

# “This Is Indeed the Prophet Who Is to Come Into the World!”

## The nineteenth in a series of sermons on John’s Gospel

### *John 6:1-15; Numbers 11:1-15*

---

Everywhere he went Jesus was followed by larger and larger crowds. John the Baptist’s ministry had come to an end, yet the messianic fervor sweeping throughout Israel did not die down. It only increased. Jesus had shown himself to be greater than the Baptist—not only in the power of his preaching, but also in the amazing signs and wonders he performed which proved that God was with him. While many were following Jesus out of desperation (because of disease or demon possession), others saw in Jesus a potential king who could lead Israel to victory over Rome. Although Jesus is Israel’s king, and God’s final prophet, and even though he shows great compassion upon those sick and suffering, it will become clear in John 6, that the vast majority of Jesus’ followers badly misjudged who he was, and were following him for all the wrong reasons. This will begin to become clear in the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee.

We return to our series on the Gospel of John and we now come to John 6, surely one of the most interesting and theologically-loaded chapters in all the Bible. In this passage (which Bob Godfrey has aptly called “Jesus’ church shrinkage seminar”) we find two important miracles; the feeding of the five-thousand—the fifth miraculous sign which Jesus performed, followed by the account of Jesus walking on water. These two miracles are, in turn, followed by a lengthy discourse in which Jesus says of number of things so difficult to accept that many of his disciples walked away and no longer followed him.

And then in the discourse which makes up the bulk of the chapter (vv. 22-58), Jesus places himself at the very center of Israel’s redemptive history. Jesus makes a number of striking allusions to key Old Testament events—all of which, he implies, are fulfilled in his messianic mission. Jesus speaks directly about the doctrine of election, and tells the crowds that they cannot come to him unless they are drawn to him by the Father. Jesus speaks of the true nature of faith, he speaks of the spiritual eating of his flesh because he is the living bread come down from heaven, and he lays important groundwork for his institution of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper later on. As you can see, there is much in this passage for us to consider.

Ideally, we should go through this entire passage in one sitting—but that would take several hours to do it justice. So, what I will do is break the passage down into a number of smaller units so we can go through the whole discourse in some detail. But while we are in John 6, I ask you to read through the entire chapter several times so that we don’t lose sight of the forest for the trees. First, we will look at each of the two miracles which provide the setting and the context for the discourse which follows. Then, we will divide our study of the discourse into three parts, before we wrap up with the outcome of the discourse (vv. 59-71) when many of Jesus’ disciples walk away because of our Lord’s difficult sayings.

In the first 15 verses of John 6, Jesus miraculously feeds well over five thousand people. This is the only miracle found in all four gospels (other than the account of the resurrection), yet the only mention by John of the lengthy Galilean phase of Jesus’ ministry which figures so prominently in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The first thing we should notice when we come to John 6 is that the scene has shifted from Jerusalem (in John 5) back to the Galilee region. John informs us in verse 1, “*after this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias.*”

The time reference, “after this” points in the direction of what happened next (chronologically speaking) not that this happened immediately after Jesus left Jerusalem. We do not know much time has elapsed since the events recounted in John 5, only that this is the next major event in his messianic mission.<sup>1</sup> John also tells us that Jesus is now on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, when previously he had been on the west side (the more predominantly Jewish side), ministering in the villages on the Sea (Capernaum) or in the nearby hill country (Cana). Jesus is now in a largely Gentile region—an indication that the kingdom of God is already advancing into Gentile regions—as foretold by Israel’s prophets.

It is also clear that Jesus’ popularity has continued to increase, just as had been foretold by John the Baptist. By this point in his ministry Jesus has difficulty moving about freely because so many people are following him—as evident from verse 2 when John tells us “*a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.*” While many judge the success of someone’s “ministry” by its size, Jesus does not see things this way. The crowds are not following Jesus because they believed the gospel he was preaching, or because they saw him as the Messiah who had come to save them from the guilt and consequences of their sin. No, the Jews and Gentiles who lived in the Galilee region followed Jesus out of amazement at his miracles or out of desperation. The people saw or heard that Jesus had compassion on the sick, and that he healed many of disease and demon possession. These people had nowhere else to go. All they had was primitive folk medicine and if they were sick, or had children who were, they didn’t much care about the fact that Jesus had come to deal with the root of all human sickness and suffering—the guilt and power of sin. They needed help.

