



INTERPRETING THE SIGNS

READING JOHN'S GOSPEL

**SESSION 14:
DARWIN WAS RIGHT:
JESUS CONFRONTS SELF-PRESERVATION**

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Interpreting the Signs Study Guide: Reading John's Gospel, Session 14
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DARWIN WAS RIGHT: JESUS CONFRONTS SELF- PRESERVATION SESSION 14

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Why does Jesus perform these miracles? How do they fit into his larger strategy?
2. Why does Jesus get harder and harder to believe in? How does that contrast with our methods and approach?
3. What does Jesus think about how people come to the Father? How does that support his methods to draw people to faith in him?
4. Do you think Jesus' twelve disciples became "the twelve" because they ultimately decided to stay after this mass exodus of disciples or because they were already in some special class of disciples?

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

In this story, Jesus addresses what is one of the most powerful dynamics in nature—Darwin’s process of natural selection, or using Spencer’s more clearer term, survival of the fittest. The idea is that those organisms in nature best suited to survive are those species that will survive the longest and thus more abundantly and more effectively pass on the traits that provided their competitive edge to the next generation. This in turns provides subsequent generations with a higher percentage of more competitive traits than the previous generation. The assumption is that the motivation or driver of natural selection is that of physical survival. According to biology, to physically survive and pass on our traits to the next generation is one of the deepest, if not the deepest, motivations and drivers for all living things, including humans.

Regardless of whether or not you believe in evolution, natural selection, or the survival of the fittest, or whether or not you would agree that those ideas even apply to human populations, most would agree that the motivation to survive is a very powerful motivation in all people. This motivation emerges as the dominant concern in this story of Jesus’ interaction with a group of people who had become his disciples. In the end, they left Jesus for food. Let’s see how our drive to survive can be spiritually deceptive and in the end, ultimately lead to our destruction.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

Read the Passage:

John 6:1-71

Think Through the Questions:

1. Where is Jesus at and why is that important?
2. Why does John mention that it is Passover?
3. Why does Jesus seek solitude from the crowd?
4. Why does Jesus make it more difficult for the crowd to believe in him?
5. Which is the more powerful motivation, the emotional stimulation of signs and wonders, or being fed?

COMMENTARY

We've already seen Jesus confront people who follow him simply because of the miracles, signs, and wonders he performed (4:43-54). Note that most of these people were not needing cured of disease or bodily injury. They were people drawn to Jesus because of his power demonstrated in the healing of these people. As we have stated earlier, it is not wrong to begin following Jesus because of the demonstration of his power. It is simply immature to remain in the place of always needing the emotional stimulation of seeing miracles, signs, and wonders. People should mature to believe in Jesus because of his words and the testimony concerning him. Here we see Jesus confront an even greater motivation—that of physical survival seen in the desire for food.

As in the last chapter, this entire passage builds around an event in which Jesus performs a miracle around a gathering of many people. After the event, John records the interaction Jesus had with the people affected by the miracle. The event John selects to record is Jesus' turning two fish and five loaves into enough food to feed thousands of people. The setting is Galilee, which is again away from Jerusalem, and the time is Passover, which is the Jewish celebration memorializing God's deliverance of Israel from the oppressive slavery of Egypt centuries earlier. While it is probable that Jerusalem experienced the greatest surge in population from Jews traveling from all over the Roman Empire during Passover, it is likely that the entire region experienced a population surge during this period, which lasted at least a week (Exodus 13:3-10). As we can expect, there are many people present, and as they are in Galilee, there are many people following Jesus because of the signs they saw Jesus do (6:2). This is the second time John comments on the Galilean characteristic of being drawn by signs and wonders (4:45). What is Jesus going to do with these people now? After repeated efforts to get them to believe in his words, how is Jesus going to work to draw them into deeper faith?

