

The Bread of Life

A Study of John 6:35 to the End of the Chapter

Study Bible Studies Not stated (file created 26 December 2010)

John 6:35 (quoted)

John 6:38 (quoted)

John 6:41 (quoted)

John 6:51 (quoted)

John 6:55 (quoted)

John 6:63 (quoted)

John 6:66 (quoted)

John 6:69 (quoted)

Acts 16:31 (quoted)

Preamble

The last session of our study of the Gospel according to John concluded at verse 35, where Jesus said: "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (John 6:35, KJV). In the passage read to us today, we see our Lord making further profound statements, adding to the confusion of those who heard Him. Present-day readers, though privileged with the knowledge that Jesus is, indeed, God the Son, and fairly knowledgeable about the doctrine of salvation, are nevertheless at times rendered confused when they hear His declarations. The passage, therefore, demands more than a casual reading. To the "I am the bread of life" statement, our Lord adds:

"For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me." (John 6:38, KJV)

"I am the bread which came down from heaven." (John 6:41, KJV)

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (John 6:51, KJV)

"For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." (John 6:55, KJV)

These declarations compounded the confusion of all those who heard Him, including some who had been following Him for a long time. Their reactions and responses were much as one would expect. In verse 66, we read: "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (John 6:66, KJV). It is obvious that their minds rose no higher than the physical meaning of what He said. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" they argued (John 6:52, KJV).

Let me confess this to you. I have read the Gospel many times over in my life. Each time I come across some statement I am unable to comprehend fully, I read on, promising myself that I will come back to it

later for a closer study — but never do. I am sure that at least some of you present here today have had a similar experience. Not to worry. The very fact that we are here on this cold winter evening, after our busy Christmas celebrations, is proof enough that we want to understand the will of our Lord. Though I dare not pretend that I will be able to throw light on everything that confuses us in the Gospel, I am prepared to make a very humble attempt. Today, I want to centre on the utter disbelief of those who heard our Lord, and their stupefied question, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" To them, it was madness for any man to offer his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. It was almost as if Jesus were promoting cannibalism — a truly appalling thought.

The Bread of Life

We will briefly look at His statement about the Bread of Life. I am sure the concept was dealt with adequately in the previous session; however, permit me to add a few thoughts before we come to the "eat my flesh" statement of our Lord.

Food is a pretty basic concern today, as it was then. Most often, we miss the degree to which over two-thirds of the world's population worries over water and food. We live surrounded by food in plenty: store shelves packed with more food than will ever be sold, refrigerators at home stuffed with items we will discard when, or before, they turn inedible. We overindulge in food, while a large majority of children and adults, in our own country and around the world, will sleep on empty stomachs tonight.

We are blind to the desperate food concerns of so many, when our own supply is overabundant. It may cost us more than we wish, as with the onion crisis we have periodically to pass through, but our food is readily available. We pass up the food set before us, allowing preference to dictate what we choose to eat. Such is not the case for the majority of the world's population, nor was it for the crowds in Jesus' day. Some had plentiful resources, but most lived hand to mouth, barely earning enough to feed their families sufficiently for survival. That was the context of Jesus' words about bread, food, and God's provision.

His audience then did not look on food as a given. Abundance was for the few wealthy enough to flaunt their wealth by throwing out the leftovers of daily feasting. Meat was a special item, available to the larger public only on feast days. Bread was enough of a concern for daily existence.

Is it any wonder Jesus speaks of being the Bread of Life? Bread was the essential food of the people. It was what they relied on to get them through the day — not an extra item on the plate, but the heart of most every meal. All too often, bread was the only ingredient in one's normal

diet, and has been the staple food all over the world throughout history. When Jesus speaks of being God's provision, it is not about the extraordinary moments of blessing in life; it is, rather, about the routines of living. My friends, Jesus is not the feast food, but the very basis of life. Do you see how the person of Jesus became synonymous with ordinary bread?

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to go to Nairobi for a conference. When the conference was over, the participants went on an African safari in the jungles of Kenya. One night, at the jungle resort, with the locals dancing barefoot all around us to the rhythm of drums, we were served a grand game-meat dinner. The dinner lasted three hours, during which we were served meats progressing from ordinary chicken to turkey, wild duck, ostrich, rabbit, and impala, and so on, finally ending with roasted zebra meat. Most of us stuffed ourselves with meat for three hours, almost as if that were the last meal we would ever have. Some could stomach it; others refused to come out of the washrooms for two days. I can guess what must be going through your mind. Some of you have heard this story before. Some must be thinking that I am being boastful about my trip abroad. Others here may be thinking I am making up this narrative for effect. Yet others must be wondering how zebra meat would taste. As an aside, zebra meat tasted rather like horse meat, if you know what horse meat tastes like. But all that is beside the point. During those three hours, small — very small, for that matter — portions of bread were not forgotten, served as a side dish, though it was supposed to be a game-meat dinner. Remember, we are on the subject of bread today.

