

# The Gospel of John

## Seven Signs, Seven Statements

### Lesson #5

#### Statement # 1 - I am the Bread of Life

##### John 6:22-71

As we begin this week's lesson we want to go back to the end of the last lesson for just a few moments and review the apostle's mind set. It has apparently been a roller coaster ride the last few weeks.

John tells us that Jesus has been performing miracles and huge crowds have formed and have begun following Jesus around waiting to view His next miracle. In modern terms it would have been a three ring circus with lots of undertones swirling around Jesus. The sick and lame jockeying for position around Jesus hoping to be the next one cured. The skeptic, who wants to "figure out" how He does these "tricks". The Temple officials trying to see if He is a threat to them, and waiting for Him to make a mistake they can exploit.

The apostles must have been bewildered. There is just too many things that is happening at once to make sense out of anything. They are in the inner circle, close enough to see what He does, but still clueless as to what Jesus will do next. Out of all this chaos, John chooses to slow events down. Notice how all activity except Jesus' concern for feeding the crowd stops. Living goes into slow motion. John wants us to stop and take a closer look at what happens.

Now it is the next day. If you were one of the Apostles what can you expect to happen today? Surely, somehow, Jesus is taken to Jerusalem and made king! The apostles, have-nots, will become powerful men. The Romans will be driven out of the country and the Davidic kingdom will be restored. As James Cagney said in his movie gangster role, "Top of the world, Ma, Top of the world."

What happens next is completely incomprehensible. Jesus again does the unexpected. The apostles must have listened to Jesus with amazement and dismay. All of their dreams of being powerful men in this new kingdom are evaporating as they hear Jesus tell them they must eat His body like cannibals.

Notice the interesting juxtaposition of these three events: **the feeding of the multitude; Jesus' water miracle; and the "Bread of Life" discourse.** The key to these 3 seemingly unrelated events is John's statement in 6:4 that it was near the time of the Passover Feast.

The holy feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits celebrated the liberation of the Exodus experience when Moses led his people out of Egypt and across the Red Sea to freedom.

The “baptism” of the children of Israel in the Red Sea [Sea of Reeds] was another creation story. In Creation the division of the waters created land but in Moses’ Red Sea miracle the divided waters created a nation as Israel emerged from the waters of chaos no longer as slaves but as a free people.

In celebration of this great liberation and miracle of the waters Moses and the Israelites sing a song in Yahweh’s honor, the Song of Victory found in **Exodus 15:1-18**. As Moses leads the people of God across the wilderness God continues to care for His people by miraculously feeding them manna, bread from heaven.

**Moses’ Song of Victory was always sung in the liturgy of the Covenant people, in the Temple and in the Synagogue on the Sabbath.**

Within these 3 events in John chapter 6, during the time just preceding the Passover, **John shows us Jesus miraculously feeding a multitude, like Moses; making a water miracle, like Moses, and now in the Synagogue in Capernaum those who witnessed the miracle of the feeding of the multitude the day before, have just sung Moses’ Song of Victory.**

John is presenting **Jesus as the new Moses who will lead the new Exodus. He will lead His people out of bondage to sin and death. Jesus is the promised prophet of Deuteronomy 18:18-19 when God promised Moses a future redeemer:**

*“From their own brothers I shall raise up a prophet like yourself; I shall put my words into his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him. Anyone who refuses to listen to my words, spoken by him in my name, will have to render an account to me.”*

The next morning, the crowds, who had been looking for Jesus, realize that He has somehow gotten away. The crowds had been watching for Him ever since the multiplication of the loaves miracle when they wanted to make Him king. They realize He has somehow, perhaps by another miracle, eluded them.

Looking for Him, They find Jesus in Capernaum, on the northwestern side of the Sea. Jesus doesn’t exchange pleasantries with the crowd, and He points out they have come looking for Him in order to receive more free food. These people are very selfish in that they want someone to take care of their material wants and desires. Jesus wants them to look beyond the signs into the meanings.

Jesus uses “food” as a metaphor for earthly, material wealth. All earthly “works” will perish. Even though earthly food is necessary to sustain earthly life it’s use is limited because it is perishable and therefore is not able to safeguard us beyond its earthly

limitations...it cannot safeguard against death. Even the manna that came down from heaven in Exodus 16:20 was perishable. Only Christ can give the food that satisfies eternally, sustains our spiritual hunger, and gives eternal life. He offers what Isaiah prophesized in **Is 55:2-3**.