While many saw Jesus as a miracle-worker who could heal the sick, there were others who understood enough of the Old Testament to know that the coming Messiah would be a king. But many of those looking for a king wanted a military leader who could lead the oppressed Jewish people to victory over and then liberation from the hated Romans. When they saw that Jesus showed no fear in standing up to the corrupt and indifferent Jewish religious leaders, many embraced him. This explains why a huge crowd followed Jesus from place to place—sadly, for all the wrong reasons. The crowds of desperate people watching Jesus’ every move are not a sign that his is a successful ministry. Instead, this is a sign that the sinful human condition is so deep and troubling that the people are blind to the truth. They do not care about who Jesus says he is or even in discovering the true nature of his ministry. Their only concern is his miraculous power. This is why there is a powerful sense of both irony and tragedy in the size of crowds now following Jesus.

Therefore, when we read in verse 3, that “*Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples,*” we can only wonder how many of these the people following Jesus from place to place actually sensed that Jesus was the new Moses leading the people of God (the true Israel) in a New Exodus. Surely some did—as we will see in our text—but the vast majority of these people did not, and really did not care that something of biblical proportion was about to unfold before their very eyes. Their own needs and personal suffering pushed any theological reflection into the background.

According to Mark’s account of this same event (Mark 6:30-43), Jesus went into the hill country seeking a solitary place to escape all the attention and to rest. In Jesus’ day, the area east of the Sea of Galilee was remote, desolate, and a good place to go if you wanted to be alone. But it doesn’t quite turn out that way for our Lord. People quickly figured out where Jesus was and began coming toward him. When John says that Jesus went up on the mountain (*to oros*) that does not necessarily mean a specific

---

<sup>1</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 267.

mountain (or even a hill), but more likely that Jesus went into the hill country or onto the high ground east of the Sea of Galilee (which we now know as the Golan Heights).<sup>2</sup>

In verse 4, John lays out the theological setting for what follows throughout the balance of chapter 6. *“Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.”* This is the second of three Passover celebrations mentioned by John. The miraculous feeding of the five thousand about the time of the annual Passover tells us that Jesus is intentionally placing himself in the role of a new Moses leading God’s people in a New Exodus. The key feature of the Passover celebration is the Jewish family’s sacrifice and eating of the paschal lamb as instructed in Exodus 12. Twice in the opening chapter of this Gospel, John has told us that Jesus has been identified as the Passover lamb (John 1:29, 36). The mention of the first Passover in John (chapter 2) is tied to Jesus’ entrance into the temple (which he calls his Father’s house) in order to drive out the merchants and money-changers, and in which Jesus identifies himself as the true temple of God, which must be destroyed so that it will be raised up—a reference to his coming death and resurrection. Shortly before the third Passover (mentioned at the end of John 11 and following) Jesus begins to speak openly of his death, only to die during that next Passover as the true Passover lamb.

The fact that the miracle and discourse which follows occur at the time of the second Passover during his messianic mission, also serves as the basis for Jesus to speak about himself as the bread of life which comes down from heaven, and that his flesh must be given so that people may have eternal life and the forgiveness of sin. In this miracle and discourse Jesus is setting the stage to fulfill everything to which Israel’s Passover had pointed. Jesus is also laying the groundwork for the institution of the sacrament of his own body and blood—the Lord’s Supper, which replaces the celebration of the Passover. Through the course of this chapter John moves from the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (our topic in this sermon) to the discourse (to which we turn in the coming weeks), from Moses to Jesus, and finally from bread (manna) to life-giving flesh (his own body, which Jesus offers on the cross).

To put it another way, we will completely miss what is going on in this chapter if we do not see Jesus as instituting a New Exodus and identifying himself as the new Moses who is fulfilling Old Testament prophecy and typology. That the crowds want to make Jesus king means many of them did indeed make the connection between what Jesus was about to do in the wilderness with the coming of the Messiah. But they fail to see that Jesus’ kingship is not merely political. Roman occupation of their ancient homeland is not Israel’s greatest problem. For the average person in the crowd that day, the crushing guilt of sin is not the issue driving them to follow Jesus out into the wilderness. They want deliverance from Rome, or from their own suffering. If Jesus is the miracle-worker they think he is, then he is just the one to lead them to deliverance. No doubt, they are excited about Jesus’ arrival in their area. They have a great sense of expectation (even a sense of messianic expectation), but it is all sadly misplaced and misdirected. He must give his flesh as a sacrifice for sin, and we must feed upon that flesh by faith. Jesus must suffer and die. But Jesus’ dying and rising was not on their minds this day. Far from it.

Jesus did not find the privacy he was seeking in the wilderness with his disciples. As we read in verse 5, *“lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”* In Mark 6:33-35, we get a bit more information about the crowd which was beginning to assemble and how they managed to find Jesus out in the wilderness. According to Mark, *“now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great*

---

<sup>2</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 268.

*crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late.'*"

When we look at John's account in light of what we read in Mark 6, it becomes clear that Jesus saw the crowd assembling, that he took compassion on them (John adds us that Jesus healed many during this time), and that Jesus taught the crowds until it began to get dark. As it grew late, Jesus saw that the people would need food. Mark's Gospel does not name Philip or Andrew specifically, but John does (vv. 7-8). As some commentators have pointed out, Philip was from nearby Bethsaida—giving the whole account the sense of an eyewitness report. If anyone knew where to buy food, it would be Philip. But none of this caught Jesus by surprise, for as John tells us in verse 6, "[Jesus] *said this to test [Philip], for he himself knew what he would do.*" The new Moses was about to institute the New Exodus.

Yet, it becomes clear that even Jesus' own disciples are missing the true significance of what was unfolding out in the wilderness. All the disciples can see (and we must acknowledge that this was a serious issue) is that a huge crowd of people have followed Jesus into the wilderness, and now that it was getting dark, people would need something to eat and they little in the way of food. According to verse 7, "*Philip answered [Jesus], 'Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.'*" An average day's wage was a denarius. But the crowd is so big that not even eight months wages would buy anywhere near enough food to feed even a few. It is not like someone can jump in the SUV and go to the nearest Costco and buy Cliff Bars in bulk and flats of bottled water.

In verses 8-9, Andrew mentions that a boy brought some food—although the quantity was sufficient only for himself. "*One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to [Jesus], 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?'*" Barley loaves were associated with the working poor, and the boy's two dried fish were barely capable of feeding one person, much less this huge crowd. But there may be more here than we think in John's account. The term translated "boy" (*paidiron*) can also be translated as "servant," which may point us in the direction of 2 Kings 4:42-44, where we read, "*A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing the man of God bread of the firstfruits, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And Elisha said, 'Give to the men, that they may eat.' But his servant said, 'How can I set this before a hundred men?' So he repeated, 'Give them to the men, that they may eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.' So he set it before them. And they ate and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.'*" The fact that Andrew mentions a servant's barley loaves (the same term "servant" is used in 2 Kings 4:42-44) in connection with a miraculous feeding, is likely intended to indicate that Jesus is a prophet greater than Elisha.<sup>3</sup> One thing is certain—Jesus' miracle will be much greater than Elisha's.

Jesus takes charge and prepares the crowd to eat a meal beyond their wildest expectations. As we read in verse 10, "*Jesus said, 'Have the people sit down.' Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.*" Mark gives us a bit more detail in his Gospel. "*So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.*" The crowd included many more people than the five-thousand, because that figure only included the men—undoubtedly, there were many more women and children present as well. Things were well organized and there must have been an air of expectation.

Although the miracle takes place out in the wilderness (a desolate and barren region), both John and

---

<sup>3</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 270.

Mark report that the area where this took place was filled with green grass. That this fact was remembered at all, points in the direction of an eyewitness account (John was there) and may indicate that it was still spring when this miracle took place. There may even be an allusion to Eden (a green paradise) or more likely to the messianic feast, such as we find in the opening verses of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.”* A green pasture is the perfect place for the people to recline and eat a meal fit for and prepared by a king.

According to verse 11, the miracle begins with Jesus offering thanksgiving over the loaves and finishes in verses 12-13 with everyone eating to the point of being full and with plenty of food left over. *“Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.”* The verb to “give thanks” is *eucharistesas* from which we get the term “eucharist” as a designation for the Lord’s Supper. Jesus is not speaking of the Lord’s Supper directly in the discourse which follows—rather, he is using a traditional Jewish phrase for the blessing of the food which the Lord is about to provide. In fact, the Lord will provide so much food that each one ate *“as much as they wanted.”* At this foretaste of the messianic feast to come (the great marriage supper of Christ the Lamb), everyone will be fully satisfied. The people have reclined in green pastures in the presence of the shepherd and shall not want for anything.

*“And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.”* While John does not give us the details of the miracle itself, it is clear that Jesus turned five barley loaves and two dried fish into a messianic feast wherein thousands ate until their stomachs were full, and that twelve full baskets of food remained—far more than Jesus started out with. There is little doubt that the fact that there were twelve baskets left over (not eleven or thirteen) points us to the history of Israel, a nation composed of twelve tribes. The miracle the crowds had just witnessed (and indeed participated in), is a powerful sign that Israel’s Messiah can indeed provide for all the needs of his assembled people, and that he can and will satisfy our deepest needs.

As with Israel in the wilderness (as recounted in Numbers 11, our Old Testament lesson), God had provided the people with heavenly food, every bit as much as he provided Israel with manna in the wilderness. And although there is no report of murmuring among the people as there was among the Israelites in the wilderness (on the contrary, everyone seems well satisfied), the people who were following Jesus in such great numbers did so because they were weary from the Roman occupation, and worn out from the trials and difficulties of life. These people went to such lengths to follow Jesus out into the wilderness because they were dissatisfied and were seeking something better.

