

“The Story of Manna: The Picture of the Gospel”—Exodus 16; John 6

Brandon Holiski
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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and let's meet in John 6...

We have been considering the story of God providing manna for his people in the wilderness of Sinai, found in Exodus 16. The first week we considered the problem of grumbling. Last week we looked at the nature of God's provision for His people, which we will bring up again. But today we are going to shift gears a bit and consider how the story of manna is actually a picture of the Gospel.

The Picture of the Gospel

If you've been with us for any length of time, then you know my strong conviction that the Gospel is the scarlet thread that ties together and unifies all of Scripture. We are always right to ask how a text points us to Christ and His work. When we ask that question of Exodus 16, we discover that God's provision of manna in the wilderness was a picture that foreshadows an even greater provision God offers His people hundreds of years later. It is to that provision that we will now turn our attention to John 6.

The chapter begins with a famous miracle. Follow along as I read, beginning in verse 1. This is the Word of God...

“After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. 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?’ ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷ Philip answered him, ‘Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.’ ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?’ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.’ ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’” (John 6:1-14)

There are some interesting parallels between this story and Exodus 16, aren't there? Both take place in a wilderness. Both involve a mass of hungry people. Both have people claiming that they don't have enough to eat. Both involve an explicit test. And in both God provides the people of Israel food, bread and meat, and to the point where they all eat their fill.

Furthermore, remember what we said last time about God's provisions in Exodus 16. We noted that they were supernatural, sufficient, and sanctifying. All three of those characteristics are present in John 6 as well. There is an obvious miracle. Five loaves of bread and two fish is not enough to feed five thousand men (plus women

and children), yet somehow God takes that little boy's lunchbox and pulls out enough food to feed thousands. That's a supernatural provision. But it's also sufficient. He didn't just feed thousands. They feasted. Just like in Exodus, the people with Jesus ate their fill. They had "*as much as they wanted*" (John 6:11). The provision was sufficient, abundant even. And, of course, that is the point of the twelve leftover baskets. These full baskets were a picture of the twelve tribes of Israel, brimming over with God's provisions.

And notice how the people react in verse 14: "*When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, 'This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!'*" What are they saying? To understand that we have to recall something Moses said in Deuteronomy 18:15 (cf. 18:18). 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.*" Over the years, that promise came to be seen as a Messianic prophecy, that is, a prediction about the coming Messiah (or Christ). The Jews were expecting the arrival of a Christ figure who would be "like" Moses because of this prophecy. So when they see Jesus essentially doing the manna thing for them in the wilderness it's no wonder why they conclude that He must be "*the prophet who is to come into the world.*" They're suggesting that He may be the Messiah, which explains why in the next verse they try to forcibly make Him king because they were expecting a Messiah who was a political-military king.

But the point to see is that they are recognizing the connection between what God did for Israel in the wilderness and what Christ just did for them. The parallels are uncanny. Yet the provisions, in both stories, were not just supernatural and sufficient. They were also meant to be sanctifying. That is, they were meant to point beyond the physical provision to some more significant spiritual provision. That's why John calls the miracle a "sign" (6:14). Signs point to something. And this one, just like the manna, was meant to point to an even greater spiritual provision. The significance is expounded a few verses later, during the events of the next day. Look at verse 22 and following.

"On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³ Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. ²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' ²⁶ Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'" (John 6:22-26)

Now, you may be thinking, "Wait a second, I thought verse 14 said that the food miracle was itself a sign." Well, yes, it was. But Jesus' point is that they received the miracle but they didn't see what it signified. They missed its significance. So they were coming because they ate their fill and wanted another free meal. But Jesus provided the first meal to teach them that He can provide for their greater need, eternal life. They were seeking a meal plan, when what they should have been seeking from Jesus was eternal life. They were seeking more bread or the thrill of a new miracle from Him, when they should have been seeking *Him*.

Mike Wilkerson helps us see the modern tendency to do the same thing:

*"Many come to Jesus with wrong motives. Some come to him for mere 'bread,' expecting an endless meeting of everyday desires. They come to have their old appetites satisfied, not to get new ones. They don't actually believe that Jesus offers what is most satisfying. For them, bread, water, comfort, control, achievement, affirmation, pleasure—immediate and tangible, though fading quickly—seem to satisfy. These are the same ones, who, in the end, turn away from Jesus, cynical and self-righteous, saying: 'I tried, he failed.' Yet they never had an appetite for him at all but only absorption in themselves... We are often just like them, wanting Jesus only because we think he will satisfy some other desire we bring to him... rather than wanting *him* to be our satisfaction."*¹

That's exactly the error of these people in John 6. But Jesus continues, in verse 27, to help them (and us) to understand the point of all these food miracles.