Jesus' miracle is rather straightforward. John records that a crowd of five-thousand men were present, which did not include women and children. The size of the crowd could have easily been 15,000-20,000 people or more. One of Jesus' disciples, Andrew, came to Jesus with five loaves of bread and two fish that were given to him by a boy in the crowd (v.9), but knew that such a small amount would not feed thousands. Jesus, knowing beforehand what he was going to do,

instructs the people to sit down, gives thanks for the food, and provides the entire crowd with enough fish and bread to satisfy everyone, with twelve baskets of bread left over.

The insights from Jesus' miracle are many and profound and are seen in the imagery included in the event as well as the interaction Jesus has with the Galileans after the event. As is John's custom, the insights all point to Jesus as the Son of God and that life is found in him.

In the actual event, there are several things we need to draw our attention to. Once again, it is Passover, and Jesus eventually offers his own body as bread to eat and blood to drink. This again is a placing him in the role of being the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (1:29). You also see Jesus taking two fish and five loaves, what was very little relative to the need, and exceedingly multiplying beyond the needs of everyone present, not unlike the miracle of water-to-wine at Cana. Additionally, the leftovers are collected in twelve baskets, which clearly represent the twelve tribes (families) of Israel and Jesus' ability to overwhelmingly provide for them as a nation, if they would simply eat what he provides. The crowd's response to Jesus was just short of a political riot—a mob that wanted to appoint for itself a king. Why? Because Jesus miraculously provided them with food—a blessing Israel enjoyed while it was under the leadership of Moses and living in the wilderness. This will come up later in Jesus' discussion with the crowd. In order to avoid what would be a disaster, Jesus leaves the crowd to find solitude. The disciples leave Jesus alone at the mountain and take a boat across the sea to Capernaum. During their trip, the sea becomes hostile and Jesus appears to them to comfort them and provides immediate safe passage to the shore.

The crowd that remained on the other side of the lake after the feast of loaves and fish started looking around for Jesus the next morning after they slept off the feast from the previous day. The text doesn't say how large the crowd was at this point. However, it does mention that more people came on boats from Tiberias to the place where Jesus performed the miracle. Obviously, the word had gotten out and others were coming to see Jesus. Once they realized Jesus was no longer there, they all got back in their boats and went to Capernaum, where they found Jesus.

Jesus' interaction and its conclusion with those who were following him is somewhat shocking. As I read, the conversation with Jesus and these group of followers becomes increasingly tense. It seems to go through three phases:

Phase 1: Jesus Confronts Their Motivations (vv.25-34)

Phase 2: Jesus Adds Complexity to Their Confusion (vv.35-51)

Phase 3: Jesus Adds Difficulty to Their Confusion (vv.52-65)

Phase 1: Jesus Confronts Their Motivations

When they find Jesus, Jesus immediately confronts them with their motivations. He states that they seek him not because of the emotional stimulation of signs and wonders, but because they filled their stomachs. This points to an even more powerful and deceptive motivation—the motivation of survival...of having our basic needs met. But Jesus doesn't condemn them for this. Jesus uses this motivation to draw them into true faith by using the metaphor of food to help them understand his words. With this intent he tells them,

Do not work for food that perishes, but work for food from the Son of Man that does not perish but endures and yields eternal life. (v.27)

They then ask Jesus how to do the work that yields this food. They are missing the point of Jesus comments. Their response still betrays their longing to fill their basic needs. Jesus wants them to look beyond their basic needs. As with the woman at the well and Jesus' offer of "living water" that forever quenches thirst, Jesus' offer of food that never perishes is an offer of himself to provide all that is needed for eternal life.

Jesus tells them that the work that they must do is believe in him whom God has sent. Jesus is again pointing them to believe in him. Revealing the substance of their faith, they ask for a sign. The feeding of thousands the previous day prompted them to think that Jesus may indeed be the promised prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-22). They want to see more, and they remind Jesus that Moses gave Israel bread to eat throughout its travels in the wilderness. They wanted Jesus to prove that he could provide like Moses. Jesus corrects their assumption, reminding them that it was God who provided the bread, and it is still God that provides the bread that leads to true life by providing the Word of God, who is life. Knowing that Jesus is speaking

of himself, the crowd then asks Jesus for this bread that gives life, and in their mind, the bread that never perishes.