Our Lord's Concern for the Crowd

Such was Jesus' concern for the crowd who came to meet Him after five thousand of them were fed with a handful of loaves. They were not seeking Jesus to learn from His ways, but to satisfy the growling of empty bellies. They wished to follow Jesus as a release from the drudgery and sweat of daily labour. They wanted a free ride, not a relationship with God that would change them into ministers of God's presence and blessing for the world around them.

Jesus was happy enough to have fed them on the hillside. He was happy to meet their needs with the sufficiency of God's provision. At the same time, He wanted them to focus on more than their economic pressures. He wanted them to take their attention off their material needs, and to trust God to supply their needs as they accepted His provision and lived according to the life and teaching of Jesus.

The Other Dimension

Our Lord's words became more touching still, because this was the

season of the Passover. The Jews regarded blood with a peculiar awe, and they were, at that very time, leading their lambs to sacrifice in Jerusalem, where blood would be sprinkled towards the four directions of the earth. The timing of His statement could mean that the shadow of the animal lamb was passing, and its place being taken by the true Lamb of God. The shadow of the cross was always before Him. As they had communion with the flesh and blood of the Paschal lamb, so they would now have communion with the flesh and blood of the true Lamb of God.

It was our Lord's habit, whenever anyone misunderstood what He said, to correct the misunderstanding — as He did when Nicodemus thought "born again" meant re-entering his mother's womb. But whenever anyone understood Him correctly, and simply found fault with what He said, He did not soften it; He repeated it. In this discourse, our Lord repeated, in one form or another, five times over, what He had said about His flesh and His blood: He would not be talked out of it, and He would not explain it away.

The full weight of these words did not become evident until the night before He died, when He instituted Holy Communion. In breaking bread with His disciples at the Last Supper, He was preparing them for His imminent death — His body broken, and His blood shed, on the cross. In His last will and testament, He left them what no other man, on dying, has ever been able to leave: Himself, given for the life of the world.

I do not take this to mean, as some have held, that the bread and the cup are turned into His actual, physical flesh and blood. Our Lord's habitual manner of teaching was through picture and figure, and I believe He meant here what He meant when He called Himself the door, or the vine: that, as surely as bread sustains our bodies, so He alone sustains our souls. Indeed, He tells us plainly, a little later in this same discourse, that "the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63) — it is by the Spirit, through faith, that we feed on Him. To eat His flesh and drink His blood, then, is to come to Him and believe in Him, feeding upon Him by faith — not upon the dead Christ of Calvary alone, but upon the living, glorified Christ, who died, rose again, and ascended into heaven. As mankind died spiritually through eating in the Garden of Eden, so we live again spiritually through feeding upon the Bread of Life. Such feeding, unlike any earthly meal, profits unto life everlasting.

Consuming Jesus

If I were to say that I had succeeded in consuming a tiny portion of Jesus, what would your reaction be? You may say, "Here he goes again — first he eats zebra meat, and now he makes this tall claim. How could we believe him?" But that is the whole idea. We need to consume Jesus. There are three steps involved: first, we try to understand His teachings; second, we internalise His teachings; and third, we practise

in our lives what we have learnt. None of these three steps can be taken unless we have deep-rooted faith in the birth, death, resurrection, and second coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. Had I used the word "absorb" in place of "consume", you would perhaps have accepted my claim more readily.

And there is this question: how much of Jesus can one consume? There is no limit, my friends. The more of Him you consume, the closer you get to Him. You will not suffer as my friends did, who ate too much zebra meat. At the same time, no one, alive or dead, can claim to have absorbed Jesus completely.

The human body has a remarkable capacity to assimilate all manner of foods. Whatever the variety of a person's taste, the food they eat is digested and assimilated into blood, bone, and flesh. Bread is often called "the staff of life", because it contains almost all the nutrition needed for the human body. Jesus talked about the Bread of Life to make matters simpler for ordinary people to understand.

An Intimate Concept

This idea — that Jesus is the Bread of Life — is a very intimate concept. The invitation is to become intertwined with Him — quite literally, to come to know Him so fully that His way of being becomes our way of being. In our text, it is implied that our identity as a follower of Jesus means that we will travel the road He travels — that His values will become our values. Because of our faith in His Word, we are promised guidance and help on a daily basis. We are encouraged to live each moment in the faith that Jesus is with us, guiding the way.