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” (John 6:27)

That bread, in other words, was just a fleeting picture of something greater. It satisfied for a moment and then was gone. But the provision of eternal life does not perish. They're seeking something temporal, when Christ offers something eternal. Oh how this is the mistake of our age too. The mistake that, perhaps, some of you in this room are still making though you have been in church for a long time because you don't yet grasp what it is that Jesus wants for you. Tim Chester makes this point in his commentary on Exodus.

“Jesus doesn't always give us what we want. But he meets our deepest needs. He gives us identity, fulfillment, forgiveness, and relationship. Above all, he gives us life. He gives us a future—an eternal future in God's presence. Jesus gives us himself, and that is a gift that endures beyond death. We look for satisfaction in wealth, but wealth corrodes. We look for satisfaction in our careers, but at best, careers end in retirement. We look for satisfaction in the admiration of others, but our looks fade or our powers decline or someone more admirable comes along. We look for satisfaction in relationships, but people betray us or we are left bereaved. Even when these things endure, we don't. We die; and death robs us of all the things for which we have lived, for we take none of it with us. There is only one exception and that is Jesus. Death does not rob us of Jesus. Quite the opposite. It opens the door to a greater experience of his glory. Look to Jesus to be enough for you, and there will never, ever come a day when he is not enough.”²

Now look at the exchange starting in verse 28.

“Then they said to him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’²⁹ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’³⁰ So they said to him, ‘Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?’” (John 6:28-30)

And then they bring up the manna...

“Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” (John 6:31)

Jesus had already done that earlier in the chapter. He was the true and greater Moses, but he came to give them something better than food. He came to give them eternal life. That's what the provision of food was meant to point to—God's supply of eternal life—yet that's not what they are seeking from Jesus. They're missing the point. So look at Jesus' response, starting in verse 32.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’³⁴ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’³⁵ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.’” (John 6:32-40)

There is so much meat in that response, no pun intended, but let's focus on the Exodus stuff today and not the implications of these verses for the doctrine of election. Jesus was showing that He can do more than supply bread. He can give us Himself, which is of more value than mere bread in our bellies. He says, *"I am the bread of life."* In other words, the manna in the wilderness of Sinai and the bread in the wilderness of Israel was meant to point to Jesus.³ And, for future reference, this is the first of seven "I Am" sayings in John's Gospel, which allude to Exodus 3:14 (where God revealed His divine name), and are generally viewed as implicit claims to Christ's divinity.⁴ Not surprisingly, then, the people have an issue with what Jesus says. Look at how they respond in verses 41 and 42, the very next verses...

"So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.'"
⁴² *They said, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"* (John 6:41-42)

They're grumbling! Just like in Exodus 16, they fall into the sin of grumbling. You know what is a sure sign that you are not seeing Jesus as enough for you in a particular moment? Grumbling. But let's notice what they are grumbling about. Jesus claims to be the bread of eternal life and they are grumbling that He would make such a claim. Why? Is it because they don't want eternal life? Of course not. They want life, but they want it on their own terms. They're just like people today. They ask, "What must we do?" And Jesus responds, "It's not about what you do, it's about what has been given for you. Receive Me, the bread of life coming down from heaven." And they're like, "Can you believe this guy?" The more things change, the more things stay the same. "God has given us salvation in Christ, the bread of life, and people still grumble at the thought of a crucified Savior or at the idea that there's only one way."⁵ But, it's like I tell my kids all the time, "Grumbling about it ain't gonna change nottin'." Jesus put it more eloquently. Look at verse 43.

"Jesus answered them, 'Do not grumble among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— 46 not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'" (John 6:43-51)

Obviously this imagery is key to understanding the Lord's Supper. We partake of Christ's broken body, not through a literal act of consumption but through the act of faith. And here we must notice that Jesus says that those who ate the manna still died, but those who partake of the bread of life will live forever. "Jesus was moving from the physical to the spiritual, from the temporal to the eternal, from the exodus to the cross."⁶ Still they don't want to accept this and they continue to complain and argue. Verse 52...