They continue to misunderstand Jesus' words because they are so focused on the present, worldly state of things—their need for food and their need for a political ruler that frees them from Rome.

Phase 2: Jesus Adds Complexity to Their Confusion

Jesus then begins speaking very clearly about who he is. Using once more the metaphors of water and food, Jesus states that those who believe in him will have all of their longings fulfilled. From there, he states that he is from heaven, that God is his Father, and that he is here to do the will of the Father. Those who believe in him will have eternal life and be resurrected to that life on the last day according to the will of the Father.

In these statements, Jesus introduces some complex ideas into an already confusing conversation for the Jews:

- Jesus as the Son of God from heaven. (incarnation—God became flesh)
- The Father's role in people coming to faith in Jesus and eternal life. (predestination)
- The resurrection to eternal life for those who believe in Jesus. (resurrection and end-times)
- Eternal security in the will of the Father through Jesus. (salvation can never be lost)

Not only are these difficult concepts in our day, but were also to Jesus' contemporaries. They were also important to Jesus' mission and to understanding Jesus' message. However, Jesus simply states the truth of these matters, and it causes confusion in the crowd. They knew this Jesus. They knew his parents. How could this man come from heaven? They complain and grumble among themselves, and Jesus rebukes them for it. He wants them to realize that their grumbling and complaining hinders their progress in believing in him as well as hearing and believing the teaching of the Father. It has already been noted by Jewish leaders (Nicodemus), John the Baptist, the Scriptures, and by Jesus himself in word and deed that he was sent by God. They should be heeding the teaching of God revealed in the Scriptures and in the words of Jesus,

not grumbling about it. Jesus concludes this response by stating clearly that he is the bread of life and that by eating of this bread, people find eternal life. This is in contrast to those who ate the bread (manna) of Moses in the wilderness, who eventually died. Jesus promises that those who eat of his bread will live forever. To throw another challenge into an already tense and confusing dialog, Jesus states that the bread he is speaking of is his flesh. On the surface, it appears that Jesus has taken the metaphor and brought it back into reality, but what does it mean that people must eat his flesh? This comment then takes the conversation to the next level, where it becomes increasingly difficult to continue to listen to Jesus.

Phase 3: Jesus Adds Difficulty to Their Confusion

They continue to grumble and complain at Jesus' words. Jesus throws more gas on the fire by adding, "you must drink the blood of the Son of Man" to have eternal life. This statement is even more offensive to the Jews because of the prohibition in the Law of Moses that forbade the drinking of blood and the eating of meat with its blood (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:23). Jesus continues his same basic message—he who feeds on the Son of Man will find true nourishment and will find eternal life in the Jesus and the Father.

John then reveals where this conversation took place—the synagogue in Capernaum. Synagogues were like town-halls for Jews that did not live in physical proximity to the temple in Jerusalem. They were places where Jews would assemble, read the Scriptures, and govern themselves. Present during Jesus' discussion were the synagogue leaders, which were the Jewish leaders in Capernaum and the surrounding areas. Also present were those who stayed after Jesus' miracle and sought after him the next day, following him to Capernaum. In addition to these were Jesus' twelve disciples and most probably other Jews from Galilee who happened to be in the synagogue on that day.

Confusion remains in the synagogue crowd. Knowing that his disciples were grumbling along with the Jewish leaders, Jesus confronts them. The disciples were quite possibly the twelve in addition to the large crowd that had that time considered themselves disciples, which literally means "follower." Jesus essentially confronts their "fleshy" perspective of things. To Jesus, they need to break out of their worldly perspectives, and start seeing things according to the Spirit. Stop look-

ing for physical food, which will not give you eternal life. Stop looking for a human king, which will not give you eternal security. Start looking for something more enduring, more promising, and more secure. Start looking for the Father and the life found in his Son, who is Jesus. The things of the flesh are of no help at all in securing what you're truly longing for. Start listening to the words of Jesus and the teaching of the Father. Start believing in the Son of Man and find eternal life, eternal food, and eternal peace.

