

John 4:31–38

Introduction

Over the last two weeks, we've been looking at how Jesus reveals Himself in the course of a conversation with a Samaritan woman. The conversation ends with the woman saying to Jesus:

- John 4:25 — “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.”

And Jesus responds to the woman:

- John 4:26 — “I—who speak to you—I am.”

It's at this climactic moment of the conversation that Jesus' disciples, who had gone into the city to buy food, arrived back at the well.

- John 4:27–30 — Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” They went out of the town and were coming to him.

Notice the vividness of that last sentence. The first verb is an aorist verb telling us about an already *completed action*: “They **went out** of the town.” But the very next verb is an imperfect verb denoting *action still in progress*: “They went out of the town and **were coming** to Him.” That's what we're meant to see in our mind's eye – the Samaritans *on their way*, coming to see Jesus. And then the very next word is: “Meanwhile.”

I. John 4:31–32 — Meanwhile [while the Samaritans were on their way] the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”

It could seem at first like we've transitioned to something completely unrelated to everything that's just happened. But after this brief interaction between Jesus and His disciples John will pick right back up again in verse 39 with these words: “Many Samaritans from that town believed in Him...” It's in the light of these Samaritans who are even now on their way and coming to see Jesus that we're meant to hear and understand this short interlude.

“*Meanwhile* the disciples were urging [Jesus], saying, ‘Rabbi, eat.’” That is, after all, why the disciples went away into the city in the first place – to buy food for themselves and for Jesus (4:8). And yet, apparently, having given Him His portion of the food they had just purchased it was still sitting there untouched with Jesus showing no apparent interest in eating. That's why “the disciples were urging him, saying, Rabbi, eat.” Hadn't they left Him just a little while ago, “wearied from His journey” and hungry (4:6)?

Can any of us imagine why Jesus is not at this moment interested in the food that they have brought Him? “He said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’”

II. John 4:33 — So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?”

I don’t think we should be too hard on the disciples here. Maybe, if they had known more of Jesus and been more sensitive to His priorities, they would have been able to guess that He wasn’t talking about physical food for the stomach. But I think it’s still going too far to call this question, as one commentator does, “dull-witted and improbable.” Jesus Himself just said—in response to them urging Him to eat!—that He has food to eat that *they don’t know about*.

So if we shouldn’t be too hard on the disciples, should we be questioning instead the methods of Jesus? Why is He so “vague?” Why does He wait until the disciples are so totally confused before finally saying things “clearly?” The answer is, in the first place: Because this is who Jesus truly is. He can say truly, “I have food to eat that you do not know about,” and there is no hyperbole—no false spirituality—here. On the other hand, Jesus is not so “heavenly-minded” that He’s forgotten where His disciples are. And so, in the second place, it’s actually by speaking in this way that Jesus engages the disciples and prepares them to understand even more fully what it is that He’s about to say.

“The disciples said to one another, ‘Has anyone brought him something to eat?’”

III. John 4:34 — Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish [*teleioo*] his work.”

Jesus isn’t trivializing the importance of food for the stomach. He’s not so “heavenly minded” that He forgets that physical food is actually essential to life. He’s not saying that He *never* needs to eat because He always has this other food. If Jesus doesn’t eat, then—apart from supernatural intervention—even Jesus would die.

So what is Jesus saying here? He’s saying that what He hungers for—what He desires—above all else is to do the will of the one who sent Him. On the one hand, that “will” will never, ever require of Him a voluntary death by starvation (that would be suicide). But on the other hand, that “will” may at times take precedence over the immediate satisfaction of His physical need for food. And when this happens, Jesus says, there is no contest for Him. He doesn’t struggle with the fact that His stomach is demanding to be filled and yet now He’s being called upon to deny His stomach in order to do His Father’s will. Jesus has only one supreme hunger with which no other hunger can ever compete, and that hunger is for that supremely satisfying food of doing the will of the one who sent Him and accomplishing (or finishing) His work. Jesus sees His entire life through this lens of the mission He’s been given by the Father to accomplish.

