

“Whoever Feeds on This Bread Will Live Forever”

The Twenty-Third in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 6:49-59; Exodus 17:1-7

In 112 AD, the Roman governor of the province of Bythinia in Asia Minor—a man named Pliny the Younger (the son of the famous historian)—wrote to the Roman emperor Trajan, asking for instructions about what to do about a growing problem. Roman authorities, it seems, were quite worried about a new and increasingly popular religious sect. To the Romans, this new sect (called “The Christians” or “The Way”) was thought to be atheistic because they would not worship either the Roman gods or the Emperor. Christians worshiped their own God (a man they claimed rose from the dead), and who was in some way related to the Jewish God. There were also disturbing reports of cannibalistic practices among them, because these Christians gathered together in secret to eat flesh of their God, and then to drink his blood. The latter concern arises largely from the language in our text, containing Jesus’ statement in John 6:54, *“whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”*

We have spent a number of weeks going through Jesus’ “bread of life” discourse which is found in the 6th chapter of John’s Gospel. As we have seen, this is one of the most remarkable passages in all of the New Testament because of the important (if not shocking) things which Jesus declared to the Jews who packed into the synagogue in Capernaum to hear him teach.

In the “bread of life” discourse, Jesus speaks of himself as living bread from heaven. He speaks of himself as one with YHWH (in some way), he claims that he is the source of all spiritual life, and that he will raise the dead. Then when the assembled crowd begins to complain and grumble about his statement that he is the “bread from heaven who gives life to the world” Jesus tells these Jews who considered themselves God’s chosen people, that they cannot come to him (in faith) unless and until they have been drawn to Jesus by the Father. As we will see in our text this morning, John 6:49-59, Jesus was not finished making difficult statements. He will now speak of the necessity of feeding upon his flesh and drinking his blood, and when he is finished with this discourse, many of those who had been following him, did so no more. Those who have been following Jesus from purely self-interest, walked away.

The context for the “bread of life” discourse is very important, so I will review it again briefly this morning. In John 6:1-15, John recounts how Jesus miraculously fed over five thousand people in the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee. Large crowds were now following Jesus everywhere he went. People were bringing their sick and suffering to him so that Jesus might heal them—even out into the wilderness. The scene is one of “biblical proportions” in which Jesus acts as a new Moses, leading the people of God in a new Exodus from the wilderness of this present evil age into a glorious age of salvation in which the Messiah restores Israel, and then sets his people free from the guilt and power of sin.

While the people watching this scene unfold were correct to see Jesus as that prophet predicted by Moses (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15), they also saw in Jesus someone whom they could make king. This misguided desire, as we have seen, stems from the fact that Jesus’ messianic mission was intended to the advance of the kingdom of God, and it centered in Jesus’ redemptive work to save his people from their sins. But those who saw in Jesus a miracle-worker and a prophet, saw someone whom they thought would be perfect to deliver Israel from the power of Rome. Jesus knew of their intentions to make him king (the crowds would even use force), and so he withdrew from them before the situation got out of hand.

When it got dark, the crowds witnessed Jesus' disciples get into a boat and depart back across the Sea of Galilee toward Capernaum, the home base for Jesus and his disciples. No one saw Jesus get into the boat with his disciples, and so the crowds began looking for Jesus throughout the night. Not realizing that Jesus walked across the Sea, got into the boat with the disciples, and then calmed a storm which suddenly blew in, the crowds were surprised to find Jesus the next morning in the synagogue back in Capernaum. When they questioned Jesus about when and how he arrived there, Jesus did not answer their question, but instead gave the "bread of life" discourse which runs from verses 26-58 of chapter 6.

We have good reason to believe that the lectionary reading in the synagogue (John says the Passover was near) were two texts which are alluded to by Jesus in his discourse. The first is Exodus 16 (which deals with God giving Israel manna in the wilderness). The second is Isaiah 54 (which deals with Israel being taught by God when Jerusalem is restored). These readings are likely in the people's minds (at least indirectly) during the following exchange which takes place between Jesus and those assembled in the synagogue that day to hear him teach. Jesus will now declare himself to be the true bread from heaven, and his appearance in the synagogue means that the Messiah himself will teach the people of Israel about something much better than manna and bread that does not spoil.

In verse 26, Jesus challenged the crowd's motives for questioning him as they did. Why were the people following him? What was their true motive in wanting to make him king? Jesus quickly exposes the unbelief of the crowds which lay not far beneath their apparent zeal in seeking out Jesus the next morning after the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus tells the people, "*truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.*" He then warned them in verse 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.*" Jesus also makes the first of several claims to deity and to the fact that he and YHWH are one. "*For on him God the Father has set his seal.*" It would soon become clear that Jesus is not who they expected, nor someone they wanted to make king.

