

The Way and Words of Life

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[0 : 00] You'll really find it helpful to turn back to this amazing passage on page 892, John 6 in the Bible. You want to take your Bible out, put away all shopping lists, those sorts of things.

John chapter 6. And just to confirm what Jordan said, yes, we did have a clergy retreat. One of the most important activities on clergy retreat is Frisbee golf.

And all of us over 40 try to catch Jordan, who is the winner all the time. And I never caught him, but I did have a hole in one.

Just one. How many did you have, Jordan? Three. Actually, one of the best parts of the retreat was the Bible teaching.

We had terrific Bible teaching. And at the end, we sat around and said, we talked about the experience of just being fed. You know, it's great fellowship, but we just, as people and as disciples, we are fed and strengthened together.

[1 : 05] And I say that because John 6 is where this whole idea of feeding on Christ comes from. Remember the chapter started about five weeks ago, where Jesus feeds 5,000 families with five fish, five loaves and two fish, baskets left over.

And the next day, he preaches this very long sermon with one basic theme, which is in verse 35. He says, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

And as we come to the last big chunk of this chapter, there's a tension going on. Jesus gets simpler and simpler and clearer and more direct.

I mean, I loved Jordan speaking to the children. There's no words in here that children can't understand. It's very simple. But as Jesus gets clearer, there is a reaction of hostility and antagonism, not just from the wider crowd, but from many, many of the disciples.

And in verse 66, we read many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. There's a mass defection. Because, you see, there is a point that comes to any of us in our relation with Christ, where it becomes clear that Jesus is laying claim to us in the most radical and far-reaching possible way.

[2 : 37] And that the way that I live and the decisions I make and that the way that I think and the attitudes I hold are poisoning me and poisoning those I love.

And that I have to choose between the things that I've invested myself in that I think are going to make me happy. And Jesus, who comes along and says that he is the true bread of life.

I mean, the whole service that we've been saying, we've already said, love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. It's a complete thing. And there comes this point in our relationship with Jesus where we realize, I'm just playing around on the edge of religion.

But to be a true disciple means to let go of my iron grip on all these things that I think make me happy and allow Christ and his grace to grip me. To realize I'm just so frantically busy going, you know, off on so many different directions to truly follow him is mean I'm going to have to simplify my life and make Christ first.

It means I'm going to have to demote some of those things and feed on him first and last. And I wonder if you've ever felt that. I wonder if some of you might be feeling that now.

[3 : 53] Because if you are, Jesus is revealing himself to you and your choice is to listen to him with hunger and humility or to go away like these disciples.

Many choose to be offended and scandalized. And they say in verse 60, this is just all too hard. I don't have to listen to this. So the question this last section in chapter 6 gives to us is, will you feed on Jesus or will you defect?

Are you a true disciple or are you a fake? And there are two points, two big points. The first is feeding on Jesus' flesh.

And that's the middle section, verses 47 to 59. And then we'll look at some responses. Now this middle section is one of the most deep and profound words, I think anywhere, recorded of Jesus. They deal with fundamental issues, our connection between God and Jesus as the only true food for humanity. If you look down at verse 48, he begins by echoing what he's been teaching in the day.

[5 : 01] He says, I'm the bread of life. In verse 49, he speaks about the ultimate futility and inadequacy of anything else in all creation to ultimately satisfy.

Even the best gifts that God gives to us in this life, the things that we sense most feed us, they will lead us to dust and to death apart from Christ.

There is nothing, there is nothing apart from Christ that can truly satisfy and fulfill and feed our needs. This week, spending time with the younger staff, they told me about a website called Hashtag FOMO.

I understand it's a Twitter site. I have looked it up. FOMO is fear of missing out. And it's a very West Coast general fear that others are having better and more satisfying experiences than you have. And so we all have things that we think will make us happy. And what the site is, the site's a combination of a couple of things. All sorts of people put posts on about the things they're frightened of not getting or that they regret.

[6 : 16] One guy I read last night says FOMO is ruining my life. And then they compare themselves and there are these pictures and photographs and stories of how people get to do the coolest things, hanging out with movie stars, skydiving in Dubai or dancing in the latest club.

And the thing about it is it's completely addictive. As you look at all these great experiences and then you have to put, you have to keep watching the hashtag in case you're going to miss out on the next great experience that you're going to miss out on.

But you see, all the accumulation of the coolest experiences in the world are not true food or true bread.

They can't really change me. They can't give me the life of God. They cannot connect me and bring me closer to God or give me the life of heaven. Christ alone is true food and true bread.