➤ Luke 13:32 (cf. Acts 20:24) — He said to [the Pharisees], “Go and tell that fox [Herod], ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish [*teleioo*] my course.’”

The course will be ultimately finished and the mission finally accomplished only with His sufferings and death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. That's why immediately before He went to the cross Jesus could pray in anticipation of His obedience to the end:

- John 17:4 — I glorified you on earth, having accomplished [*teleioo*] the work that you gave me to do.

And yet we also see in this that the mission about to be accomplished at the cross—when Jesus will cry out, “It is finished [*teleo*]” (Jn. 19:30)—was a mission that embraced the whole of His life; Jesus sees the whole of His life as tributary to this mission – as one continuous doing of the will of the one who sent Him. This is Jesus' *food*. In the sense that this is the food most satisfying to Jesus—in that sense—it's right to say that it's His *only* food. It's the food that takes immediate and absolute precedence over every other temporal and fleshly need or desire. It's the food with which no other kind of food can compete as that which Jesus most hungers for and is most satisfied with.

In the synoptic Gospels, this reality is highlighted the most clearly in the account of Jesus' temptation:

- Matthew 4:1–4 (cf. Deut. 8:3) — Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

John doesn't include this account in his Gospel, but this reality of the “bread” that Jesus most hungers for and is most satisfied with and that sustains Him throughout this earthly life is still clearly revealed here in these verses in chapter four. In the temptation, the devil invited Jesus to miraculously turn stones into bread and so to circumvent the purpose of God in leading Him out into the wilderness where there was no food. But here at Jacob's well, there's no need for any miracle is there? The food is sitting right there in front of Him and it's been brought to Him no doubt, in some sense, at His own request. There is no devil present, tempting Jesus. When the disciples left Him, Jesus was wearied from His journey and hungry. When the disciples returned, Jesus was just as hungry, if not more so, but in spite of that hunger He is no longer interested in the food the disciples have brought Him. Why? Because at this moment, His other, greater hunger—and so in a very real sense, His *only* hunger—is taking precedence over the immediate satisfaction of His physical appetite. At what moment? At this moment when Jesus can probably even now see the Samaritans in the distance coming to Him. The disciples had brought Jesus physical food to satisfy His physical hunger. But the Samaritan woman was even now bringing Jesus men and women, and it was the Father's will that Jesus proclaim to these men and women the good news of the kingdom. Was there still time for Jesus to grab a quick bite? Almost certainly there was. Would it have been any sin for Jesus to have eaten just a quick bite before the people arrived? Certainly not in and of itself. And yet Jesus' hunger to be always doing His Father's will and the reality that His deepest satisfaction was always found in doing His Father's will has at this moment rendered every other hunger wholly irrelevant. The disciples were urging Jesus, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” But now, as the people from the nearby town of Sychar are coming

out to see Him, Jesus has true food to eat that His disciples don't know about. Jesus has a food to eat now—at this moment—that satisfies His one supreme hunger and desire – to be always doing the will of His Father and to accomplish His work.

On the one hand, we can only stand back and gaze in wonder and awe upon our Savior who, in longing above all else do His Father's will and accomplish His Father's work has also accomplished our salvation. We weren't sent into this world with a specific mission to accomplish as Jesus was. And so it's in this sense that we only reap the everlasting benefits of that hunger that He had and of the food that He hungered for. And yet there's also a sense, as we're about to see, in which we are called to share in the priorities of Jesus – to hunger for the same things He hungered for, and to make His food our true food. "My food," Jesus said, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." And then He continues in verse thirty-five:

IV. John 4:35a — "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'?"

One commentator explains that "the period between sowing and harvest was usually thought of as six months, but the interval from the latest date of sowing to the beginning of harvest was four months" (Beasley-Murray). So, apparently, this was a proverb emphasizing the necessity of waiting. It seems to have been an encouragement to relax and/or to turn one's attention to other matters since the harvest was still a long way off. As much as one might be looking forward to harvest, there was no way of "hurrying it up," so he might as well settle down to wait with patience. James uses a similar example:

- James 5:7 — Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.

