

The bread and wine

Part 3 – Philip and the Bread of Life

In Part 2 we took a shot at what Jesus meant in **John 6:54** when he said, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.” We concentrated on the “drinking his blood” part of that verse, starting with Leviticus 17:14 to make the connection between blood and life, and ending with the connection between Jesus’ blood and eternal life, and how we can actually experience that eternal life now by “feeding on Jesus” in John 6:57, pictured later by the bread and wine Jesus gave to his disciples to eat and drink in Luke 22.

But why did Jesus also talk about “**eating his flesh**” in John 6:54, and especially to Jews who would never eat raw flesh with the blood still in it? Genesis 9:4 made that clear, that “you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood,” and so did Leviticus 19:26, that the Israelites should “not eat meat that has not been drained of its blood.” So imagine being a Jew and hearing Jesus say “you have no life in you” if you didn’t eat his flesh - and with the blood still in it too.

So what on earth was Jesus getting at? Well, he’d given a hint already back in **John 6:51** when he said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If a man eats of this bread he will live forever. **This bread is my flesh**, which I will give for the life of the world.” So Jesus had made a connection already between his flesh and bread. Eating his flesh, then, would be like eating bread, which made eating his flesh a little easier to accept, perhaps, but that raises the question as to why Jesus was calling himself “bread” as well.

Jesus himself answers that in **verse 58** when he makes the comparison between “Our forefathers who ate manna and died” and himself as “the bread that came down from heaven, and he who feeds on this bread will live forever.” So Jesus takes these Jews back to Exodus 16 when God sent a miraculous food to the Israelites to keep them alive in the desert, and now God was doing it again - only this time it contained an even greater miracle ingredient in it that would keep them alive forever, and that miracle ingredient was Jesus himself.

This really upset many of those listening, however, because it made no sense at all (John 6:60-61). But how do we make sense of it today too? Well, we go back to **John 6:1** to see what led up to it.

It's springtime just before the Jewish Passover (John 6:3), so the Jews in Galilee (and especially the men) should have been preparing to leave for the grand weeklong Passover festival in Jerusalem sixty miles to the south. But here in verse 2 it says "a great crowd" of people were not preparing for Passover at all, they were following Jesus around instead.

Jesus, meanwhile, wants time with his disciples away from the crowds, so they hop into a boat to cut across the north end of the Sea of Galilee to the eastern shore. The people can see where the boat is headed, though, so they trek across land to the boat's likely landing spot. The boat arrives well ahead of them and Jesus takes off into the hills, but looking back he sees the crowd gathering below, and that's when it comes to his mind "what he's going to do" (verse 6).

We know from **John 5:19** that "the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what **he sees his Father doing**," so what came to Jesus' mind at this point was a clear picture of what the Father was up to here. Jesus knew exactly what he had to do, therefore, and first on the list was turning to Philip and asking him, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"

What a question. There are thousands of people gathering down there, it's an unpopulated spot, and how are the disciples going to pay for all that bread - and find a bakery nearby big enough to supply it?

And worse still it sounds like Jesus is saying, "What on earth are we going to do, Philip?" which was totally out of character for Jesus, who always knew exactly what to do. But what the Father had in mind here was a little "test" for Philip (verse 6), like a sort of mid-term exam, perhaps, because Philip had been with Jesus now for two years and witnessed - and even performed - many astounding miracles, so with all this experience behind him how would Philip react to Jesus asking him where they could buy food for thousands of people?

And that's the big question, isn't it? Will Philip simply smile and say, "Come now, you're Jesus, this is a stroll in the park for you," or will he get all flustered and try to come up with a solution, even when there obviously isn't one?

But why did Jesus pick on Philip? Well, from what we know about Philip he was a practical, common sense man. When Nathanael was doubtful about Jesus, for instance, it was Philip who piped up and said, "Well, come and see for yourself, Nathanael" in John 1:46, which was the obvious thing to do.

It was also Philip in John 14:8 who said, “Lord, **show** us the Father and that will be enough for us.” To practical-minded Philip this was also the obvious, sensible thing to do, because seeing Jesus had helped Nathanael, so why not make the Father visible as well? Philip, therefore, was the one with the quick solution and the ready advice. He was the ‘Mr. Fix-it’ of the group.