The best evidence we have that the people assembled in the synagogue missed the whole point of Jesus' miracles (which prove that he is Israel's Messiah, sent by God) comes when they respond to Jesus' warning about working for food that does not perish but which endures to eternal life. They ask Jesus "*what must we do, to be doing the works of God?*" Having been trained by self-righteous Pharisees, the people want Jesus to tell them what good works they must do to get the bread which does not perish. They have completely missed Jesus' promise to give them this bread which endures to eternal life. Jesus' answer (in verse 29) gives us the key to interpret the difficult sayings which follow. "*Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'*" If Jesus is who he claims to be, then the only way to receive the benefits he is freely offering to us (life giving bread from heaven) is to stop trying to work for it, and simply receive it by faith.

Once again, we can see the depths of Israel's spiritual blindness in the next exchange between Jesus and the assembled crowd, when the Jews insist that Jesus perform another miraculous sign. Instead of giving them the sign they demand (which would only harden their hearts all the more), Jesus corrects their understanding of redemptive history, before making what sounds much like another claim to deity. "*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. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*" It was YHWH, not Moses who gave the Israelites bread in the wilderness, and it is Jesus (who bears YHWH's seal) who comes down from heaven, precisely because he is the living bread the Jews say they have been seeking. The Jews present still miss Jesus' point, and in verse 34 ask him, "*Sir, give us this bread always.*" This is not about bread which fills the stomach and does not get moldy.

Jesus' answer is clear and direct. "*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. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.'*" Answering them with the *ego emi* formula ("I Am"—which is one of YHWH's most important self-designations), Jesus declares that he is the living bread from heaven, and that when this bread is received (i.e., when people trust in him), it will satisfy all spiritual hunger and thirst. This bread (his flesh) is not like the barley loaves Jesus gave them in the wilderness. Nor is it like the manna YHWH gave to Israel in the wilderness. If you eat of that bread, and you will become hungry again. That bread spoils. The bread Jesus offers is not like any bread they have ever known. It satisfies our deepest needs. But the people present that day who have heard and seen Jesus, do not believe in him. They simply do not understand. They do not want to understand. They just want more free bread.

In verses 37-40, Jesus goes on to tell them, "*all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 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. 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.*" Jesus lays out the purpose of his messianic mission as clearly as he can—he has come to do his Father's will, and fulfill all righteousness. He will offer himself to the Father as the final, once for all sacrifice for sin, and his own righteousness (his obedience to the law of Moses) is imputed to us through faith. Jesus will indeed save all those given to him by the Father, and he raise them all up on the last day. Jesus now adds that it is the Father's will that his people believe in him, and trust that he alone can save them from their sins. In other words, the only people (even among those Jews who were God's chosen people) who are made right with YHWH, are all those (and only those) who believe (trust) in Jesus. Those hearing Jesus words (then and now) must trust in him in order to have eternal life.

We should not be surprised then, when we learn in verses 41-42 that those listening to Jesus were growing increasingly unhappy with what they were hearing. "*So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' 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.'*" The Jews understood that for all intents and purposes, Jesus was making a claim to deity. Yet they knew Jesus' family. They had watched him grow up. How could he have come from heaven? Instead of responding to their grumbling in such a way as to lower the tension which now must have pervaded the entire room, Jesus began to teach about election, total inability, and effectual calling. Jesus responds to unbelief with the truth of the Gospel, and the reality of the depths of human sinfulness.

In verse 43, "*Jesus answered them, 'Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.'*" Anyone who has read the Exodus account, knows that the Jews constantly complained and grumbled while in the Sinai desert. Now Jesus reminds those grumbling about Jesus' claim to be the bread from heaven, that they are just like the Jews who complained in the wilderness about God giving them manna to eat. The reason why they did not see the irony in this stems from the fact that they cannot come to Jesus unless and until God's draws them to Jesus. Jesus is telling those who thought their national election (as the Jewish nation) would save them as individuals, that, in fact, they are not restored to God's favor until they believed in Jesus and accept him as Israel's Messiah sent by YHWH to saved them from their sins. Furthermore, they could not even believe in Jesus unless and until God enabled them to do so.

Citing next from Isaiah 54:13 (which, as we noted, was probably the lectionary text for the Passover), Jesus explains why those present must listen to him. "*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—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.” The prophet Isaiah foretold of a time when God would restore Jerusalem to greatness. By citing from this passage, Jesus is declaring that this time of restoration has come because he has come. Jesus is telling the Jews that anyone who is properly taught of God (those whose minds have been illumined by the Holy Spirit to understand the things of God), must believe in him to have eternal life. And now, Jesus adds, he can say this because he has seen the Father. After all, Jesus has just told them he is the living bread who came down from heaven. He adds with unmistakable clarity, “*I am the bread of life.*” Shocking words, no doubt, but clear and direct. You must believe that Jesus is that one who gives eternal life (i.e., the “bread of life”) in order to receive eternal life.

