

John 6:35, 41-51^{viii ix}

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever 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 comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

^{viii} **About the Gospel: John 6:35, 41-51**

This section of the discourse on the bread of life combines the themes of bread as the revelation of God in word and wisdom and bread as the revelation of God in the Eucharist. Various Old Testament parallels would prepare the hearer for understanding bread as the symbol of God's word. Amos describes a famine not of bread but of hearing the Lord's words (Amos 8:11); the image of wisdom giving "the bread of understanding" (Proverbs 9:5); the word of the Lord giving sustenance like bread (Isaiah 55:10-11).

For Jesus' hearers, this bread would have meant the Torah. Jesus is that revelation of God. He does the Father's will, not his own. Those who really see him (6:40-the verb for "see" used here indicates, for John, true spiritual insight in contrast to the verb used in 6:36) will

have eternal life in the present and participate in the resurrection “at the last day” (v. 40).

In reaction, “the Jews” (or more specifically for John “the Judeans” in Jerusalem and now in Galilee who oppose Jesus) murmur at Jesus, like the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16:2, 7). The skepticism about Jesus’ physical origins (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55; Luke 4:22) is answered on a theological level. As in rabbinic writing (Hosea 11:4), God draws people to the Torah and is their teacher (Isaiah 54:13), so here the Father draws all who have learned from God to Jesus (12:32).

Jesus’ identification as the bread of life indicates his relationship to humanity, that of nourishment. In verses 45-50 the same argument is made as in 4:13-14 The Torah is without life-giving power. This leads naturally into the more specifically eucharistic discussion on “eating the bread.” The descriptions of the bread of life also echo the problems of the humans in the garden of Eden: “I will never drive away” (6:37; Genesis 3:24); “one may eat of it and not die” (6:50; Genesis 2:17, 3:3); “Whoever eats of this bread he will live forever” (6:51; Genesis 3:22).

^{ix} **Reflection and Response**

At times, the Old Testament seems to present long life and material prosperity as the invariable signs of holiness. Thank goodness, a careful reading reveals more than this, for the spiritual lessons connected with God’s providence are hammered home in the Bible. When adversity strikes, we still have a tendency to ask, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” But in Psalm 34, the righteous also cry for help, for they are afflicted, broken-hearted and crushed in spirit.

When the author of Ephesians says, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us,” he reminds us of God’s providence. Christ’s extraordinary sacrifice on our behalf manifested God’s love and power once again and gave us safe passage into a new life with God. These acts demand a response from us. We are challenged as much by God’s gifts as we are by the lack of them. Our conduct toward each other must reflect God’s outpouring of love toward us.

Jesus points out that the Israelites ate manna in the wilderness and they died. He is reminding the people that people do not live by bread alone—true life comes from the word of God. Jesus identifies himself with God. Those “taught by God” will come to Jesus to be fed the living bread for eternal life in that long-promised land where there will never be scarcity. Anyone who tastes this bread will never die.

We come to the unsearchable mystery of the Eucharist with a joyful hush of thanksgiving in our hearts. Jesus sustains our souls with his life now and forever.