What Jesus does in this last section is he makes two shifts, moves two new directions. And the first is he shifts from the picture of bread to the picture of flesh and blood.

[7 : 21] So the one thing, the one central thing we must do to receive eternal life is to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Jesus is speaking about his death.

The way in which Jesus gives us the true food from heaven is through the atoning death on the cross for us when his flesh and his blood were torn apart.

See, in the Bible, blood does not mean life. It's not blood that's pumping around our bodies normally. It's not blood inside me. It's blood outside me.

It's blood poured out. It's blood lost, blood shed, blood separated from the living thing. Blood is always a symbol of death in the Bible. So that the bread of life that Jesus offers becomes available to us when the flesh and blood of Jesus are separated on the cross.

It's a very dramatic picture of a violent and bloody death. Look down at verse 51, please. Second half of the verse. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.

[8 : 32] And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Very important details. He says the bread that I will give, it's completely free.

It's completely gracious. None of us deserve it. He's not compelled to do it or coerced to give his life. And he's talking about the, you know, the horror of the cross here.

He's going to do that freely. For the life of the world. The word for means in the place of, on behalf of, as a substitute for. So as he gives his life over to death, it is for the sake that we will have life. And he says, is my flesh. Of course, he's speaking symbolically here. He's not actually speaking about the sacrament, although I might mention this later. The sacrament points to the same thing. Verse 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.

[9 : 39] So when Jesus became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man, the whole fullness of the God had dwelled in him bodily. But his physical flesh and blood were not magic.

There was no more power in his flesh and blood than there is in yours, in human DNA. So if you went back 2,000 years and bled a litre of blood from Jesus' body.

Sorry about this yucky illustration. And you brought it forward in the time machine and you could drink it today. It wouldn't do you any good. What he's talking about is that on the cross, his flesh and blood are torn apart.

That on the cross, he becomes the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and his human flesh and blood, his body as it were, becomes the channel or the conduit through which eternal life, which dwelled in him, comes to us.

He gave his flesh over to death. He takes our place so that his body becomes the source and fountain of eternal life for you and me. And the other shift he makes is that when he starts talking about his flesh and blood, he changes the word for eating from the normal word that we use at meals to munching, chomping, devouring, gobbling, feasting.

[10:59] And if I'm speaking to teenagers, I might use the illustration of zombies.

Feasting. And this Bible translates it as feeding to show there's a difference. Look at verse 54. Whoever feasts, 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 feasts 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 ever who feasts on me, he also will live because of me. This is how we receive the gift of eternal life through Christ.

It's not through believing in Jesus generally. It's not just believing in his death. It is feasting on him as our substitute and savior in his death. And don't you think it is astonishingly humble for Jesus to use this picture?

[12:12] I mean, we might say, Jesus, why didn't you use chocolate and caviar as a picture of your precious eternal life giving flesh? No, he says, whoever, whoever feeds and drinks.

It's domestic. It's ordinary. It's something we all do. It's something we all understand. Last week, my wife took me to a new ice cream store that's in our neighborhood.

And there's a long line of people, which means I usually I would never go there. But I lined up for the first time and I tasted for the first time their salted caramel ice cream.

Difficult to describe how good it was. Very difficult. And the only way for you to experience it, of course, is to actually taste it. The same is true with Jesus.

You can be a fan. You can be a follower and have never really tasted the true bread of life. You can even stand and say you believe Jesus died on the cross without actually experience and tasting who he is and the reality of his death for you.

[13:20] Because apart from actually sampling and savoring Jesus himself in his death, there can be no changes in us, no real heart changes. I think that's why Jesus compares himself to the manna, the bread in the Old Testament.

A really good gift that came from God, which was meant to point to Jesus, point to Jesus. And I think it's a picture that every good experience that we have in life, our best experiences, they come from God.

But as good as they are, they cannot feed us with eternal life. They are meant to turn us so that we feast on him, feast on him each day, each hour. God's not anti-pleasure.

He's not anti-good experience. But at their best, those experiences are meant to turn us to Christ. And if they don't turn us to Christ, they will turn us away from Christ to themselves.

And all our hungers and all our tastes need constant recalibrating. And the only way to do that is to feast on Christ. And this passage warns us that all our good pleasures will lead to dust if there's something in your life that you really need to be happy apart from Christ.

[14:36] Something you choose above him, before him. Jesus promises it will turn to dust and death in your mouth. But when we learn to feed on him, if we're able to feed on him, it is the key to be able to serve others.

If I'm feeding on him, it means I can love others even if they don't love me. And if I'm feeding on him, I think it's the only way to starve my pride and my bitterness and my anxiety and my regret. Because none of us have power over those things apart from Christ. What does he mean to feed? He's speaking about taking Jesus into our hearts.

