

“You Have the Words of Eternal Life”

The Twenty Fourth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 6:60-71; Isaiah 40:1-8

When Jesus declared that he was “*the living bread who came down from heaven,*” many of those assembled in the synagogue in Capernaum began grumbling. When Jesus went on to say “*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,*” a heated argument broke out. After Jesus finished speaking, John says, many of those present complained about his hard sayings, and from that time on “*many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*” There can be little doubt that Jesus is driving away the multitudes now following him through these difficult sayings which reveal his identity as the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah, as well as the true nature of his mission—which is not to attract a large number of followers and lead an insurrection against Rome, but to obey his Father’s will, even if that meant giving his flesh on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. This is why Bob Godfrey very aptly calls the “bread of life” discourse in John 6, “Jesus’ church shrinkage seminar.” When Jesus is finishing giving his “bread of life” discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum, many disciples walked away and no longer followed him.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of John, and we wrap our time in John 6 and our study of Jesus’ “bread of life” discourse. We have looked at the setting for the sermon (Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the 5000, and Jesus walking across the Sea of Galilee), and we have considered the details of the discourse and the difficult sayings we find within it. We now consider the outcome of Jesus’ discourse—which is that many who had been following him, no longer did so. By this point in his messianic mission huge crowds were following him everywhere he went, but for all the wrong reasons. When Jesus fed the people in the wilderness they called him a prophet and wanted to make him king. Messianic expectations reached a fever pitch. But people quickly lose interest in Jesus whenever he reveals the true purpose of his mission.

The time had now come for Jesus to drive away the “looky loos” (the consumers) who are following him out of self-interest, and not because they are looking for someone who will deal with the guilt and power of sin. Given the usual image of Jesus—meek and mild—it can come as a bit of a shock we when consider that the Jesus who is revealed in the gospels is anything but meek and mild. His tender compassion and love for sinners is found throughout. But so is the disconcerting way Jesus speaks of himself (his claims to deity), and the way in which he dramatically confronts the religious leaders of his day with their self righteousness and misunderstanding of the Old Testament. In the “bread of life” discourse, Jesus says things which good Jewish boys would never say. Unless he is truly who he claims to be (the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah) then his words are positively revolutionary—even dangerous.

Before we consider the consequences of Jesus’ “bread of life” discourse (vv. 60-71), it is important to set out a brief outline of those events recorded in John 6 which took place in the Galilee region about the time of the Jewish Passover (the second during Jesus’ public ministry). What actually happened in the twenty-four hours before and during the time Jesus gave this discourse? Why does Jesus get such a negative reaction from those who heard him in the synagogue? To answer these questions and to understand our text, we will briefly review these events in summary form.

The chapter begins when Jesus miraculously fed over 5000 people in such a way in which it was obvious

to all that he was a new Moses leading the people in a new Exodus—many saw him as the prophet foretold by Moses.

In their despair at the difficulties of life and chafing under Roman occupation the people who saw Jesus perform the miracle of the loaves and fish wanted to make Jesus king—even by force, if necessary.

Knowing their intentions to make him king, when night fell Jesus withdrew from the people.

Crowds of people frantically searched for Jesus throughout the night, not knowing that Jesus left the area by walking across the sea of Galilee, joined his disciples in their boat, and then calmed a storm.

The crowds are surprised to find Jesus the next morning in the synagogue in Capernaum (across the Sea of Galilee from where they last saw him). No doubt, many those present have eaten of the bread and fish, Jesus miraculously produced in the wilderness the previous afternoon/evening.

Those who find Jesus in the synagogue ask him about when and how he arrived in Capernaum. Jesus does not answer them. Instead, he gives the “bread of life” discourse to the assembled crowd.

It is likely that the lectionary reading in the synagogue was from Exodus 16 (which deals with manna in the wilderness) and Isaiah 54 (which deals with God teaching his people during the future restoration of Jerusalem). These two texts probably drive much of what follows.

Jesus begins by telling the people that they are seeking him for the wrong reason—they want to fill their stomachs. They do not truly care about him or his mission. Jesus warns them not to labor for food which perishes but for that which endures to eternal life. He promises to give them this food.

He then claims God’s seal (divine approval) is on him. This is the first statement to the effect that he is one with YHWH.

