

The Bread That Satisfies, Part 3 (John 6:47-59)

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Human beings are not born knowing how to perform all the functions necessary for survival. The most basic among them must be learned, eating included. Nursing is an acquired skill. Swallowing more baby food than you spit out is an acquired skill. Navigating the 18" between the baby food jar and their open mouth without flipping the spoon upside down or catapulting carrots onto the floor.

There's a reason we give Cheerios to 1-year-olds, not chicken wings. And when they're finally old enough to hold a knife without impaling themselves or stabbing their brother, they have to learn how to pair it with a fork to cut up a piece of meat. None of us are born knowing how to nourish our physical bodies. In the same way, none of us are born knowing how to nourish our souls. That too must be learned.

We have to learn the pleasures of this world are broken cisterns that hold no water. We have to learn we were created for relationship with God, for the joy of knowing him, loving him, and serving him. We have to learn sin destroys that relationship, rendering us all liable to divine judgment. We have to learn there is no other way for our sins to be forgiven and our relationship with God to be restored except through faith in Jesus. And we have to learn how to trust and obey Jesus in every area of life that our souls might be fully and completely satisfied in him.

Maybe you know in your head Jn 6:35 is true. "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.'" You agree that somehow or in some way the answer to our deepest longings and greatest fears is Jesus. But what does it actually mean to "come" to Jesus or "believe" in Jesus in order to experience life in his name?

That's what Jn 6:48-59 teaches us. In v. 48, Jesus repeats the theme of the entire conversation between him and the Jews in this chapter, "I am the bread of life." He alone can satisfy your soul, friend. So what should you do? Make trusting Jesus the supreme ambition of your life. That's what you should do.

Then Jesus pivots in v. 49 from explaining the origin of genuine faith, the theme of vv. 36-47, to describing the nature of genuine faith in vv. 49-59. We need to know where faith comes from. It's a work of God rooted in the sovereign will of God. But we also need to learn what faith consists of so we can embrace it and practice it. Christians speak of the importance of "faith" all the time. But what does that actually mean?

1) FAITH IS FOCUSED ON THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS (vv. 49-51)

The entire passage is framed in terms of a contrast between two kinds of bread or nourishment. What Jesus says about the first kind in v. 49 may surprise you. "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died." When the Lord delivered his people Israel out from slavery in Egypt, he provided food for them in the form of a fine, wafer-like substance that appeared on the ground like dew every morning. They called it "manna" and ate it for 40 years.

You know what happened to the adults who came out of Egypt, save two, by the end of 40 years? They all died. The manna sustained their physical life in this world for a short time, but that's all. It didn't give them spiritual life. It certainly didn't guarantee their resurrection from the dead or the hope of life with God. Was it a gift from God? Yes. Did God create it and provide it? Yes. Could it give them the life they needed most? No. It had no power to undo the curse of death or the eternal judgment our sins deserve.

All of God's gifts are good, but only one of them grants life. V. 51, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." Jesus is not one of many gifts in a long list of gifts, friend. He is a categorically different sort of gift, an infinitely superior kind of gift, for he is the only gift that has ever come down from heaven that can give you spiritual life.

The best every other gift can touch – a rewarding job, a healthy body, a strong marriage, financial stability – is the momentary blip of your existence on earth. Only Jesus can give you real life, both now and for all eternity. V. 51 tells us how. "And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

There's nothing metaphorical or abstract about the word Jesus uses for "flesh." It was his living, breathing, blood-filled, flesh that Jesus "gave" as a physical sacrifice when he died on the cross. Why did he do that? Heb 9:22, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." The justice of God must be satisfied. The debt of our rebellion against a holy God must be paid. The death of Christ is more than an inspiring example of self-sacrifice. It's the very price of your atonement. No other payment is sufficient. Thanks be to God, no other payment is necessary.

Genuine faith has a fundamentally cruciform character. It's not a mere belief that God is real, or God has a plan, or everything will work out in the end. No. Biblical faith is focused on the gospel, on the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for

sinners. It has a particular object – the person and work of Christ – because every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places flows down to us from one hill and one hill only. A hill called calvary.

At calvary, we find life in the form of peace with God, a peace that comes not from knowing we've done enough but from knowing Jesus has done it all. At calvary, we find life in the form of power from God, a power that overcomes sin, conquers evil, and ensures our vindication on the final day. At calvary, we find comfort in God, a God who is familiar with sorrows, present in our suffering, and knows how to use the worst acts of men for his glory and our good. At calvary, we find identity and purpose in God, adoption as his very own sons and daughters, and glory to live for greater than ourselves.

