

John 6:16-34— Group Discussion Guide

TEXT - John 6:16-34 (ESV) 16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. 20 But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” 21 Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. 22 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. 27 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.” 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?” 31 Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” 32 Jesus then said to them, “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.”

What is going on in this text (retell the story or summarize main points)?

THEOLOGY - What do we learn about God from this text?

- a) Jesus has power and authority over the sea (often symbolic for evil forces in the world). There is nothing in all creation that is beyond his power and authority. In the midst of life’s storms we can look to God alone for peace and comfort.
- b) Jesus reveals God to us and corrects our misunderstandings with his word. In this text we see that Jesus speaks truth to the crowd as he invites them to stop seeking the food that perishes and receive the bread of life. In this Jesus shows us that God doesn’t want our transactional ways of relating to him (using God to get something else) but rather for us to trust him and live in thankfulness to the true life he has given us in Jesus.

Anything else we might learn about God from the text?

Consulting the Scholars¹ - 6:28. The crowd misunderstands the thrust of Jesus’ prohibition. His words ‘Do not work for food that spoils’ (v. 27) did not focus on the nature of work, but on what is or is not an appropriate goal. His point was not that they should attempt some novel form of work, but that merely material notions of blessing are not worth pursuing. They respond by focusing all attention on work: (lit.) ‘What must we do in order to work the works of God?’ The expression ‘the works of God’ does not refer to the works that God performs, but (as in niv) to the works God requires. Their question therefore resolves into this: Tell us what works God requires, and we will perform them. From John’s perspective, their naïveté is formidable. They display no doubt about their intrinsic ability to meet any challenge God may set them; they evince no sensitivity to the fact that eternal life is first and foremost a gift within the purview of the Son of Man (v. 27).

6:29. Jesus sets them straight: The work of God—i.e. what God requires—is faith. This is not faith in the abstract, an existential trust without a coherent object. Rather, they must believe in the one [God] has sent. Such language may reflect a specific Old Testament passage, such as Malachi 3:1 where God promises to send, in due time, the

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 284–287). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

‘messenger of the covenant’, but in fact the language is reminiscent of the entire ‘sentness’ theme in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus is supremely the one who reveals God to us, precisely because, unlike any other person, he has been in the courts of heaven and has been sent from there so that the world might be saved through him (e.g. 3:11–17). Faith, faith with proper Christological object, is what God requires, not ‘works’ in any modern sense of the term. And even the faith that we must exercise is the fruit of God’s activity (cf. notes on vv. 44, 65). Although the noun ‘faith’ is not used, this ‘work of God’ turns out to be nothing else than faith, making this ‘work of God’ diametrically opposed to what Paul means by ‘the works of the law’. As a result, the thought of the passage is almost indistinguishable from Paul: ‘For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law’ (Rom. 3:28).

6:33. The bread of God is synonymous with the ‘bread of heaven’ (cf. ‘kingdom of heaven’ in Mt., versus ‘kingdom of God’ in Mk. and Lk.). In the Old Testament ‘the bread of God’ refers on occasion to the ‘show-bread’ (niv, ‘food of God’, Lv. 21:6, 8, 17, 21, 22; 22:25); here it refers to Jesus, he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. In addition to establishing a typological reading of the Old Testament, this clause accomplishes three things: (1) it serves as a transition from the thought that Jesus provides the true bread from heaven (vv. 27ff.) to the thought that Jesus is the true bread from heaven (vv. 35ff.); (2) it expands the recipients from Jews to the world, i.e. to lost men and women without distinction, opening up the way to the proposition that the decisive factor is not whether or not one is a member of the Jewish race, an heir of the Mosaic covenant, but whether or not one is taught by God (v. 45), whether or not one believes in Jesus (v. 35) and has been given by the Father to the Son (vv. 37–40); (3) it reminds us that this bread of God is the revealer, the one who has narrated God to us (1:18), the one who alone can tell us heavenly things (3:11–13), the one whose words, because he is the obedient Son, are nothing less than the words of God (5:19ff.).

6:34. The synagogue crowd understands little of this. Like the woman at the well with her ‘Sir, give me this water’ (4:15), this request operates at a mundane level. The people take Jesus’ words in v. 33 to mean ‘the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven’—a grammatically possible rendering that misses the point: Jesus himself is the bread of God. Jesus therefore ventures, in the next section, to make the identification explicit.

LIFE

Can you think of a time when you felt like the storms of life were going to take you under? How does Jesus walking on water and appearing to the disciples (6:16-21) give you encouragement to face dark nights ahead?

What have you been working for this week? What “perishing food” are you prone to work for?

How does this text lead you to love God and others more?

How do you sense the Spirit leading you to respond in obedience? How does what you learned call you to change?

PRAYER

Confess your sin to God in prayer and ask Him for strength to respond in obedience to his word.

What is one personal need you have that we can pray for you as a group?

Pray for one friend, family member, or coworker who you want to share the love of Jesus with.