When the people ask what works must they do to receive the bread of which he speaks, Jesus tells them in verse 29, *“this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”* This statement about believing in him (trust) is the key to understanding the rest of the discourse.

In response, the Jews demand another miraculous sign. Jesus does not give them one, but reminds them that it was YHWH not Moses who gave the Israelites bread in the wilderness. Jesus then tells them *“the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”* Another claim to deity.

The Jews want more of this bread that won’t spoil. But Jesus tells them *“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* He uses the *ego emi* formula (“I AM” one of YHWH’s self-designations) and goes on to tell them that they do not believe and indeed cannot believe because only those given to Jesus by the Father can come to him.

Jesus adds that he has come to do the will of the Father and raise all those given to him on the last day. He now tells the Jews, *“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.”*

The Jews begin to openly grumble because Jesus said he is the bread who came down from heaven (John’s account implies that in doing so the Jews in Capernaum are acting just like their forefathers in

the Sinai). They claim to know Jesus' family and history, so how can he claim to come from heaven?

Jesus tells the people not to grumble and tells them that even though they may consider themselves God's chosen people, "*no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.*"

Jesus then explains to them that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah 54:13, that he will teach them the truth, and that he can do so because he has seen the Father. He adds that "*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life*" and then tells them, "*I am the bread of life.*" This is yet another claim to deity.

Next, Jesus explains that the manna their fathers ate in the wilderness only sustained temporal life, not eternal life. Likely pointing to himself, Jesus says, "*this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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.*" He is speaking of his death upon the cross—something still hidden from the crowd at this point in time.

At his words, the Jews began to argue among themselves (this time quite heatedly) debating how Jesus can give them his flesh to eat.

Jesus says 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.*" Jesus now speaks in an absolute sense—to have eternal life we must eat his flesh and drink his blood—which we do through believing his words and trusting that he is the Son of God who will save us from our sins through his sacrificial death.

Instead of lowering the tension in the room, Jesus concludes the discourse by restating much of what he already told them (vv. 54-58), "*whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 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.*"

So, when we read in verse 60, "*when many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'*" we should not be surprised. Yes, these were hard words. Yes, Jesus' words were shocking to those listening to them for the first time, as we might be shocked hearing them again, and that even with the benefit of two thousand years of Christian reflection upon Jesus' hard sayings. The people wanted more food, but Jesus did not give them more. They wanted to make Jesus king, but he wanted no part of it, and even withdrew from them before the more zealous in the crowd could seize him. They wanted another miracle, but Jesus refused. And then Jesus had the audacity to make claims to deity and even spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood—the true meaning of which was lost on those to whom understanding was not given.

There can be no question that these were the most difficult, yet the most important words those in the synagogue that day had ever heard. God incarnate was revealing who he is, and what he came to do. The crowds are blown away by Jesus' words. But we cannot blame them for being blown away. Jesus is re-writing Israel's entire history and placing himself at the center of it. He is claiming to be one with YHWH (calling God "my Father and identifying himself as the Son of Man), using self-designations only YHWH uses (I AM), claiming that he will raise the dead, and that he can give eternal life—prerogatives YHWH claims for himself throughout the Old Testament.

It bears repeating—if Jesus is not the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah, then he is positively dangerous and should be seen as an extremist of the worst possible kind. Anyone who reads or hears these words but rejects Jesus, cannot then claim that Jesus is a great teacher or a prophet. If these words are not true *because* Jesus is not who he claims to be, then Jesus has no place among the world’s great ethicists and religious leaders. Jesus’ words will not allow that conclusion. His words are divine revelation about who he is, and his words explain the true nature of his messianic mission. But these hard sayings are also clearly intended to drive away the multitudes following him for all the wrong reasons. The self-interest of the crowds might prevent Jesus from accomplishing his messianic mission—to offer his flesh for the life of the world. Jesus will not allow that to happen. He knows that he must suffer and die for our sins.

