:17–18
- To counter this claim they responded by charging “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven?” (6:43)
 - These “Jews” resisted changing their idea of *who* Jesus was, clung more tenaciously to Moses and the old law
- Jesus’ pointed statement, “Your fathers did eat manna [sc. the *Torah*] in the wilderness, and are dead” (6:49), took on particular significance for this audience.

Eating Flesh and Drinking Blood (6:51–59)

Words to “the Jews”

- Concentrates on the central act of Jesus’ work, His salvific death, and how believers appropriate it
- “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you, *Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.*” (John 6:51–53)

The Sacrament and the Discourse

- Comparisons between the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and the flesh and blood section of the Bread of Life Discourse must be qualified
- The symbolism of the sacrament is actually much broader than what Jesus’ statement focused on here
 - Commemorative looking *back* at His death and proleptic looking *forward* to His glorious return and celebrated as a type of the great end time messianic feast (Isaiah 25:6–8, Ezekiel 39:17–20, Zechariah 9:15, D&C 27:4–14)
- New Testament references to the sacrament are to the body (*sōma*: Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24, 27, 29) of Jesus rather than specifically to the flesh (*sarx/sarka*: John 6:51, 53–55).

Flesh and Blood

- The combination of *flesh and blood* emphasizes that Jesus was speaking of His mortal body, because “flesh and blood” consistently refer to living, albeit mortal, body (Ether 3:8–9; see Leviticus 17:11–14; Ecclesiastes 14:19; 1 Corinthians 15:50; cf. “flesh and bone”)
- The use of *sarx* in the Johannine corpus itself, where it is antithetical to spirit (*pneuma*), emphasizes the earthly as opposed to the divine, and, when used of Jesus, emphasizes His incarnation as the Word made flesh (1:14).

The Salvific Death of Jesus

- The sacrament serves as a memorial of a wider range of Jesus’ atoning acts—his suffering, death, resurrection, and return in glory to live with His saints
- The flesh and blood of the final section of the Bread of Life discourse has particular reference to the fact that Jesus has really come in the flesh and that He, the Lamb of God, would sacrifice that flesh for His people
- Even many of his disciples, who knew who he *was*, had difficulty accepting what he must *do* and no longer walked with him (6:60–66)
 - They, too, began to “murmur” at the proposition that their Messiah would need to give His flesh and blood by dying

The Testimony of Peter

- Jesus, turning to His final audience, poignantly said to the Twelve, “Will ye also go away?” (6:6–67)
- Peter’s response, “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (6:68–69)

An Easter Testimony

- “And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works . . .” (3 Nephi 27:13–14)