*Why spend money on what cannot nourish and your wages on what fails to satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and you will have good things to eat and rich food to enjoy. Pay attention, come to me; listen, and you will live.*

**This supernatural food which Christ promised and Isaiah prophesized is His very own Body and Blood - the Sacrament of the Eucharist.** This teaching will become clearer as the narrative continues.

Jesus calls Himself the “Son of Man”, He is offering more clues as to His real identity. This title comes from the passage in **Daniel 7:13** foretelling the glorious figure who was to receive from God the eschatological kingdom and eternal rule. Jesus will use this title for Himself 10 times in John’s Gospel.

Up to this passage Jesus has referred to Himself as the “Son of man” in John 1:51; 3:13; 3:14; 5:27; 6:27. He will also use this title in 6:53; 6:62; 8:28; 12:23; and 13:31. With the exception of Acts 7:56; Revelation 1:13; and Revelation 14:14 the title “Son of man” appears only in the Gospels. In all the Gospel accounts this is Jesus’ favorite title for Himself, only He uses it and it is always used in a Messianic reference linking Jesus to Daniel’s prophecy of the divine Messiah in Daniel.

It is important to note that the crowd still does not understand what Jesus is telling them. The crowd is still focused on seeing “signs”. Prophets worked “signs” to signify their authority from God. **They are asking for “works” from Jesus but what is He asking of them? Faith! Their faith in Him will be the “sign” that He is God’s representative. Jesus is telling them that faith in itself is a “work” of God. The “work” of God is to believe in Him.**

The people fail to understand what Jesus is telling them about “belief” [verse 29] so they ask again, implying that if they saw a really convincing sign, something even greater than anything they had yet witnessed [verses 2, 14, 26] they would believe Him, that is believe His words.

‘*Our fathers ate manna...*’ The crowd already sees Jesus as the “new Moses”. His multiplication of the loaves and fishes links Him to Moses’ greatest miracle, the feeding of the multitude with the heavenly manna, the bread from heaven [as does His walking on the water witnessed by the Apostles]. Therefore, they think that He is referring to manna and so they ask Him to provide the manna as Moses did as a “sign”. Their challenge to Jesus is “What Moses gave us was bread from heaven—if you are the “new Moses” can you do the same?”

In order to appreciate the significance of this request it is important to keep in mind that there was a general belief that the Messiah, when He came, would come as one “greater” than Moses the great national prophet-hero of Israel, in the signs that He would accomplish. A Jewish commentary on Ecclesiastes [Midrash Koheleth, 73] states:

*The former redeemer caused manna to descend for them; in like manner shall our latter redeemer cause manna to come down, as it is written, ‘there shall be a handful of grain in the earth.’ [quoting from Psalms 72:16].”*

What His questioners are looking for is a miracle greater than the miracle of the loaves and fishes from one who claims to be the Messiah! The key to understanding this challenge is of course linked to the whole situation of the national expectation of the “prophet greater than Moses” promised in Deuteronomy 18:15-19.

Jesus answers this demand by speaking plainly. He no longer hides His meanings behind Old Testament references. His response is simply ***‘I am the bread of life’***. *No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst.’*

“I am” in Greek, *Ego ami*, recalls the name that God revealed to Moses. But here and elsewhere in John’s Gospel it forms the prelude to the explanation of a parable. In this case the parable is in action and not in words. The gift of the manna and the multiplication of the loaves are explained by Jesus as parables of His gift of Himself, the true bread from heaven. Also see John 8:24 [Jesus speaking] *‘I have told you already: You will die in your sins. Yes, if you do not believe that I AM He, you will die in your sins.’*

Jesus emphasizes the importance of this statement. First, with a solemn “amen, amen, He tells them it was not Moses who was the giver of the manna. Moses was only the instrument of God’s action. Secondly, Jesus tells the people that the manna, while it was in a sense “bread from heaven”, was not the “true” Bread of God.

*the true bread....* While all bread is the gift of God, the Bread which can be described as peculiarly of God is that bread which not just gives bodily nourishment but gives a greater gift. Life! What distinguishes the “true Bread” from the manna is that the Bread of God brings life, in the **present tense** indicating that which is continually giving life, and it is offered to all men, not only to a particular nation or people. It is the Bread of Life that is ever descending and “gives life to the world”.

The crowd was quite prepared for the idea of uniquely heavenly bread, but they were not prepared for such a mystical statement as “I AM the Bread of Life” and the claim such a statement carried. “The Bread of Life” means primarily bread that gives life but with Jesus’ next statement this becomes Bread that is life itself!