In verse 60, John states that “many disciples” thought that Jesus was uttering “hard sayings” which shocked and offended them. John uses the word “disciple” in two different senses in this and the next verse. In verse 60, the word is used in the broad sense of someone following Jesus because they thought him to be a miracle-worker, and even perhaps, a prophet. It is a reference to the crowds who are following Jesus’ every move. But when John uses the same word in verse 61, he is referring specifically to the twelve—and using the word in a much more precise and narrow way. *“But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this?”*

There are several things here of which to take note. The first is that Jesus is aware of what of people were thinking about him and his teaching. He already knew that many wanted to make him king, and that the people did not believe (trust) in him as a savior from sin. Therefore, Jesus possesses divine attributes (including supernatural knowledge about people) although he chooses to veil his divine glory with human flesh. Jesus has heard the crowds grumbling at his teaching and arguing over what he meant. But he knows his own disciples were not happy about what just happened. Remember, the previous evening, they had been in the boat when Jesus approached them. In his Gospel (6:52), Mark indicates that like the unbelieving crowds, his own disciples *“did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”* Now, we learn that the twelve are as put off by the discourse as were many in the crowd.

John does not give us more information, but we do know by this time that the disciples were already thinking (as we would) about how much influence and prestige they had gained because of their close association with Jesus (who was now well-known throughout the region). There will even be discussion among the twelve about who gets to sit at Jesus’ right hand and he who gets to sit on his left when he rules the nations. If such sinful pettiness is behind the reason for their grumbling, then the disciples are thinking like a politician’s handlers who just witnessed their candidate make a terrible public gaff which causes a ten point drop in the polls. “Jesus, if you want to be king, you cannot say things like that.”

But the disciples may be grumbling for all the same reason the crowds are—Jesus’ claims to deity, the statement about coming down from heaven, and the most difficult statement of all about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. These are hard words. Jesus is teaching very difficult things which would be hard for any first century Jew to accept. That is why he performed the signs and wonders we have seen so far—to confirm that he is from God and that he has YHWH’s blessing (or seal, as Jesus puts it). For whatever reason Jesus’ own disciples are grumbling. Jesus knows about it, and confronts them: *“Do you take offense at this?”* We can imagine the twelve all simultaneously looking down at their feet, avoiding all eye contact, and not wanting to admit that they had indeed been grumbling about what Jesus had said.

In verse 62, Jesus asks the twelve to consider the consequences of what would happen when he does go back to heaven from whence he came (in his ascension). *“Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”* Jesus has told them plainly that he came down from heaven—which

may be why they are grumbling. He is now telling them that at some point he must go back to where he was before. It is vital that we understand Jesus is not threatening to leave them because they were grumbling. Rather, Jesus knows that if they are offended by his teaching now, it will only get much worse for them later when they see him hanging upon a cross—something he must endure before he ascends into heaven.¹ Despite the grumbling (or better in light of it) Jesus must prepare the twelve for what will come—which he will do at length in the Upper Room discourse.

In verse 63, Jesus continues to explain to them that “*it is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.*” The words Jesus has spoken which caused the grumbling can only be properly understood through the eyes of faith—which is why John told us back in John 2:22, “*when therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this [that is body was the temple which must be raised after three days], and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*” The same thing holds true here. The disciples may not understand with great clarity what Jesus meant when he spoke of coming down from heaven, of going back to heaven, or even that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have life. It makes little sense to them now, but it will all become clear after he instructs them, dies, and then is raised from the dead on the third day. The Holy Spirit will ensure that they understand—he will illumine their minds to understand these things so that they may then believe with a much greater level of clarity.

There is no doubt that Jesus has in mind human weakness and inability which results from the Fall when he says “*the flesh is no help at all.*” But in the context of what has just happened, Jesus is also referring back to the discourse when he spoke of eating his flesh. His point is that the twelve must not stumble on trying to figure what “flesh” means, when the key is to look beyond the eating of flesh (the metaphor), to the true meaning of the words as revealed by the Spirit (the reality)—that Jesus will offer his own flesh as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Jesus clearly points the disciples in this direction when he tells them “*the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*” If the twelve see Jesus as that one sent from God who will offer up his own body for the sins of the world, then through faith he will be their bread of life, which when eaten (by faith), will be the means through which they will enjoy that eternal life and lack of hunger and thirst which Jesus has been promising. Again, there is an important Old Testament echo here. In Jeremiah 15:16, the prophet spoke of “eating God’s words” (i.e., believing what YHWH told him). So too, the disciples eat the flesh of Jesus and eat the bread of life when they believe Jesus’ words. To feed upon Christ is to feed upon his words, i.e., it is to believe what he says, no matter how difficult those words may be.²

