

Flesh and Blood

John 6:48-59

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, August 3, 2008

“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:54).

It seems that almost every year brings some miracle drug. Not only does the human race benefit from new cures, but researchers are hard at work to reduce even the effects of aging. One treatment involves the enzyme telomerase, which may combat the degradation of human DNA. Research suggests that human cells grow older as their telomeres shorten; telomerase is designed to impede this process and extend our lifespan. If this science is developed, we can imagine starting the day with our telomerase milkshake, seeking the elusive eternal life for which mankind longs.

But God is far ahead of the scientists! Long ago, he sent his Son into the world to offer eternal life. Jesus gives not some miracle drug, but his own flesh and blood. He said, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (Jn. 6:54).

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Eternal life is the topic of Jesus’ teaching in John 6. The chapter began with Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the five thousand, and in his subsequent teaching Jesus sought to elevate his hearers from earthly to heavenly bread. This chapter contains the first of Jesus’ “I am” sayings: “I am the bread of life.” His Jewish audience connected this claim with the manna that fed the exodus generation in the time of Moses – bread that fell from heaven. Jesus wanted them to see that he is not only a new Moses, but a greater Savior than Moses ever was. The people, however, struggled to understand and grumbled against his words.

Starting in John 6:48, Jesus continues his teaching, pointing out a significant difference between the bread that he gives versus the manna of Moses' day. Whereas the ancient manna sustained physical life for just a day at a time, the bread that he offers gives so much more: "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die" (Jn. 6:48-50).

This makes some important points. First, it reminds Jesus' hearers of how the Israelites of the exodus complained about their manna and revolted against Moses. Jesus' present hearers were making the same mistake. Secondly, as a result of their sin, the exodus generation was judged by God, so that none but the few believers ever left the desert. The entire generation that witnessed the great miracles of the exodus – miracles like the ten plagues on Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea – subsequently died in the desert because of their sin.

This point would have been all the more poignant since John 6 takes place during the Passover celebration – the main feast that commemorated the exodus! Even though this crowd was fed by Jesus' miracle, the result of their unbelief would be same judgment and death experienced by their ancestors.

Thirdly, Jesus makes a contrast between the bread he gives and the manna. His bread conveys life not just for the body but for the soul. His bread overcomes the deadly curse of sin and gives eternal life: "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (Jn. 6:51). A. W. Pink summarizes Jesus' meaning: "I am that which every sinner needs, and without which he will surely perish."¹

FLESH AND BLOOD

As Jesus pressed his points, he continued with some unusual language, which seems to have upset his hearers. He said, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn. 6:51).

John notes that this statement incited a great deal of agitation: "The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 341-342.

give us his flesh to eat?” (Jn. 6:52). Given Jewish food regulations, this was a revolting thought. It was made even worse when Jesus added the idea of drinking his blood: “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” (Jn. 6:53). The law expressly forbade the drinking of blood; Jews could not even eat meat with the blood still in it (Lev. 17:10-14), yet Jesus spoke to them of eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

The real problem was the people’s lack of spiritual understanding. Just as Nicodemus could not understand how one could be born again, and the woman by the well could not understand how Jesus could give living water, this crowd misunderstood Jesus’ true meaning. It was bad enough, they thought, for Jesus not to give them more of his miraculous bread, but now he spoke in this grotesque manner!

What did Jesus mean? Some interpreters have taken Jesus’ teaching in a mystical manner. An example is William Barclay, who understood the idea of eating Jesus’ flesh as meditating on his incarnate humanity:

It is as if Jesus said: “Feed your heart... on the thought of my manhood. When you are discouraged and in despair... remember *I* took that life of yours and these struggles of yours on me.”... He was telling us to feed our hearts and souls and minds on his humanity, and to revitalize our lives with his life until we are filled with the life of God.²

The problem with this interpretation is that Jesus clearly was not referring to his incarnation. He describes his flesh as “the bread that I *will* give” (Jn. 6:51), so he is looking to something in the future.

Other Christians interpret Jesus’ words as referring to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, also known as the Eucharist. When Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, they see a clear reference to the ritual that Jesus would later institute. These verses are used as a proof text for the Roman Catholic doctrine of “transubstantiation,” which teaches that the Lord’s Supper involves eating the physical flesh and blood of Jesus transubstantiated into the form of a wafer and cup of wine.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:224-225.