Some of the Followers Left Jesus

Those followers who left Jesus were handicapped by their skewed expectations — let us accept that. More than a Saviour from their sinful ways, they were looking for a conqueror to liberate them politically from foreign rule. Rather than follow Jesus by living according to His teaching, they wanted to follow Him in order to sit at His feet and never have to work again. They wanted a free ride that would enable them to carry on with their own concerns, rather than the concerns of God. Jesus would have none of it. He offered God's provision, but a provision with a purpose. He offered them a change of focus, granting them the freedom to live according to a new purpose — a purpose and relationship that would feed more than a hungry belly, but would feed our inner selves for eternity.

They wanted to feast at a banquet table. Jesus wanted their lives to have much deeper meaning. He asked the crowd following Him to turn their attention from material things to the presence and purposes of God. They were focused on issues that would never satisfy. Once they

had eaten their fill, they would wish for something different. They would grumble, as their forefathers did, eating manna in the wilderness. They would throw away the excess, ignoring its importance to one with nothing to eat.

Jesus' solution was a new focus. It was to take their minds — and now our minds, too — off concerns for physical needs, to focus on serving God instead. God would continue to provide for material needs, but the focus of our lives should be on much more than food, which spoils. It should, rather, be on living in relationship with God, and finding nourishment for our very lives.

We have to exercise our choice today. Do we find all this confusing, difficult, and unsatisfying to our material needs, and turn away from Jesus? Or do we accept that salvation and eternal life can be ours only when we accept Him unconditionally, and walk along with Him in this life, and its extension into eternal life?

Jesus Reveals His Divinity

Jesus spoke of the Son of Man ascending to heaven. In this statement, He was revealing His divine origin. No one, till then or thereafter, had the audacity to claim that he had lived in God's presence and would ascend back to God. Jesus fulfils this very claim when He ascended to heaven before the very eyes of His disciples (see Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50; Acts 1:9-11), now ruling over angels, authorities, and powers.

Though many disciples deserted Him because of His difficult teaching (John 6:66), eleven of His twelve disciples accepted Him and His message. In the words of the outspoken Peter: "And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6:69, KJV). Those who loved Him accepted that He was indeed God the Son, one with the Father in the Holy Trinity — difficult though it was to comprehend, then for them as now for us.

Application 1

Earthly bread says, "Be baptised, join the church, do good works, make reforms, and so forth." Heavenly bread says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31, KJV).

The thief on the cross was given eternal life, but he never once partook of the Lord's Supper. At the very last moment of his life, knowing well that he was going to die shortly, this man accepted Jesus and believed on Him, expecting Jesus to take him with Him to heaven. Eating His flesh and drinking His blood are, therefore, ways of expressing an unconditional acceptance of Jesus. Jesus is the Bread of Life, and all should yield their lives to Him.

How is it with you this evening? Are you ready to take on a new focus in

your Christian belief?

Application 2

Today, many people without Christ look full and happy to the untrained eye. But they have a serious malady called "unbelief". It will cause them to spend eternity anywhere but heaven, if they do not repent and receive Jesus, the Bread of Life.

Would you like to have eternal life? It is available to everyone who receives Jesus as the Bread of Life. Do you realise that, when the Word goes home into your heart today, it is just as much a living Word as it was two thousand years ago, when the Lord Jesus spoke it to the multitudes?

Are we ready to welcome it with total submission?

Conclusion

We must be drawn by the Father to the Son. Do you sense the power of God drawing you to Jesus this evening? Are you hungry for the Bread of Life? It is a sign of God quickening your spirit with His. This is the divine condition; the human element is expressed as you exercise the faith God gives you. We must take the step of faith, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

The poet James Proctor put it this way:

I've tried in vain a thousand ways, my fears to quell, my hopes to raise; But all I need, the Bible says, is Jesus. My soul is night, my heart is steel, I cannot see, I cannot feel, For life, for light, I must appeal to Jesus. He died, He lives, He reigns, He pleads, There's life in all His words and deeds, All the guilty sinner needs is Jesus. Though some will mock, though some will blame, In spite of fear, in spite of shame, I'll go to Him, because His name is Jesus.

— James Proctor, "I Go to Him" (1901)

Our Saviour's ministry in Galilee, which was coming to a close, was filled with warmth and love. He had performed many wonderful miracles, and had set forth many gracious teachings. Let His gracious teachings show us the light of life.

Amen.

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