The ongoing, soul-filling fellowship with him as we partake in his death. It's digesting. It's actively taking him in through faith.

The way that we grow, the way that we transform and change, is taking into our heart the crucifixion and Jesus crucified to ourselves.

[15:41] That's feeding on Jesus. Jesus. So what's the reaction? It's very interesting that there's more in this chapter, the end of the chapter, on people's response than there is in Jesus' words.

And in the next chapter as well. And there are three different responses. The first two are both offense and rejection. And the last one is a kind of a tentative faith.

But the great surprise is that the first rejection comes from the crowd, but the second rejection comes from disciples, people who have already begun to follow Jesus. You know, you might think that when Jesus begins to speak in this way, people are just rushed to him to feed on him.

I mean, these promises are too good to be true, almost. But there's a great realism in this chapter. Yes, for a while, crowds did flock to him.

But as Jesus becomes clearer, people take offense and then they complain and then they reject. And I think the basic human disposition toward God outside the Garden of Eden is suspicious.

[16:50] And the natural, the normal reaction to Jesus is people are offended. And I think this is very helpful because if you're partially offended by what we're talking about today, this is for you.

And if you have friends who are offended by Jesus, this is also very helpful. Let's look at the three reactions quickly together. I'll spend more time on the first, little less on the second, and very quickly on the third.

It's because I'm very laid back. So the first reaction is the crowds. We go back to verses 41 to 45. You can see there that the crowd has begun to grumble and complain.

And you know what they grumble about? They grumble because Jesus keeps saying, I have come down from heaven. I have come down from heaven. Four times he says it. And I think we need to feel something of the offense of this.

The incarnation of Jesus is offensive because of what it says about us. You see, on our own, our best spiritual insights and intuitions and thoughts are completely in the dark.

[17:58] You can take the most accomplished, brilliant, compassionate, delightful and generous person. Apart from Christ coming from heaven and their feeding on him, their best opinion about God is a stab in the dark.

One of the most powerful ideas and assumptions in our culture is that the way in which we look for God and search for him is that we look around horizontally to all human spiritualities and experiences.

We compare the different religions and we compare different spiritual experiences. And we construct a view of God out of that. It's an affront when Jesus comes and he keeps saying, no one has ever seen God, verse 46, except the one who's come from God.

You can only truly know God if you know me. You can only truly please God or experience God if you please. You can only truly worship God if you worship me by coming to me and believing in me and feeding on my flesh and drinking my blood.

It's offensive. It cuts straight across the idea that we can find God through accumulating spiritual experiences. It's what Chris Wright, preaching last week, called the scandal of particularity.

[19:12] You can see it in verse 42, just after Jesus says he's come down from heaven. They say, is not this Jesus the son of Joseph, his father and mother we know?

How does he now say, I have come down from heaven? It's contempt and it's dogmatic. It's a dogmatic refusal to accept that God could come to us through this one man.

And I don't know about you, but I find this dogmatism quite disheartening, particularly when you're trying to share your faith with a friend or someone you love. You know, the most wonderful and delightful people automatically dismiss Jesus without even really a thought.

And what does Jesus say to people in these circumstances? What does he say to the person with a dismissive attitude, the one who just rejects him? His answer is quite amazing.

He doesn't become threatened and insecure. He doesn't even defend himself and justify himself.

You look at verse 43. He says, stop grumbling. And then he says, only God can really convince you in your hearts of my authenticity.

[20:25] Since I'm heaven sent, I come from God with eternal life. The only one who can back up my claim is God himself. You have to hear directly from him or you're just going to keep grumbling.

Verse 44. No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him. And I'll raise him up on the last day.

This word draw is very important. It's always against resistance. It's not a violent and abusive drawing, but it's always against inertia or disinterest.

Because you see, only God's grace is powerful enough to overcome our grumbling. We cannot approach God by our own competency. The movement begins with God himself.

It's very encouraging in one way. It means that every single one of us who've come to Jesus Christ, we've done so because God the father has drawn us. If he had not drawn us, we would still be resisting.

[21 : 29] He's not closing the door of eternal life to the select few who fly first class. No, no, no. He's drawing the door of God's grace open wide to eternal life to the most cynical, hard-hearted, stubborn and dismissive person because it's God who draws them.

And if it's God who draws them, I think it means for us that we shouldn't harass or nag our friends. We should pray for them. I mean, yes, our witness and our conversation, our invitations are very important.