So imagine poor Philip trying to make sense of Jesus’ question about finding enough bread for 5,000 plus people in a desert. His practical mind tries to figure it out mathematically, **John 6:7**, and he soon realizes that eight months worth of wages wouldn’t nearly be enough for even one tiny bite of bread for everyone.

Mr. Fix-it Philip is well and truly stumped. But this was all part of the Father’s plot, and so was the crowd of thousands that had gathered below. They’d been so hooked on seeing more miracles from Jesus that they’d rushed out to follow him without any thought as to where they were going, or how long they’d be away, or what food they’d need to take with them.

And now they were miles from home and they’d soon be hungry, which has created the perfect testing site for finding out where the disciples’ brains are in their understanding of who Jesus is and what he’s come for.

And that was the real question, wasn’t it? It wasn’t about where they could find enough food to feed all these people physically, it was about where the brains of these disciples were when faced with a crisis. Would they immediately think in physical terms and look to physical resources to solve the problem, or would Philip put his calculator away and watch how Jesus dealt with the situation **BASED ON** what Jesus had said earlier in **John 5:24**, that “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me **has eternal life** (and) **he’s crossed over from death to life.**”

Had that statement now given Philip another map in his head to go by, that in everything Jesus said and did he was leading them across a bridge from the physical to the eternal? Was a picture beginning to form in Philip’s mind that God hadn’t sent Jesus to lead them to a better, more fulfilling and healthier life physically, he’d sent Jesus to enable them to experience life eternally? In which case, would Philip see this latest crisis in those terms too, that this had all been orchestrated by the Father to enable Jesus to teach them something about eternal, not physical, life? Well, at this point in time it doesn’t look like it, because Philip’s mind can only focus on a physical solution to the food problem.

He's not alone, however, because Andrew is stuck in the same groove. Andrew's solution to the food shortage was to hunt through the crowd of people to see what food he could gather from them, but among all those thousands of people he could only come up with one basket containing "five small barley loaves and two small fish." So God had made absolutely sure there was no physical, practical, common sense, 'Philip-type' solution to the problem.

And when Andrew turns up with only one basket, does Jesus bang his forehead and cry out, "Is that all you can find, Andrew?" No, but that's probably what Philip's thinking, because he can picture the basket with the five loaves being passed down the front row of the crowd, and by the tenth person or so it will be empty, and then they've got a riot on their hands as the ones behind blame the ones in front for being so greedy, and then - well, to Philip's practical mind this was a disaster. It was utter craziness. It was nuts.

Jesus isn't panicking at all, though, because he's **seen** what the Father has in mind, and he thanks the Father for the wonderful lesson coming up for his disciples. He then starts tearing pieces off the loaves (Mark 6:41) and keeps on handing them out to his disciples in a continual supply for distribution. There's always a new piece of bread (and fish) forming in his hands until all the people have eaten as "much as they wanted," **John 6:11**. The twelve disciples then fill their own baskets with the leftovers for the trip home, so that nothing is wasted, and there's no mess left on the hillside.

But what was Philip thinking as he watched Jesus' hands constantly producing bread and fish? Did it hit him that bread **in Jesus' hands** could have kept on reproducing for eternity? Jesus could have fed a million people, or fed every person on the planet forever. So was a picture now coming into focus in Philip's mind that Jesus wasn't dabbling in the physical, he was operating on a vastly higher level in which impossible situations were resolved, and people's needs were being taken care of - not by natural, but by supernatural means?

Did it now dawn on Philip that when Jesus asked him, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" it was, in fact, a deliberate set up by the great God himself to open Philip's eyes to a whole new world that wasn't limited by things having to make sense. It didn't matter if a crazy situation with no possible solution loomed. It didn't matter if even death stared you in the face, because in Jesus' hands you **crossed over** from death and hopelessness, worry and fear, into a world in which you were filled with as much peace and calm as you could want.