By this point the crowd is starting to turn, by calling Himself the bread of life Jesus is stating His Divine Origin. The crowd has been given a revelation by the “new

Moses” and if they accept Him as “the prophet like Moses” they are required by God to listen to Him. This requires a choice on their part. **Deuteronomy: 18:19** told them that:

*“I shall put my words into his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him. Anyone who refuses to listen to my words, spoken by him in my name, will have to render an account to me. “*

The crowd responds the same way their ancestors did in the wilderness. Not only are they complaining, they are limiting what they believe God can do on their behalf.

Notice the future tense in verse 51: *the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world.* What does this future tense point to, His sacrifice on the altar of the Cross and to the miracle of the Eucharist where Jesus’ sacrifice becomes present for every generation, beginning at the Last Supper.

Jesus is the true bread not only because He is God’s Word but also because He is the spotless victim whose flesh and blood is offered in sacrifice for the life of the world. Ever since man’s fall from grace sacrifices were offered for sin. The animal offered in sacrifice died in the place of the sinner:

**Leviticus 17:11:** *For the life of the creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you for performing the rite of expiation on the altar of your lives, for blood is what expiates for a life.*

**Hebrews 9:18-22:** *That is why even the earlier covenant was inaugurated with blood, and why, after Moses had promulgated all the commandments of the Law to the people, he took the calves’ blood, the goats’ blood and some water, and with these he sprinkled the book itself and all the people, .....In fact according to the Law, practically every purification takes place by means of blood; and if there is no shedding of blood, there is no remission [of sins].*

**The idea of a mystical, sacred meal was not foreign to believers of the Old Covenant.** In the Temple in Jerusalem the blood of the sacrificed animal was poured out on the altar and then the animal was skinned and its meat was roasted on the altar. But, with the exception of the whole burnt offering, and the Tamid sacrifices, every sacrifice was eaten by the Priests or at the occasion of Passover or the Toda, “Thanksgiving” offering, by the people. **The sacrifice had to be eaten:**

**Leviticus 6:17-19:** *This is the ritual sacrifice for sin: The victim must be slaughtered before Yahweh on the spot where the burnt offerings are slaughtered. It is especially holy. The priest who offers this sacrifice will eat it. It will be eaten inside the holy place, in the court of the Tent of Meeting.*

**Leviticus 10:16-18:** *Moses then inquired carefully about the goat offered as a sacrifice for sin, and found that they had burnt it. He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron’s surviving sons, and said, ‘Why did you not eat this victim for sin in the holy place, since it is especially holy and was given to you to take away the community’s guilt, by performing the rite of expiation for them before Yahweh? Since its blood was not taken inside the sanctuary, you should have eaten its meat there, as I ordered you.’*

In the Old Covenant the sprinkling of the blood in the altar was a figure of justification, and the burning of the flesh of the animal was a figure of sanctification. Therefore, the eating of the sacrifice was a symbol of redeemed man in a mystical union with Yahweh.

Animal sacrifice for sin ended with the Old Covenant and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70AD. We have the sacrifice of the New Covenant, the blood of Christ. But for that sacrifice to be effective and celebrated the Lamb of God **must still be eaten**, not just by the priests but by all of us because we have all been called by our High Priest, Jesus Christ, into a royal priesthood of believers, and we must still eat the sacrifice.

*1Peter 2:9: But you are a chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a people to be a personal possession.... Also see 1Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6; 5:1-10, and CCC#1546.*

What was it about what Jesus was teaching that was intolerable to an orthodox Old Covenant Jew or Israelite? **Hint: read Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; 7:26; 17:10-12; and Deuteronomy 12:16.**

The people believed He was speaking literally and demanding cannibalism, which was forbidden, but there was more to their outrage than that. Under the Noachide Law [Laws set down for all mankind after the flood] and the Law of the Sinai Covenant, no flesh or blood of any kind was to be consumed or the offender was to be completely cut off from the community:

*Leviticus 17:10-11 If any member of the House of Israel or any resident alien consumes blood of any kind, I shall set my face against that individual who consumes blood and shall outlaw him from his people. For the life of the creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you for performing the rite of expiation on the altar for your lives, for blood is what expiates for a life*

To consume flesh and blood will cut them off from the Old Covenant community. In the holy Eucharist, believers are eating Christ's glorified body and drinking His glorified blood; however, He **absolutely does** intend that New Covenant believers be cut-off from the Old Covenant. After His Resurrection and Ascension the Old Covenant will be fulfilled and transformed. The purification and sacrificial rites will be fulfilled, the liturgy will be transformed and only the moral law will remain, but a moral law that is intensified and internalized and a covenant that is internationalized—offered to all nations on earth.