But there are at least five reasons why Jesus was not speaking of the Lord's Supper. First, his original hearers could not possibly have been expected to recognize a sacrament that would not be instituted until a year later, on the night of Jesus' arrest. Secondly, if Jesus was teaching that one can only be saved by partaking of the Lord's Supper, this would contradict his emphasis in this very chapter on salvation through faith (Jn. 6:29, 35, 40, 47), and would rule out the salvation of those who could not receive the sacrament, like the thief on the cross and infants who die. Thirdly, Jesus never used the word *flesh* when speaking of the Lord's Supper, but said, "This is my *body*" (Mt. 26:26; Mk. 14:22; Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). Fourthly, in John 6:63, Jesus informs us that his words had a spiritual, not a fleshly meaning: "The flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

Finally, it is abundantly clear that Jesus is referring to his substitutionary offering of himself on the cross. His flesh is the bread "that I will give for the life of the world" (Jn. 6:53). This is why Jesus' words about his "flesh" and "blood" are associated with the Lord's Supper, since they both point to the same thing: Jesus' atoning death on the cross. Jesus did not die so that we might be saved by taking the Lord's Supper, and his teaching in John 6 does not direct us to the blessed sacrament. Rather, both Jesus' teaching and the Lord's Supper teach that we are saved only through faith in his death for our sins.

There are good reasons to be sure that Jesus was speaking of his coming death on the cross. First, we remember that this chapter takes place at the time of the Jewish Passover (Jn. 6:4). This festival remembered Israel's deliverance from Egypt when God sent the angel of death to slay the firstborn of Egypt. Only God's people were spared, by sacrificing a lamb and spreading its blood on their door posts. The Passover meal consisted of eating the sacrificial lamb. This is a vital theme in John's Gospel; we remember John the Baptist's witness to Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29). This is how Jesus meant the Jews to understand "eating" his "flesh." By eating the Passover lamb, the Israelites identified with the sacrifice for sin offered by the Lamb

of God. Jesus wanted his hearers to make the connection between the Passover lamb and his own sacrificial death.

Secondly, the last sentence in John 6:51 says, “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” This would be better rendered as “The bread that I will give *on behalf of* or *in place of* the life of the world.” John Calvin writes that this “denotes that unique giving which was made on the cross when [Jesus] offered Himself to the Father as a sacrifice. Then He delivered up Himself for the life of men; and now He invites us to receive the fruit of His death.”³

The famous theologian Karl Barth was once asked what is the most important word in the Bible. He replied, “*huper*,” the Greek word Jesus uses in this verse: “*for* the life of the world.” This is the key to the gospel: Jesus died “for” us, that is, “on our behalf,” and “in our place.” Jesus used this same word when he said that the Good Shepherd gives his life “for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11, 15). The high priest Caiaphas justified Jesus’ death by saying it was necessary that one man die “for the people” (Jn. 11:50). *Huper* means “on behalf of” and “in the place of,” and it was in this way that Jesus gave his flesh and blood on the cross to redeem us from our sins.

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL: CHRIST’S ATONING DEATH

When we understand his meaning, we see that Jesus was presenting his hearers with the very heart of the gospel. He said: “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” (Jn. 6:53-54). Just as the Israelites received the Passover in faith by spreading the blood on their doors and eating the lamb, Jesus offers salvation to the world through our believing receipt of his death in our place. Eating, therefore, describes our acceptance of Christ in faith. J. C. Ryle says, “Whenever a man, feeling his own guilt and sinfulness, lays hold on Christ, and trusts in the atonement made for him by Christ’s death, at once he ‘eats the flesh of the Son of Man, and drinks His blood.’”⁴

³ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:168.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 1:398.

This teaching gives us a potent description of saving faith.

First, faith in Christ is *necessary*. One gains no benefit from bread unless he eats it. Likewise, though Jesus died for “the world” – that is, for everyone who believes – his sacrifice gains us nothing unless we confess our need of forgiveness and trust in his cross. It is not necessary for you to have spiritual highs or perform religious quests, but it is absolutely necessary that you trust in Christ’s death if you would be saved from your sins.

Second, faith in Christ is always *personal*. Just as no one can eat for you, no one can believe on Christ for you. To be fed, you must pick up the bread, take it into your mouth, chew it, and swallow. Likewise, neither your parents, nor your spouse, nor the church can believe in Christ for you. You must pick up the Bible (for it is in the Word of God that we “feed” on Jesus), take it into your mind and heart, meditate on its promises, and believe on Christ for your own salvation.

Third, faith in Christ is foremost *in his cross*. It is not enough for you to admire the story of his birth, to appreciate his lofty teachings, or to praise his perfect example in life. To believe on Jesus is to trust that he died the death your sins deserved. He suffered on your behalf as an atonement for your sins. He died in your place, as a substitute provided by God so that you might be forgiven and saved. Just as we eat when we sense our hunger, we trust in Christ as we recognize that our sins threaten us with damnation, of which the cross is our only escape. Jesus spoke of his “flesh” and “blood” because, as Charles McIlvaine wrote: “It is as having been once offered up on the cross, a propitiatory sacrifice for our sins, that we receive our Saviour... We must always keep that great sacrifice, of which his flesh and blood were the constituents, in the eye and embrace of our faith.”⁵ As Jesus said, “For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (Jn. 6:55).

⁵ Charles P. McIlvaine, *Truth & Life: 22 Classic Christ-Centered Sermons* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005), 267.