And the crowd sitting there calm and filled was proof of it, but could Philip make the connection between the crowd being filled with “as much as they wanted” physically, and what Jesus had come to fill people with supernaturally and forever? Could Philip make the connection between the bread flowing out of Jesus’ hands and the life that was now flowing out of Jesus into those in John 5:24 who “hear my word and believe him who sent me”?

Could he? Well, that’s what this whole episode was designed to do, which thrilled Jesus, because he knew the Father had set this up just perfectly to get through to the likes of Philip. And what a great way of doing it too, getting Philip all flustered to begin with by asking him for a solution that blew all Philip’s fuses, and then solving it in a way Philip would never have thought of or even believed was possible. It introduced Philip to a world he’d never dreamed of, a world that didn’t send you loopy if things didn’t make sense.

By now it was evening and time to head back across the water to Capernaum, but dark came and no Jesus. They couldn’t wait any longer so they rowed out in the dark without him, only to be hit three miles from shore by high waves. But there walking above the waves toward them was a man, which terrified them, but on realizing it was Jesus “they were willing to take him into the boat” (21).

That’s an interesting statement, especially when the willingness to take Jesus on board included Philip. It meant that Philip had **come to terms with things not making sense on the physical level**. To see Jesus actually walking on water had now become acceptable to him. And what a far cry that was from the Philip we saw a few hours earlier - the Philip who could only think on the physical level for a solution to the bread crisis. It was the picture of that ever-expanding bread that had changed him, which God knew it would, knowing how Philip’s mind worked. It had shown Philip that with Jesus involved you could have calm and peace in situations that were ridiculously impossible and didn’t make any sense at all.

More boats were now arriving with people looking for Jesus, so some in the crowd cadged a lift back to Capernaum and discovered Jesus had been there for some time already, and they wondered how he’d managed to do that without a boat. Jesus’ response was rather blunt in **John 6:26**. He accused them of looking for him just so they could be fed physically, which was silly of them, because what was “food that spoils” (27) compared to the food he was giving them that would last forever? So, don’t spend all their energy on feeding their stomachs, he told them - tune in to what God wanted them to do instead.

But what exactly did God want them to do, they ask? Simple, Jesus replies in **John 6:29**, God wants you to “believe in the one he’s sent.” Yes, but, they reply, what “miraculous sign” could Jesus give to prove God had sent him? God had obviously sent Moses, they said, because he rained down all that miraculous manna from heaven on their ancestors in the desert, so what sign could Jesus offer compared to that?

Jesus’ answer again is very simple, that God sending manna from heaven to the Israelites **was the sign** that God had sent him, because it perfectly pictured God sending HIM as bread from heaven, “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world,” **verse 33**.

Their beloved Moses and his manna, therefore, was actually the sign God had created thousands of years ago to identify Jesus when he came. And the manna perfectly pictured what Jesus had **come for**, as well, that God had sent Jesus, just like he’d sent the manna, **as food**. And not just any food, but THE food, the ONLY food they’d ever need. Just as manna was the only food the Israelites needed to keep them alive in the desert, Jesus was the only food they’d need for everlasting life. And not just everlasting life for themselves either; Jesus was food enough to “give life to the world.” From him comes everlasting life in a steady torrent to keep the whole world alive forever, just like the bread in his hands on the hillside could have kept filling those people physically forever.

Many of those listening to Jesus had actually seen the bread miraculously reproducing in Jesus’ hands too. So God had prepared the ground beautifully for Jesus now saying in **verse 35**, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”

But would they believe it? No, they would not, because **it didn’t make sense**. How could Jesus say he’d been sent from heaven to be their eternally sufficient food, when in reality he was “the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know” (42)? Jesus was just a man like any other man, so how could an ordinary human stop people being hungry and thirsty forever?

It was a good question, but instead of asking Jesus to answer it, they started “grumbling among themselves” (43). And isn’t that a typical human reaction when things don’t make sense? It’s grumble to other people rather than go to the person who said it and have it out with him one on one. But there was a reason for the Jews reacting this way, and a startling one at that.