*"The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'"*⁵³ *So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.'"* (John 6:52-58)

Again, He's not talking about literally consuming His flesh and blood. It's a metaphor for faith. Notice the repetition of "believe" throughout this chapter. If they are to receive eternal life, it will only come to those who trust in Christ. So it raises key questions. Will we trust in Christ to receive eternal life? Will we believe that what we truly need is found only in Christ? These are the right question to ask, but unfortunately people fail to ask them, even religious people like the ones we are reading about. It just didn't compute with them. As Tony Merida summarizes, "The religious leaders were looking for a list of things to do to have this bread. They had their pad and paper. [But] Jesus said you simply need to believe."⁷

The object of our belief, our trust, Jesus Christ, is unpacked further as John continues his book. Jesus, John explains, is the Son of God, sent by the Father to lay down His sinless life on the cross as a sacrifice for sinners. On the cross, He bore our sins and the judgment of God that we deserve as sinners. He rose from the dead, victorious over sin and death, and He lives today extending life to all who would believe in Him, turning from the promises of sin and turning to Him for the forgiveness of their sins and the salvation of their souls. He is the Savior. The only One. The way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him. And He offers that salvation freely to all those who believe as a completely undeserved act of grace.

What an offer! Yet most people are not interested. Like the leaders in John 6, we may want salvation, but we want it on our own terms. The amazing grace we sing about is not so amazing to everyone. In fact, it's downright offensive to a great many.

One of my favorite pictures of this comes from a literary classic called, *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo. He tells the story of Jean Valjean, who at the start of the tale had just finished serving 19 years in prison (5 years for stealing bread for his starving sister and her family and 14 additional years for numerous escape attempts). Those years have made him a very jaded man as you can imagine. When he is released from prison, he seeks shelter, but no innkeeper will have him because his passport indicates he is a former convict. The only one who gives him refuge is bishop Myriel.

At night Valjean steals some of the bishop's valuables and takes flight. The police catch him with the goods and they bring him back to the bishop's house and throw him down at the bishop's feet. They then explain that they found Valjean with the stolen goods (this is a really tense scene). But to everyone's surprise Myriel conveys to the police that they are mistaken about Valjean's theft. Then he looks at Valjean and says, "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"⁸

What a picture of grace. Valjean deserved to be prosecuted, but the bishop chose not to bring judgment upon him. What makes this grace so shocking is that the bishop didn't just let Valjean off the hook, he incurred the cost of his crime (by giving him the valuables he stole) and blessed him beyond what he even sought (by giving him even more valuables). What a shocking picture of grace.

But biblical grace is not just shocking. It's also threatening. Victor Hugo writes this wonderful line about Valjean after this encounter, which you have only encountered if you have read the book because I don't think it's in any of the movies or live performances. The author says of Valjean, "He could not have told whether he was touched or humiliated."⁹ If you are a Christian, meaning you have consciously experienced the grace of God, you can relate to that sentiment. When you realize your guilt and the goodness God has lavished on you in Christ, you have these moments where you don't know if you should be crying in joy or sorrow. You feel both. You feel touched and humiliated, just like Valjean did when he experienced grace from bishop Myriel.

Later in the same chapter Valjean's thoughts are further narrated:

“In opposition to this celestial tenderness, he summoned up pride, the fortress of evil in man. *He dimly felt that this priest’s pardon was the hardest assault, the most formidable attack he had ever sustained;* that his hardness of heart would be complete, if it resisted this kindness; that if he yielded he would have to renounce the hatred with which the acts of other men had for so many years filled his soul, and in which he found satisfaction; that, this time, he must conquer or be conquered, and that the struggle, a gigantic and decisive struggle, had begun between his own wrongs and the goodness of this man.”¹⁰

I know this struggle. You know this struggle if you are a Christian. In the face of God’s incredible grace to you, you are not merely shocked by it, you are threatened. Why? Because you know you deserved the opposite of His favor. You know you could never repay His favor. By accepting it, you lose your sovereignty. You lose control. And that is scary. You are not your own anymore because you could never repay the grace that He has shown you and so you owe your life now to this gracious God. In fact, that is what Myriel says to Valjean, “You have promised me to become an honest man. I buy your soul. I take it away from the spirit of perversity; I give it to the good God.”¹¹ As one writer explains, “The grace of God when it comes in will either turn you into a harder person than ever or break your heart into eternal softness.”¹²

Later in the book we see that contrast all the more starkly. Throughout the book there is a police officer named Javert, who self-righteously pursues Valjean. He has a strong sense of justice and has spent his life thinking in terms of rewards and punishments, but knowing nothing of grace. One day, Javert falls into the hands of Valjean, but remember that Valjean by this time is a changed man. Grace has had its way with Valjean, so instead of killing his enemy, he lets him go. It’s another picture of shocking grace. The recipient of grace is now extending grace. But just like it was previously to Valjean, grace proves very troublesome to the officer. He realizes that to receive it means that he would have to radically change his worldview. But instead of embracing the change, he casts himself in the river and dies.