The life Jesus holds out to us is immeasurably more than a "pass" on the day of judgment. He came to give you life in the fullest sense imaginable, not life for good people or wealthy people or white people. Life for "the world," for any man or woman willing to cling to Jesus for the spiritual satisfaction he alone provides.

Genuine faith, saving faith, is focused on the person and work of Jesus. For as J.C. Ryle once said, "The preaching of Christ crucified – the old story of his blood, and righteousness, and substitution – is enough for all the spiritual necessities of all mankind."

2) FAITH IS EXPRESSED THROUGH EXCLUSIVE DEPENDENCE ON JESUS (vv. 52-55)

I'm grateful the Bible preserves more than what Jesus said. It also tells us what people asked him. Their questions often reflect our own. Look at v. 52. "The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" It's the big "how" question, isn't it? I get faith is focused on the person and work of Christ, but how do we come to actually experience the life that is found in him?

What does Jesus say in v. 53? "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." It's a shocking command. Jesus doesn't soften his language when pressed. He doubles down. We must "eat" of the bread that comes down from heaven. It smacked of cannibalism. How can you possibly give us your actual flesh and blood to eat and drink?

It made no sense because they were only thinking in strictly physical terms. Yes, Jesus says he is the bread of life. And yes, he uses a physical word to describe the means by

which we partake of his life – eating. But he doesn't have a literal eating in view. It's figurative language. It's symbolic language, just like when Jesus says, "I am the door," or "I am the vine" he doesn't mean he is a literal door or a literal vine. He's drawing an analogy, using an illustration from the physical realm to teach us something that is true in the spiritual realm.

The parallel between v. 54 and v. 47 clarifies as much. In v. 54, who has eternal life? "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood." In v. 47, who has eternal life? "Whoever believes." The metaphor of eating and drinking is a picture of the vibrant, life-giving activity of faith. It helps us understand what genuine faith is and does. It draws spiritual nourishment from Jesus through exclusive dependence on Jesus.

In the same way we nourish our physical bodies through the physical act of eating and drinking, so too we nourish our souls through the spiritual act of depending on Jesus. Think for a minute about what the comparison to physical eating tells us about the nature of faith in Jesus.

First, faith is necessary. There are not multiple ways to sustain your physical life. You have to eat and drink. I mean, you can tell yourself, "Some people live by eating and drinking, but I'm not really into that." You can pretend working out or playing video games is enough to sustain your life. But as John Adam once said, "Facts are stubborn things." You can choose not to eat physical food, but you won't live very long if you do.

In the same way, there are not multiple ways to sustain your spiritual life. You might feel like you have life in all sorts of things – life in shopping, life in sex, life in parenting, life in achievement at work, you name it. But the life you feel isn't real. It's a mirage, a house of cards. There are not multiple sources of spiritual life. There is only one: Jesus. Unless you choose to depend on him, you will both remain spiritually dead in the present and experience spiritual death for the rest of eternity.

Second, faith is persistent. Eating a really big meal after church today won't keep you going on Wednesday morning. We have to eat again, and again, and again. The same holds with faith in Jesus. Faith isn't something you acquire at one point in your life, check the box and then move on. No. It's not something we get. It's something we do, over and over and over again, just like eating. Persistence is required. Our dependence on Jesus is an hourly, daily, moment-by-moment sort of thing. It's the only way to experience spiritual life.

Finally, faith is normal. I want to be careful here because there is absolutely nothing ordinary about genuine faith. It is a supernatural gift from God. But there are many times dependence on Jesus feels no more exciting than eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He is exquisitely satisfying, but many expressions of dependence on him will feel rather normal, just like most of the food you eat. That's a good thing, friend, because depending on Jesus should be normal!

We express dependence on Jesus when we open our Bibles day after day to meditate on his word, even when we feel like sleeping longer. We express dependence on Jesus when we choose to gather for worship with the saints Sunday after Sunday, even when we feel like making a big breakfast and tuning in from the comfort of our couch. We express dependence on Jesus when we give generously to the work of the gospel, even when it feels more rewarding to pay off debt. We express dependence on Jesus when we close our mouth and trust him to vindicate us even when we feel like instead of berating our spouse or kids into admitting we're right.

What do all of those examples teach us? That faith in Jesus isn't something you get and then move on with your life. It's a way of doing life. It's not part of the autonomic nervous system. Sustained, strenuous, sacrificial effort is required. It's not flashy. And it doesn't always pay immediate dividends. It's like beginning to eat and drink the good stuff our body needs to live instead of junk food. We might not see fast results, but we keep at it, knowing in the long run, it will have a profound, life-transforming effect.