But on this day there was no sign of God’s anger. Unlike Moses, who complained about the way the Israelites treated him, Jesus is the greater Moses who will give his people both meat and heavenly bread—filling them with good things. It should have been clear to all that Jesus is the greater Moses who obeys his Father so as to fulfill all righteousness. Like Moses, Jesus was tired, exhausted, and treated poorly. Jesus wanted to be alone with his disciples and rest. Yet the crowds gave him no peace. But he does not complain to his Father. As a result of our Lord’s obedience, the people in the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee witnessed something far greater than God providing manna in the wilderness for the grumbling Israelites. They eat until full, and are given a foretaste of much greater things to come.

As a brief aside, it is remarkable to read the lengths to which critical scholars will go to escape the force of the miracle of which we have just read. Some argue that the story is completely legendary (no surprise), or that John (or whomever wrote in John’s name) took Mark’s account and completely re-

worked it. Others contend that Jesus and the disciples had another source for barley loaves and dried fish, and in effect, pulled a fast one on the people by hiding the extra food and making it look like a miracle (of course, the number five thousand was greatly exaggerated). Still others, especially critical Roman Catholic scholars, argue that Jesus and the disciples had just enough bread to give everyone a small piece, and so this was not a meal, but the distribution of the sacrament (a spiritual meal). Others argue that the true miracle was in the hearts of the people—Jesus’ was able to convince selfish people to share their provisions with those who did not have enough.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the whole account, as we have seen, has the ring of truth and bears evidence of an eyewitness report—something critical scholars ignore. A miracle of messianic proportions occurred in the wilderness east of Galilee.

Sadly, the outcome of this miracle reminds us that the Israel of Jesus’ day was in much the same spiritual condition as the Jews of Moses’ day. According to verse 14, many of the people correctly made the connection between what Jesus had done and the prophecy of Moses. “*When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’*” In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses told the Israelites, “*the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.*” The people are right to make the connection, but as Jesus will go on to say in verse 26, the people are focused upon their stomachs and not his messianic identity: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.*” Ironically, in John 5, while still in Jerusalem, Jesus had told the religious leaders and biblical scholars that Moses had written of him—a claim apparently rejected by Israel’s leaders. But now, out in the wilderness, the Jewish people openly embrace the truth that their own leaders will not—Jesus is that one foretold by Moses, and therefore, Israel’s great prophet (and perhaps Messiah).

Yet we must not confuse this impulsive recognition of Jesus as the prophet, with saving faith. That God was with Jesus was obvious. No one else but God could work miracles like that they had just witnessed. Yet, the true meaning of the miracle is lost upon the people as seen in the discourse which follows, and in verse 15 which reveals the extent of the people’s blindness to the true meaning of Jesus’ messianic mission. “*Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*” The people were excited. They had just seen a great miracle. They sensed that something remarkable had occurred. Their stomachs were full, and Jesus had healed many of the sick among them. Perhaps their king really had come. Maybe Jesus would lead them to victory over Rome and restore Israel to greatness again. Maybe . . .

But Jesus’ response to the people’s desire to make him king reveals just how badly the people missed the point of the miracle they had just witnessed. Jesus knew of their misguided desire, and he knew that if he told them of his unwillingness to give in to their desire to make him king, this would not stop them. The people would make Jesus king, by force, if necessary. But this is not what his messianic kingship was about. Not one person there was thinking of a cross and an empty tomb, the true signs of victory and kingship through which Jesus would accomplish his messianic mission and fulfill the Father’s will, thereby saving his people from the guilt and power of sin.

Our Lord’s death and resurrection are hidden by the future. And so on this day, the people ate, had their fill, recognized that Jesus is “*indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.*” But then also intended to make Jesus king. Deliverance from the guilt and power of sin was the last thing on their minds.

---

<sup>4</sup> Morris, The Gospel According to John, 339.

So, John tells us, knowing the desires of the people, Jesus withdrew to be alone, commune with his heavenly Father, and rest his weary body. This time, he will go further out into the wilderness—no disciples, and no crowds to follow him. But our Lord will meet his disciples again shortly, and in a manner which they do not expect—walking on water. And it is to John 6:16-27, we turn next time.

Beloved, let us not make the same mistake the crowds made when Jesus fed them in the wilderness. They ate, had their fill, and were well satisfied, yet still missed the whole point of the miracle: Jesus is the new Moses, leading the people of God in a New Exodus. He came to save us not from Pharaoh or from Caesar, or even from sickness or disease. He came to save us from the root cause of all our troubles—the guilt of our sin. The bread he gave the people that day is a visible sign that his mission will take him to the cross, where he will offer himself as the sacrifice for our sins.