Friends, that’s the paradox of grace. It’s why the people ask Jesus what every religious person asks, “What do we need to *do*?” And when Jesus answers (as Christianity does later), “*Nothing*. Just believe me. Receive me,” they grumble because grace is threatening. If someone gives you eternal life, you are forever in their debt and are no longer your own. So the people say, “That’s okay, what we really want is just bread.” And that’s the tragedy of lostness. People turn down the only One in whom we can find everlasting life, in exchange for stuff we can get on our own.

That’s what grace does. It’s amazing to some and repugnant to others. It’s why we read in verse 66 that “*after this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*” My prayer for each of us, however, is that we might see Christ and respond like Peter does to Jesus in verse 68—“*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.*”

Let’s pray...

¹ Mike Wilkerson, *Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 116. Italics his.

² Tim Chester, *Exodus For You* (Denmark: The Good Book Company, 2016), 123-124.

³ “The manna in the wilderness was another *type*—something from the Old Testament that pointed to salvation in Christ. The manna taught Israel to depend on God for all their needs, but it had certain limitations. It was only bread; so it could only meet physical needs, and only for a little while. As Jesus pointed out, everyone who ate manna is now dead. Nevertheless, the bread taught people to look to God for their sustenance and salvation until he sent the true and living bread from Heaven. That bread came

in the person and work of Jesus, who offered his body on the cross to give life to the world. The meaning of the manna is that all we need is Jesus.” Philip Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 430.

⁴ See John 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 6; cf. 4:26; 6:20; 8:58, 59.

⁵ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (Christ-Centered Exposition; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 102.

⁶ Ryken, 430.

⁷ Merida, 103.

⁸ That’s my favorite scene in the story. But for a long time it troubled me because, even though the act of the bishop was touching and generous, he still lied, right? But then I heard one preacher use the scene as an illustration in a way that made me reconsider this point and demonstrated that the scene is an even better example of biblical grace than I (and every other preacher I had previously heard) realized. He said it wasn’t a lie. “Because the bishop, when he took this ex-convict in, he knew what this man was capable of. He knew what was in the man’s heart, and when he took the guy in he put everything at risk, so in a sense he gave it all away. Real grace is shocking. The bishop, by bringing the man in, opened himself, made himself vulnerable, made himself weak, and allowed himself to be plundered. The fact is it wasn’t a lie. By even the act of taking in the ex-convict, the bishop had actually been saying, ‘I know what you’re capable of, and it’s all right. I’m going to serve you even if you do that.’ He had given it all away” (Timothy Keller in a sermon called “Basics,” which was preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City on October 3, 1993). In fact, Victor Hugo (the author) puts a line in the bishop’s mouth that has stuck with me since I read it. “Do not ask the name of the person who seeks a bed for the night. He who is reluctant to give his name is the one who most needs shelter” (Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Volume 1, Book 1, Chapter 6 [1862]). You see, the Bishop knew what Valjean might do and he welcomed Him in just the same. So when Valjean is brought before him, and he gives him even more valuable goods, he is showing an *amazing* grace. It’s counterintuitive. It’s shocking. Myriel didn’t just give Valjean favor that he didn’t merit; he gave him favor when Valjean was owed the opposite (e.g., judgment, litigation, punishment, retaliation). In that way, the scene reminds me of biblical grace. The kind of grace God has shown a wretch like me (and that is no hyperbole).

⁹ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, Book 2, Chapter 13. The whole paragraph is relatable for Christians. “Jean Valjean left the town as though he were fleeing from it. He set out at a very hasty pace through the fields, taking whatever roads and paths presented themselves to him, without perceiving that he was incessantly retracing his steps. He wandered thus the whole morning, without having eaten anything and without feeling hungry. He was the prey of a throng of novel sensations. He was conscious of a sort of rage; he did not know against whom it was directed. He could not have told whether he was touched or humiliated. There came over him at moments a strange emotion which he resisted and to which he opposed the hardness acquired during the last twenty years of his life. This state of mind fatigued him. He perceived with dismay that the sort of frightful calm which the injustice of his misfortune had conferred upon him was giving way within him. He asked himself what would replace this. At times he would have actually preferred to be in prison with the gendarmes, and that things should not have happened in this way; it would have agitated him less.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Timothy Keller in a sermon called “Basics,” which was preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City on October 3, 1993.