But it's only God who can really enter into someone's life and draw them to Christ and show them spiritually what's really going on. So I want to encourage you, those of you who are Christians, to pray for your friends, particularly those who are most antagonistic.

And how does God draw us? Verse 45, the next verse. 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.

It's a quote from the Old Testament where God promises that when Messiah comes, God himself will be our teacher. That God by his spirit, as we hear the word of God outwardly, will shine in our hearts, illuminating the beauty of Jesus' face and that he is the Messiah.

[22 : 51] So none of us have believed because of our own strength and insight. None of us keep believing because of our own strength. I don't have the strength to be faithful for 24 hours, 12 hours.

But if you feel that God is drawing you now, don't resist him. Come to Jesus. That's the reaction of the crowd.

It's offense and rejection. But there's a second and even more troubling reaction in verses 60 to 66, which is offense from disciples. This is very searching.

This is not the crowd who don't have any commitment to Jesus. See, verse 60, these are those who have become disciples and have begun to follow Jesus.

And there's a great number of them who turn away because they start to grumble as well as Jesus becomes clearer. And they say in verse 60, oh, this is all too hard to swallow. You can't expect Jesus to overtake a lifelike.

[23 : 50] Just not practical. And we've seen this happen many times at St. John's, haven't we? People come with great enthusiasm and begin to follow Jesus Christ. But when it becomes clear that Jesus disagrees with us or he's calling for us to have a deeper, clearer commitment, there's a cooling and a distance and the grumbling begins.

And what does Jesus say to those who no longer want to continue with him? What does he offer those who say, I really can't be a disciple anymore? Well, in verse 62, he points us to the cross again.

And then in verse 63, he says this. It is the spirit who gives life. The flesh, speaking about our human flesh, is no help at all.

The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. See, our human flesh, apart from the spirit, cannot gain that eternal satisfaction.

But the way in which the Holy Spirit comes to us is through Jesus' words. Yep. Jesus gives us his spirit as we hear the words of Jesus being taught.

[25 : 05] So if you are feeling particularly fatigued, if you're feeling as though, I don't know if I can even continue as a disciple, the way forward is not to try harder, to work harder.

The way is simply hearing the words of Jesus by faith, because we cannot feed on Jesus apart from his words. I think this partly explains why the feeling of feeding on Jesus comes and goes for us.

Because you see, Jesus does not give us his food apart from him, and we run off all satisfied.

Because every time we feed on him, we have to come to him.

He remains our flesh, our blood, the bread of the world. And if you sense in your own heart a pulling away for Jesus, and you're feeling overwhelmed by other hungers, you wonder if you can keep

being a disciple.

And perhaps even in your heart, you've begun to grumble against him quietly. Of course, you're not saying it to others yet. Or maybe you feel as though God has not come through for you. You and I just need to attend to these really simple words of Jesus here.

[26 : 18] And the prayer, I think, for me and for you is, Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief. Isn't that the prayer for all of us? And he says, I'll give my spirit without measure, because my words are spirit and life.

And then finally and quickly, there is a lovely and true response. In verse 66, the many disciples walk away. So we've gone from a crowd of 20,000. Many of them have walked away.

How many hundreds, maybe thousands, had begun to follow Jesus? They all walk away, and we're left with the 12. And in verse 67, Jesus said to the 12, Do you want to go away as well?

And he says it for their benefit. And Simon Peter answered him, This is a great answer. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

And we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God. That's the fundamental mark there of what it is that God is drawing you, and you're feeding on Christ.

[27 : 25] You know there's no real alternative. You know the power, something of the power of Jesus' words. When you read them yourself, and when you hear them taught, it's like fire.

You get a taste of the world to come as his words enter your heart. And you know what it is to be acted on by a force from outside you, making you like Jesus. Feed on his words.

You feed on him. And above all, you've come to know, this is the mark, you've come to believe and know Jesus as the Holy One of God. Not just know about him, but to know him.

He's real to you. And this is so important. It's so important that on the night before he was crucified, Jesus gave us a meal to repeat the Lord's Supper.

And it enacts the gospel in exactly these terms. We're about to participate together in the Lord's Supper, which tells the story of the great heart of the gospel again, of Jesus' death for us.

[28 : 30] And at the end, as we come to receive bread and wine, we're invited to feed on him and to drink. And in the Anglican prayer book, which you've got in your seats in front of you, the wine, don't pull it out, the wine-colored prayer book, at the back of that book, there are 39 articles, which is a kind of a domestic creed for us as Anglicans.

And one of the articles says this, that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death. And insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ.

And likewise, the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ. So come and feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving.

And come and drink his blood with thanksgiving. Because Jesus says, Amen.

Thank you.