Even if you do not accept that Jesus is not referring to His own flesh, it must be conceded that it is not just His human Jewish flesh that gives us life. When we receive Christ in the holy Eucharist we receive all of the glorified, resurrected Christ, body, blood, soul, and divinity, which is effused without limit with God the Holy Spirit. This is the “flesh” that gives life.

Dr. Hahn in his *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* commentary [page 31] points out that this is one of three “scandals” or stumbling blocks which prevents belief in the crowd of Passover pilgrims:

1. The first was the expectation at the feeding of the multitude that Jesus was going to be a nationalistic military leader who would become their king and defeat the Romans.
2. The second was the refusal to accept His divine nature in verses 41-43.
3. The demand that we must consume Jesus as a sacrifice, body and blood is the third.

**John 6: 64-66** *‘But there are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the outset who did not believe and who was to betray him. He went on, ‘This is why I told you that no one could come to me except by the gift of the Father.’ **After this, many of his disciples went away and accompanied him no more.***

This is undoubtedly the crucial point of the text. It is obvious that the crowd, including some of Jesus’ disciples [meaning from the larger group of disciples not the Apostles] believed Jesus was speaking literally and not symbolically. The crucial point is that when they walked away **Jesus did not stop them!** If He was only speaking symbolically and then let them leave, He would be perpetuating a lie which is a sin. Jesus is without sin. They left and He let them leave because He was not speaking symbolically but literally.

Peter’s affirmation of faith is a lesson for us all. When we become frustrated with the Church because we do not understand why certain abuses continue or when priests disappoint us in their pastoral missions, it is good to remember what Peter voiced in this passage. Where would we go? It would have been better, down through Church history if others had remembered those words. The Church is the Body of Christ. We are the Body because we consume the Body. There can only be but One Body. It is our duty to safeguard, reform when necessary, and protect that Body. If you had known Judas, would you have walked away from Christ?

## **Summary**

The Old Covenant of Mt. Sinai could instruct and prepare the Church for the coming of the Messiah but the old Law was imperfect because it was powerless to offer the gift of salvation [CCC# 1962-63]. Jesus, the new Moses, surpasses the miracle of the manna, which could only temporarily satisfy the physical body and could only temporarily sustain life. Jesus gives life with a gift of food that sustains the soul eternally, Himself. He has come to fulfill and to replace imperfect Old Covenant sacraments by giving us the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist which separates us from sin which brings death, and instead brings us the gift of eternal life by giving us Himself, body, blood, soul, and divinity.

**CCC# 1393** *Holy Communion separates us from sin. The body of Christ we receive in Holy Communion is “given up for us”, and the blood we drink “shed for the many for the forgiveness of sins.” For this reason the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at*

*the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins: 'For as often as we eat this bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the death of the Lord. If we proclaim the Lord's death, we proclaim the forgiveness of sins. If, as often as his blood is poured out, it is poured for the forgiveness of sins, I should always receive it, so that it may always forgive my sins. Because I always sin, I should always have a remedy.'*" [the CCC is quoting St. Ambrose, *The Sacraments* 4,6,28; and 1 Corinthians 11:26].

Archbishop Fulton Sheen, in *The Life of all Living*, explains why Jesus' Flesh and Blood are meant to be consumed: "*Communion is not something contrary to the workings of nature, but rather, the crowning glory of its orderly processes. It is the law of all living things which have not perfect life within themselves. If the chemical could speak, it would say to the plant, unless you eat me you shall not have life in you. If the plant could speak, it would say to the animal, unless you eat me you shall not have life in you. If the animal and plant and the air could speak, they would say to man, unless you eat me you shall not have life in you. With the same logic, but only speaking above and not from below, because the soul is spiritual, Jesus Christ can and did actually say to the soul, 'Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you.'* Having called manna to a supernatural end, God gave the means to that end. And among these means, the one we hear singled out, to show how it perfects nature, is the communion of Himself in the Eucharist. The Law of Transformation works consistently throughout the whole order of nature and supernature. The lower transforms itself into the higher. The plant transforms itself into the animal when taken into it as food. But man is transformed by grace and love into Christ when he takes Christ into his soul as food, for it is the quality of love to transform itself into the object loved. In the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Bread and the Wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The word transubstantiation has been properly applied to that act. It means that the substance of the bread becomes the substance of the Body, and the substance of the wine becomes the substance of the Blood. But the outward appearances, taste, color, weight, shape, in a word, all of the sensible appearances, still remain."