Immediately, Jesus contrasts his own messianic mission with that of Moses. Jesus reminds the people of the obvious in verse 49. “*Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.*” Like the manna in the desert, and the barely loaves in the wilderness, God had miraculously provided his people with bread for sustenance. The bread God gave to Israel fills the stomach, and gave the people strength to survive in the desert. But such bread does nothing to deal with the root cause of all human troubles—including hunger, sickness, disease, demon possession, the Roman army—the key reasons why the people were following Jesus so zealously that they tracked him down to the synagogue in Capernaum. If you eat earthly bread . . . if you even eat manna, you will still die. Moses was dead. So was everyone who ate the manna in the Sinai desert. Food for the stomach does nothing to provide for the forgiveness of sin or grant eternal life. Like the Jews in the Sinai, so too, the people in the synagogue who ate the barley loaves in the wilderness will all still face death.

With the arrival of Jesus, with the inauguration of his messianic mission, with the advance of the kingdom of God, there is now the possibility of eating a bread which endures (or leads) unto eternal life. But it is bread you do not chew and then swallow. Having just said in verse 48, “*I am the bread of life*” Jesus now states in verse 50—and you can just see him pointing to himself when he says the following—“*this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*” The meaning behind Jesus’ miracle of feeding the five thousand in the wilderness is that there is a bread which gives eternal life to those who eat it (through faith). Jesus is that bread which deals with the fundamental human problem (the guilt and power of sin), and which takes away spiritual hunger and thirst.

Likely because the people listening were still in shock at his words, in verse 51, Jesus essentially reiterates what he has just previously. “*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.*” This is the third time in this discourse in which Jesus specifically identifies himself as “the bread of life” (or the “living bread”). The Jews grumbled whenever he said it, because they were beginning to understand what he meant and they realized where such a statement leads. If he (Jesus) has truly come down from heaven, then he is one with YHWH. This is a tantamount to claim to deity.

The bread of which Jesus is speaking has its origin in heaven (like the manna), and it comes from YHWH himself in and through the person of Jesus (meaning Jesus is replacing Moses as covenant mediator). Such talk angered and offended the Jews as they listened to it. Yes, they understood what Jesus was saying. But since they knew his family and personal background (or so they thought), this was too much for them to accept. More to the point, this was something they did not want to hear. They wanted freedom from Rome, deliverance from sickness and suffering, and more free bread. They did not want to hear Jesus speak about spiritual things, nor say things that (in their minds) sounded blasphemous.

It is the two clauses in the last sentence of verse 51 which contain new information. In the first clause Jesus says “this is my flesh,” which sounds like the words of institution in the Lord’s Supper (as, for example, in Mark 14:22, where Jesus says “this is my body”). But the so-called sacramental view (that Jesus is speaking of the sacrament throughout this discourse) breaks down, because in John 6:51, Jesus does not say “this is my body” (*soma*), which is the case whenever the sacrament is being discussed, instead speaking of his “flesh” (*sarx*), which ties this statement to one in the prologue of the Gospel (John 1:14), where we read the words, “*and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*”¹

Now, it may very well be that the Lord’s Supper is instituted in light of what Jesus has taught about himself in John 6 as being the living bread. But John 6 is not referring to the Lord’s Supper as the means by which we receive eternal life. On the contrary, when Jesus identifies himself as the “bread from heaven,” or as the “bread of life” he is speaking of how we “receive” eternal life (because we are given eternal life and can only receive what is given to us), and because we “have” (as a present possession) eternal life, we then believe in him (trust in him) as his words are proclaimed to us. This is what it means to “eat the bread from heaven,” which is his flesh. We are given this bread, and we believe that Jesus has come from the Father to save us from our sins. All those given eternal life, have been granted such life by the Father. They are drawn to Jesus (called) just as one draws water from a well using a bucket—the water is passive. Those so drawn, are given eternal life and respond to Jesus’ words by believing them.

The second new statement in verse 51, is “the bread which I [Jesus] give for the life of the world is my flesh.” When Jesus says he will give his flesh “for” (hyper) the life of the world, we know this to be a reference to his sacrifice of his flesh for the world (i.e., in his suffering and dying upon the cross), because the preposition “for” is used throughout John’s Gospel in a sacrificial context.² This is not a reference to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but to the cross (of which the sacrament Jesus institutes a year later is the sign and seal). It is in his suffering and dying on the cross that Jesus gives his flesh for the life (salvation) of the world. This is when the Lamb of God will take away the sin of the world (cf. John 1:29, 36). Although not directly quoted here by Jesus, this statement resounds with echoes of the suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 who lays down his life for his people as a vicarious and substitutionary sacrifice. Jesus is telling his audience that one year later (the next Passover) he will suffer and die on a Roman cross to give eternal life to all those who believe in him.