The fact of Jesus’ omniscience enters John’s account once again. In verse 64, Jesus informs the twelve, “*but there are some of you who do not believe.*” (*For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.*)” The biblical writers universally assign blame (fault) regarding those who do not believe to the person who rejects Jesus, not to the fact that God has not chosen them to believe. Throughout the Bible, unbelief is depicted as a willful act of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. It is not as though people cannot believe—that they lack the capacity to believe. Rather, because of sin, people do not want to believe in Jesus. As Paul says (Ephesians 4:18-24), their minds are clouded by sin and as Jesus says, they love darkness rather than light because their deeds are

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 300-301.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 302.

evil (John 3:19). Jesus knows who among them does not believe and is willfully suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Jesus knows that Judas, one of the twelve, will betray him.

But if the unbeliever gets all the blame for not believing, God gets all the credit when someone comes to faith. Jesus explains why the rest of the disciples *do* believe in him since the flesh is of no help, and it is the Spirit who gives life (however dimly the disciples understand Jesus' person and mission at this point). "*And he said, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.'*" Every person Jesus ever encountered was an unbeliever—unless and until they were drawn to Jesus by the Father (through the means of Jesus preaching the word of God). Not one person, not one of the twelve, could come to Jesus (in faith) unless it had been granted to them (i.e., graciously) by God. Jesus ascribes unbelief to the sinful human condition (something we all have in common with Adam), and faith to the gracious work of God (something held in common by all those who believe in Jesus).

If what Jesus said in the synagogue was offensive, his explanation did nothing to remove the offense. We learn in verse 66, that "*after this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*" Those following Jesus out of self-interest, no longer had any reason to follow him. They returned home. But what about the twelve? "*So Jesus said to [them], 'Do you want to go away as well?'*" Here is the test. As Jesus' mission enters its final year, Jesus must push the disciples to realize the cost they will pay if they continue to follow him. The question is not asked because Jesus wants an answer. He already knows who believes and who does not. The question is asked for the disciples' benefit.

In verses 68-69, Peter answers on behalf of the others. "*Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'*" The disciples have left everything (including their families, homes, and jobs) to follow Jesus. They know (because it has been granted to them) that Jesus is who he claims. No matter how difficult his words are, where else can the twelve go? Because they know that Jesus is the Holy One of God (i.e., the Messiah), he speaks the words of God which lead unto eternal life. There is no doubt an echo in Peter's confession from Isaiah 40:1-7 (our Old Testament lesson), in which we read that God judges the world through the proclamation of his word, that all flesh will perish (something Jesus has just stated), and that "*the word of our God will stand forever.*" To put it another way, Peter is telling Jesus that no matter how difficult his words may be, the disciples believe them, because they know Jesus is from God and they trust in him. Because he speaks the words of God, Jesus is the one who gives life and is that one in whom we must trust.

In the closing verses of the chapter, Jesus responds to Peter's confession with yet another reminder that the reason why the disciples believe, and do not walk away from him like the others did, is because of the sovereign grace of God. "*Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.'*" Jesus had called the twelve to follow him—they responded to Jesus' call which they in no sense initiated. Because of God's call, they were granted eternal life and believed. They will persevere to the end and be saved. Yet, according to God's sovereign purposes, one of those chosen to follow Jesus was (in Jesus' words) a devil. This man had not been called to faith or granted eternal life, but he was called to fulfill God's purpose in ensuring that the Scripture (chapter 11 of Zechariah) would be fulfilled that Jesus would be betrayed by one of his own for thirty pieces of silver. John reminds us that Jesus "*spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.*" Judas will do exactly that.

What should we take with us from the outcome of Jesus' bread of life discourse? Well, no doubt, Jesus says many difficult things here, some of which we may not like or which trouble us. In this case, we

must follow the explanation of Peter and the disciples. They did not walk away because they knew, despite the difficulties, Jesus is the Holy One of God and he has the words of life. And no one else does. Jesus may say difficult things, but he speaks the truth.

Properly understood the “bread of life” discourse reminds us that Jesus is all we need and that he gives us all we ask. He is our living bread who comes down from heaven and satisfies our deepest needs. He continues to give himself to us through word and sacrament. He is that one who has given us life, and he is that one who will raise us up on the last day. He is that one in whom we have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. He is that one in whom we must place our trust.