The analogy to eating helps us understand the necessity, persistence, and day-in-and-day-out character of genuine faith. Jesus' words here are not primarily a description of what happens when we share the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The language of eating and drinking in Jn 6 point to something even more fundamental. It describes the reality of faith, expressing our dependence on Jesus for the spiritual nourishment and life he alone provides.

In that sense, Jn 6 is not about the Lord's Supper. It's about the spiritual reality to which the Supper points, namely, the faith we express as believers whenever we rightly partake of it. St. Augustine says it well, "Believe and you have eaten."

3) FAITH PRODUCES LIFE-GIVING UNION WITH JESUS (vv. 56-59)

Jesus isn't like the marketing team at Nike. He never says, "Just do it." He consistently tells us why we should do something. Throughout Jn 6, Jesus exhorts us to feed on him by faith because it is the only path of eternal life. Notice I did not say because it leads to



eternal life, as if all faith produces is a future reward. Will those who believe in Jesus be raised up by Jesus unto eternal life with Jesus on the last day? Yes. Praise be to God.

But there is a distinctly present character to the eternal life Jesus gives to all who believe in him. V. 54, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life..." Right here, right now, even before we are raised in glory, we get to experience the joy of life in Christ. V. 56 reveals one of the sweetest of our many blessings. In fact, it's the means through which we receive them all. "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and in him."

To abide in Christ is to dwell or remain in him. It is not a formal relationship or a distant relationship. It's an intimate relationship constituted through a covenantal union in which the Holy Spirit unites us to the Son of God such that we become one with the Son of God. We're not absorbed into the divine in a Buddhist sense. Jesus remains a distinct person from us who is altogether different than us. He remains the infinite Creator. We remain finite creatures. Yet we are inseparably connected with him, our representative head, such that his death is our death, his life is our life, his privileges are our privileges, and his inheritance is our inheritance.

When we believe in him, we abide in him, and he in us. There are times when we are meditating on God's Word, engaged in prayer, or worshiping with God's people, when the Spirit blesses us with a heightened sense of that spiritual reality and we experience the joy of intimate fellowship with him. There are other times, often in the midst of suffering, when Jesus feels a million miles away. Sometimes unrepentant sin in our lives prompts the Lord to lovingly discipline us by withdrawing an experiential awareness of his nearness.

Yet in all of those circumstances, the Savior's promise to his people remains. On your good days, on your bad days, on your God feels far away days, on your God feels like he's in the car with me days, you are in Christ and Christ is in you. No power of hell can render that union asunder, friend. You might be waiting to see Jesus, but you are not waiting to have Jesus. He abides in you and you abide in him.

V. 56 is a word of tremendous comfort, Christian. It's also an exhortation to persevere and abound more and more in feeding on Jesus, in depending on Jesus, in learning to obediently trust Jesus in every area of your life. Why? Because the more we feed on him by faith, the more we look exclusively to him for nourishment of soul and less to the broken cisterns of this world, the more we will consciously experience the joy of fellowship with Jesus.

What does that joy consist of? Look at v. 57. 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." Friends, when we look to Jesus and depend exclusively on Jesus to satisfy our souls, we receive and enter into nothing less than the life of God himself. God's joy becomes our joy. God's peace becomes our peace. God's righteousness becomes our righteousness. God's wisdom becomes our wisdom. God's priorities become our purposes. God's sorrows become our sorrows.

The eternal, unending life God himself enjoys has been granted to you, Christian. As the Son has eternally derived his life from the Father, so too, Christian, you now derive your life from the Son. Your life doesn't come from you. It's not something you create, or earn, or sustain. It comes from him. It's something he creates, he sustains, and you receive. Genuine faith produces immeasurably more than a not-guilty verdict on the final day. It produces a life-giving union affording intimate fellowship with Jesus, both now and forevermore.

CONCLUSION

Faith is focused on the person and work of Jesus, expressed through exclusive dependence on Jesus, and produces life-giving union with Jesus. None of that happens automatically. A willful choice on your part is required, friend, a choice Jesus sets before all of us in v. 58, a choice you will make today, tomorrow, and every day for the rest of your life whether you're aware of it or not.

You can eat "the bread the fathers ate and died," you can labor for life in this world that perishes. Or you can feed on Christ, looking to him alone to nourish your soul, and you will "live forever." Feed on the bread of this world and die. Feed on Jesus and live. That's the choice. The table is set. The meal is ready. The Savior is willing. The saints of old line the way. Come and eat, friend.

"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" (Isa 55:2) Come to Jesus, that your soul might live. If you do, know there is a coming day when your longing soul will be fully and completely satisfied. Here is the final reward of your faith.

Rev 7:15-17, "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any



scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Amen. Come Lord, Jesus.