No doubt, this is a difficult saying, and especially hard to understand before the events of the cross, which is why we read in verse 52. “*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’*” Like their forefathers in the desert, the people in the synagogue began arguing among themselves (quite heatedly, as the text indicates) and were treating Jesus exactly as their forefathers treated Moses in the wilderness (which is the reason why I chose Exodus 17:1-7 as our Old Testament lesson, because the account of the Israelites grumbling in the wilderness echoes throughout the whole bread of life discourse). Did Jesus really say that we must become cannibals and consume human flesh? Of course not—he was speaking figuratively. Well, if he is speaking figuratively, what does he mean? How do we eat his flesh? What does he mean when he says “he came down from heaven?” The questions turned into an argument, but the key point of contention was this: “*how can this man give us his flesh to eat?*”

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 295.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 295.

Jesus answers them in verses 53-54 by restating what he just said in verse 51, only putting the matter in the form of an absolute condition. “*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. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.’*” In addition to restating what he has already said to the people, Jesus adds several new things. First, the one whose flesh is eaten is the “Son of Man’s.” As the incarnate word of God, Jesus’ flesh can give life (unlike anyone else). Second, Jesus adds that we must drink his blood. This is highly problematic for Jesus’ audience because they all knew that the Law of Moses forbade the drinking of blood. The whole idea of drinking blood is repulsive on its face. But this statement will make much sense to Christians reading this after Jesus suffers and dies on the cross, and when Jesus institutes a sacrament in which consecrated wine is identified as “Christ’s blood of the new covenant shed for the remission of sins.”

As we have seen (when we discussed the merits and demerits of the sacramental view in an earlier sermon), the language Jesus uses here is absolute—so that if Jesus is speaking of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, then eternal life comes through taking the sacrament, and not through faith. But this would conflict with the clear statements of Jesus made throughout this discourse that eternal life is made manifest through faith in Jesus (i.e., believing that he is from God, and that his words are true). When Jesus institutes the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper a year later, he speaks in sacramental language: there is a sign—bread and wine, there is a thing signified—his body and blood, and the one (the sign) can be spoken of as though it were the other (body and blood). This is what Jesus is doing here—speaking of the reality (his coming death for our sins upon the cross), using the dramatic metaphor of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. In other words, we feed on Jesus’s flesh and drink his blood, when, by faith, we trust in him for our deliverance from the wrath of God, and when we receive the sign and seal of that deliverance in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper (also through faith).

And so having made his point and then watching the people grumbling at him and arguing among themselves, Jesus concludes the discourse by restating his main point in verses 55-58. “*For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. 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. 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.*” Jesus may be speaking metaphorically when he speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, but nevertheless, like the manna and the barley loaves, his body and blood are true food and drink—not for the body, but for the soul. If we eat this flesh and drink this blood (if we believe in Jesus) he remains (abides) with us. Jesus will indwell us through the Holy Spirit (a point made in the Upper Room discourse yet to come), and we continue to trust in Jesus, drawing our strength and sustenance from our communion with him who is our living bread.

Jesus also states one more time that he has been sent by the Father, and that all those who eat of the bread God sent (Jesus), will be given eternal life (which manifests itself in faith). All of this comes to pass “because of the Father.” The people of Israel were given temporal life through means of the manna in the wilderness. But all those who feed on the living bread from heaven by faith will live forever (i.e., be given eternal life). We do not have life in ourselves, nor can we do any “works” to get such life. We must be drawn to Jesus by the Father, we must be given eternal life through feeding on him (believing), trusting that Jesus will save us from our sins and raise us from the dead on the last day. In verse 59, John ends his account of the discourse by telling us what we already assumed. “*Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.*” Next time, Lord willing, we will consider the outcome of Jesus’ words spoken that day. “*Many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*” These were hard words indeed.

As we come to the end of the discourse it would be fitting to consider the closing words from Jesus. “*Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.*” Beloved, have you fed upon this bread? Have you placed your trust in Jesus Christ, the living bread from heaven? For he offers you something which can meet your deepest needs, restore you to fellowship with God, and which grants you eternal life. The time has come to respond to Jesus’ call by trusting in him, and receiving him as the living bread from heaven.

For those of you who have trusted Jesus, he has once again spread for us a feast in the wilderness, where all of the promises made in John 6 are signed and seal to us this Lord’s Day. Come, for the feast in the wilderness is ready.