Jesus finally concludes this discussion with some sharp words. "Some of you do not believe. Some of you are not being drawn by the Father." To the crowd of people who had been following him he says, "Some of you are not of God." How offensive! How rude! We've given our lives for this guy and he tells us we don't believe and we are not of God! The whole narrative concludes with what I believe is a remarkable conclusion. Many people who had been following Jesus to this point—people considered his disciples—left Jesus. Jesus had confronted their motivations and they could not change them. They longed for physical fulfillment. They longed for earthly wellbeing and could not shift their ambitions. They could not give up their desire for physical food and the peace found in a conquering ruler. So they left.

The twelve remained, and Jesus confronts them, "Are you going to leave too?" Peter's response on behalf of the twelve reveals the true perspective of a sincere disciple of Jesus. Those who seek eternal life must continue to follow the One who has the words of eternal life—Jesus. Those who seek eternal life must continue to believe in Jesus, the Holy One of God. Jesus then points out that he himself selected them, as the Father draws people to follow Him. And yet, even in this, Jesus reveals that even from among them is one who is ultimately his enemy. Since John is not writing to simply communicate the story of Jesus' life, but is more concerned with providing understanding about Jesus to those who already have pieces of the story, he reveals the betrayer of Jesus to be Judas Iscariot, increasing the tension of the story to a level already heightened in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand.

THINK THROUGH THE ISSUES

We all have a strong urge to see our physical well-being (survival) as the most important concern of our lives. We order most of our childhood and young adult years to go to school for the single purpose of getting a job. Once we get the job, we're driven to spend and spend on things we need and things we think need in order to survive and be happy. The more we have and the more we have to spend, the more we think we need in order to fulfill our needs. In 1998, Juliet Schor wrote in her book, *The Overspent American*, that 27% of households making over \$100,000/year say that they cannot afford to buy those things that they really need. That rate goes up for those making between \$50,000-\$100,000/year to 39%. She reports that over ½ of the country—the wealthy half—believe they cannot afford everything they really need. Evidently, our needs, or at least how we perceive our needs, are never fulfilled, even when we have the resources to do so. This points to an issue in our hearts and minds and not the actual physical circumstances. Jesus says that when we believe in him and eat his bread and drink his water, we will never thirst or hunger again. The cycle of work, earn, eat, drink and the emptiness it creates can finally end.

Issue: Finding Fulfillment in Jesus

1. If you were to evaluate where you're at in your life at this point, would you say that the decisions that have put you at this point have been motivated by fulfilling longings or by pursuing Jesus?
2. What longings are you striving to fulfill right now?
3. Does Jesus promise to fulfill those longings by giving us what we want? What does Jesus say he will provide for us?
4. Why is believing in Jesus foundational for leaving a lifestyle motivated by survival and the meeting of our needs?
5. How does the way we spend our money and use our things reflect our motivations?

Respond to the Questions Below:

DINNER TABLE DISCUSSION GUIDE

MEAL #1: FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISH

Read John 6:1-15.

1. Where do you think the little boy got his fish and bread?
2. How do you think Andrew found out about the boy's lunch?
3. What do you think Jesus can do to meet all of our needs if he could feed everyone with two fish and five loaves?

MEAL #2: LEFTOVERS

Read John 6:1-15.

1. Why do you think there were leftovers?
2. Why do you think Jesus told the disciples to pick up the leftovers?
3. Why is it important that we are good stewards of what God gives us?

MEAL #3: JESUS WALKS ON WATER

Read John 6:16-21.

1. How do you think you would act if you saw someone walking on water?
2. Why do you think the disciples were afraid?
3. What does Jesus' power to walk on water and Jesus power to calm the storm say about Jesus?

MEAL #4: JESUS AS FOOD AND WATER

Memorize John 6:35

Why does Jesus say that those who come to him will not hunger and whoever believes in him will never thirst?



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