On the one hand, it was hard to wait for the much-anticipated time of harvest. On the other hand, the time of waiting could also be a blessing as it allowed time for other pursuits. But in any case, the wait was inevitable and that's the point of the proverb. But now Jesus introduces a situation that's entirely opposite. In total contrast and opposition to this proverb, He cries out now with urgency and with joy:

V. John 4:35b — "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest."

Why do I say that Jesus "cries out" with urgency and joy? On the one hand, the harvest was always a matter of urgency. There was a time appointed for the harvest, and the crops must not still be in the field after that time has passed. We can think here of the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter nine:

- Matthew 9:36–38 — "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Jesus is calling His disciples to see that the common proverb, “there are *yet* four months, *then* comes the harvest,” has no application for them. The time of the harvest has already arrived. The time of the harvest is already here.

But if the harvest was here and therefore a matter of urgency, it was also, on the other hand, an occasion for great joy. It’s with this sense both of urgency and of joy that we hear Jesus’ words: “Look, *I tell you*, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are ripe for harvest.”

And what are these fields? What is this harvest? “Look,” Jesus said, and He meant it. “Lift up your eyes, and see...,” and He meant that, too. We can imagine Him, as He speaks, gesturing toward the Samaritans who were even then coming into view as they crossed the fields. “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.” Either “white,” as a symbol of old age, is a metaphor here for the “maturity” of the crop and its readiness for harvest, or else we’re meant to see the Samaritans themselves dressed literally, for the most part, in white (or off-white) garments.

Why is Jesus not interested in the food His disciples have brought him—despite His empty stomach? Because the harvest that He was sent into this world to reap needed reaping and because in accomplishing this work of His Father was His true and greatest joy. And now Jesus is calling His disciples to share with Him in His joy by sharing also in His hunger and so by laboring with Him in the harvest. So He goes on to say in verse thirty-six:

VI. John 4:36 — “Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.”

Not only are the fields ready for harvest, Jesus says, but the harvest has, in fact, begun. All the emphasis in the Greek falls on that first word of the sentence – “*Already*.” The time of patient waiting is over. The time for turning one’s attention to other pursuits—however important—is over. *Already*, the harvest has begun. “*Already*, the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life...”

This “eternal life,” according to Jesus’ prayer in John 17, is the life that comes through knowing the only true God *and Jesus Christ whom He has sent* (Jn. 17:3). In other words, this eternal life is uniquely the life associated with the long-awaited eschatological age of the Messiah. Therefore, the harvest of which Jesus speaks must be the eschatological harvest. It’s this eschatological harvest—this harvest of the last day—that has now begun.

In the Old Testament, the “harvest” was used, on the one hand, as a metaphor for the eschatological “Day of the LORD” when the wicked would be gathered in to judgment and condemnation.

- Joel 3:13 — Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great.
- Hosea 6:10–11 (cf. Jer. 51:33) — In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing; Ephraim’s whoredom is there; Israel is defiled. For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed.

On the other hand, this same metaphor of the “harvest” could be used to describe that eschatological “Day of the LORD” when the righteous would be gathered in to the abundant life of peace and joy and the worship of God “in spirit and truth”—to that fullness of worship associated with the fullness of God’s revelation in Christ (cf. Jn. 4:21-24). So listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah:

- Isaiah 27:12-13 — In that day from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt the LORD will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