FOREVER PEOPLE

It is possible that scientists will devise ways to lengthen our lives, but only those who believe on the cross of Christ will have eternal life. This is the glorious promise that Jesus makes: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:54).

When Jesus speaks of eternal life, he is referring to a *quality* of life that only he can give. He said: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn. 6:56).

Jesus promises that when you come to him through faith in his cross, you will live in him and he will live in you. The apostle Peter said that believers “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). This does not mean that we become little deities, but rather that we are “born of the Spirit,” as Jesus told Nicodemus (Jn. 3:8). The risen and ascended Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to live within us, conveying “righteousness, peace, and joy” (Rom. 14:17). We are made spiritually alive to know God and commune with him through Christ. To abide in Christ and have him abide in us is, Paul wrote, “to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:23-24). What, I ask, has the world to offer in comparison with this?

But the life of God can only be received and enjoyed through an active, feeding faith in Christ. Jesus added, “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” (Jn. 6:57). This recalls Jesus’ earlier teaching that his own life, though uncreated and eternal, is derived from God the Father. He said, “As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (Jn. 5:26). But now we are added to this picture. We can receive this overflow of life, with the Father as the fountain and Jesus Christ the Son as the stream. Psalm 46:4 says, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” Jesus is that river, and by trusting in him we drink eternal life.

But how could we really enjoy this if we knew it someday had to end? This is one of the problems with the joys of this world. The world’s

pleasures not only pale in comparison to the life that Jesus gives, but they also will have an end. Even if science can extend life, there ultimately is no man-made solution for death. But Jesus spoke not only of the *quality* of eternal life, but also of its *quantity*. Believers in Christ do not need telomerase; in Christ, we are the “Forever People.”⁶ Jesus said, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:54).

Even death cannot end eternal life. We know from the Bible that when Christians die, our spirits enter immediately into the glory of our heavenly home (2 Cor. 5:8). But even our bodies will participate in eternal life, for Jesus will raise them up. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn. 11:25). So while the bread that came through Moses gave temporary life, Jesus said of himself: “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever” (Jn. 6:58).

As a preacher, I am instructed and encouraged by the last verse in this passage: “Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum” (Jn. 6:59). At some point, Jesus’ meeting with the crowd had moved into the church, and this was his sermon on that occasion. It was not a sermon that was likely to be popular. This Jewish audience, like so many people today, preferred more worldly food: sermons offering tips for worldly success and happiness. But that is not what Jesus preached. Surely this chapter proves that Jesus did not preach what people wanted to hear or those things they thought they needed. Jesus preached what he knew they needed, whether they wanted to hear it or not. Above all, he preached his cross. Death because of sin; eternal life through atoning blood: these were the chief themes of Jesus’ preaching. Surely, our preaching today ought to follow his example.

⁶ Taken, along with the telomerase illustration, from Joel Nederhood, *The Forever People: Living Today in the Light of Eternity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 68-69.

“IF ANYONE” AND “UNLESS”

Jesus' teaching was so vital because it presents the greatest invitation. There are two phrases in his sermon that ought to catch our attention. In verse 51 he says, “*If anyone* eats of this bread, he will live forever.” Then, in verse 56, he adds, “*Whoever* feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” “If anyone,” and “Whoever.” This appeals to you, if you have not yet believed on Jesus Christ. He does not say, “If religious people, or if the wealthy, or if the poor, or if those with good backgrounds, or if those who were raised in the church...” and so on. Jesus said, “If anyone!” “Whoever!” This means that he offers forgiveness of sins and eternal life to everyone who simply accepts him in trusting faith. Jesus offers the most matchless gift – what no money can buy and no scientist can bottle – that you would be received forever as a dearly beloved child into the life and love of God – if only you will believe. Have you confessed your need of Jesus Christ? Have you trusted in his cross? Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). You – whoever you are – can have eternal life by receiving the Savior Jesus Christ in trusting faith.

But if Jesus' teaching extends the greatest invitation, it also conveys the direst warning. There are two more phrases we should notice: *unless* and *no life*. Jesus said, “*Unless* you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have *no life* in you” (Jn. 6:53). The life of this world is not true life, and it cannot last. The life of owning fine possessions, enjoying a pleasurable lifestyle, or feeding your cravings through sin is not the life for which you were made. Such a life will never satisfy your soul. Jesus states this dreadful reality: Unless you trust in him, “you have no life in you.” And when the Christ-less life comes to its bitter end in death, it will lead you to judgment and eternal condemnation.

The Israelites of Moses day received the manna, but because they did not believe they suffered death. Jesus did not want his hearers to repeat that mistake, and neither should you. “Unless,” he says, “no life.” But out of the great love for which he took up the cross as a sacrifice for sins, Jesus says to all who hear: “If anyone.” He

promises that he is “the bread that came down from heaven...
Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever” (Jn. 6:58).