In answer to their grumbling, Jesus makes the startling statement in **verse 44** that “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” No wonder the Jews couldn’t make sense of Jesus, it’s because it wasn’t in the Father’s plan to “draw” them to Jesus yet. And the word for “draw” in that verse is the same word used in John 21:11 for dragging a net loaded with fish onto the beach. It’s pulling against resistance, or in the case of those Jews, dragging them kicking and screaming because their resistance was so strong.

But it answers the question beautifully as to how anyone can ever come to believe in Jesus when the things Jesus said about himself make no sense at all. Well, here is Jesus’ answer to that. It takes the Father to break through our natural resistance. We can kick and scream all we like but the Father has his ways of opening minds and his timing is exquisite, and it’s in perfect tune with our personality too. Look what he did with Philip. When the time was right the Father got exactly the result he was after. **He made Philip into a believer**, as we see in Philip willingly taking Jesus into the boat after seeing him walk on water.

Well, if the Father could do that for Philip, then what’s to stop him doing that for everyone? Well, he IS doing it for everyone, as Jesus says in **verse 45**, “It is written in the Prophets: **‘They will all be taught by God.’** Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.”

And how encouraging is that? It means the Father is doing the same thing in everyone’s life that he did in Philip’s life. It may not look like it when children growing up in loving Christian homes reject God, and family and friends show little interest in what we believe, but if that gets us thinking, “What’s the point of teaching anything about Christ to anyone if he doesn’t mean anything to them?” then take Jesus’ word for it that the Father will get through to them, just like he got through to Philip, “For my Father’s will,” Jesus says in **verse 40**, “is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

That’s the Father’s plan, to get us all looking to Jesus for life now and forever. It means that if a family member or close friend isn’t looking to Jesus then it’s not in the Father’s plan to break through their resistance yet. It’s not the right time. But we know the Father is intimately involved in their lives, because Jesus makes it clear in John 6:44 that the Father has made it **his responsibility** to draw people, and from what we see in Philip’s life the Father gets exactly the result he’s after when the time is right.

And Jesus knows this for certain, **verse 46**, because “he has seen the Father.” So we can take his word for it, that what he’s saying about the Father is true. But this has huge implications for us as Jesus’ disciples, because we are the ones that the Father is concentrating on for now, just as he concentrated the entire feeding of the thousands on reaching Philip.

The Father is now drawing us to Jesus just as he drew Philip. And it’s a constant pull, like dragging a loaded fishing net onto the beach, to get us to believe **verse 50**, that Jesus is “the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die.” But admit it, we do a lot of dying still, don’t we? We die inside when things don’t make sense. We get all flustered and frustrated just like Philip when faced with ridiculous situations that we can’t find a quick solution to. It kills our peace of mind when politicians waste piles of money, children suffer at the hands of bullies, family members stir up trouble, the boss is an idiot, things keep breaking down, and no matter what we do we can’t improve our health.

When things don’t work out physically as we’d like them to, we can “do a Philip” and fall apart. But what if that’s exactly what the Father intended, so we come to see that this life is no life, that it’s just one unending, unsolvable problem until we die, and no way can we fix it on any level, whether it’s ourselves, our family, our neighbours, our country, or the world? When do we come kicking and screaming to the realization that we’re angry and frustrated and depressed because we haven’t yet cottoned on that Jesus is the only one who can fix this mess? When do we believe that he is the only source of life, so that we quit dying inside and take on the life he was sent from heaven to bring us, that fills us with all the calm and peace we could desire?

When? Well, the Father is taking care of that in his perfect love and wisdom by constantly orchestrating circumstances and blowing our fuses with endless impossible situations, just as he did with Jesus’ disciples, so that when Jesus comes walking on water to us saying the same thing to us that he said to his disciples, “It is I, don’t be afraid,” we willingly take him into the boat and allow him to ease our fears and frustrations, rather than push him over the side to try and solve it ourselves with all the stress and frustration that then causes us.

The Father’s great goal for us is to eat Jesus’ flesh, meaning soak up the life he sent Jesus to bring us every second of every day for eternity, so that we cross the bridge from this death to his life, the life he not only died for to give us (verse 51), it’s also the life he feeds into us daily, just like he fed that crowd of thousands.