Do you see how the eschatological fulfillment is pictured in the Old Testament with the language of shadows and types? Isaiah says that in the day of harvest, the Israelites will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem. Jesus clarifies that since He Himself is the fulfillment of that mountain and of the temple that stood on that mountain (cf. 2:18-22), therefore this prophecy in Isaiah of worship at Jerusalem is ultimately a prophecy of the worship that will take place *not* at an earthly Jerusalem or at any other earthly mountain (4:21), but rather that fullness of worship that will be mediated through *Him*—who is Himself the “place” where God has fully revealed His salvation. Isaiah says that in the day of harvest, the Israelites who have been gathered again from Assyria and Egypt will be threshed and gleaned one by one. And now Jesus clarifies that the covenant people of ethnic Israel finds its fulfillment in the Messianic community of the New Covenant. Therefore, when Isaiah prophesies the harvest of Israel in the land of Israel, this is ultimately a prophecy of that eschatological harvest when all of God’s elect from all the nations and peoples of the earth are being *gathered* into His kingdom. Do you see how the eschatological fulfillment is pictured in the Old Testament with the language of shadows and types? And do you see how the shadows and types are giving way here—already in the ministry of Jesus—to eschatological fulfillment?

In the teaching of Jesus, there was one sense in which the harvest was still awaiting the end of the age:

- Mark 4:26-29 (cf. Mat. 13:24-30, 36-43; see Osborne on Rev. 14:14-16) — The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

But if on the one hand the harvest was still awaiting the end of the age, there’s also another parallel theme in the teaching of Jesus by which we understand that this future eschatological harvest had already begun in the person and the work of Jesus and would one day continue in even greater power when Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) – which was, in the Old Testament, the Feast of Harvest (cf. Exod. 23:16). The time of waiting is over; the joy of the harvest is now.

“*Already*,” Jesus says, “the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may *rejoice* together.” In the Old Testament, the joy that would accompany the salvation and restoration of God’s people was pictured as the joy of those rejoicing in the harvest. We see an example of this joy at the harvest in the story of Ruth.

- Ruth 3:6–7 — She went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain.

And then we can see how this joy is likened to the joy of God’s people when the eschatological harvest has arrived in passages like these:

- Psalm 126:4–6 — Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.
- Isaiah 9:2–3 (contrast Isa. 16:9-10; 17:11) — The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest...

It’s in the light of all these things—of the long-anticipated joy of the eschatological harvest—that we’re meant, now, to hear these words of Jesus to His disciples: “*Already* the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may *rejoice* together.” And it’s in the light of the arrival of this eschatological harvest that the disciples were meant to see the Samaritans who were even then coming to Jesus. Jesus was calling the disciples to share in His priorities, to hunger for the same things He hungered for, to make His food their true food – to enter into His joy (cf. Jn. 15:11; 16:24; 17:13). So we read in verses 37-38:

VII. John 4:37–38 — “For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Jesus isn’t saying that before the harvest had arrived, in the Old Testament days of sowing and waiting, people weren’t being saved. Neither is Jesus saying that people have come now to such a level of spiritual maturity and “ripeness” that they’re ready to be saved. What He is saying is that in His own person the kingdom has now come—along with the eternal life that belongs to that kingdom. And therefore, it’s only now, with His coming into the world, that we can speak of the one who reaps already receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life. It’s only now, with His coming into the world, that we can speak of the fields white for harvest.

The Father isn’t just “*seeking*” worshipers who will worship Him in spirit and truth (4:23); in the eschatological harvest, He is even now gathering them in (cf. Mat. 9:36-38).

Conclusion

And so, on the one hand, we can see with joy that we are a part of the harvest that's being reaped. We ought to give all praise, and honor, and glory to the "Lord of the harvest" (cf. Mat. 9:38)!

On the other hand, we can see that we've been called to share with Jesus in the labor and the joy of reaping the harvest. This includes evangelizing and proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom to the lost. It also includes every form of kingdom labor up until that day when the trumpet sounds and Jesus returns and the harvest—which has already begun—is finally and fully gathered in. This is the perspective that we're all called to have with respect to our temporal lives in this world. We, too, are called in these days of the eschatological harvest to share with Jesus in His priorities: to hunger with Jesus for the same things He hungered for, to make His food our true food – and so to enter daily into His joy.