



THE ONLY WAY TO LIVE

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 6:40-71

Fourteenth Message

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In our studies in the gospel of John these past few weeks, I have attempted to open up a window into my own spiritual journey. I have done so both for my own growth and for your encouragement.

One of the significant discoveries I have made in examining my own painful background is my inability to be content. It is hardly necessary to say that this need I feel that everything must be perfect in order for me to be happy has left me an unhappy man most of the time. "If only" and "I should have" are watchwords that have taken a tremendous toll on my own and on my family's life. In my healing I am discovering that I am not alone in this. In fact, I am convinced that one of the critical needs in the body of Christ is the need for contentment.

We have already examined Jesus' claim in chapter 6 of this gospel that he is the ultimate nourisher of the human heart. He is the true bread from heaven which the manna in the wilderness symbolized and anticipated. Jesus is our only true source for security and satisfaction. He demonstrated that in a miraculous feeding of five thousand people, and here in this chapter he explains the miracle in a powerful dialogue he engages in with four different groups.

Our Lord's response to us in our difficult circumstances is the same as it was to his disciples on that stormy night on the Sea of Galilee: "Stop being afraid! It is I." He is the answer to our inadequacy. Remember the lesson we learned in the feeding of the five thousand. It is that we will make it, not because we are smart and can figure everything out, or that we have the right friends who can bail us out of our problems. Our strength is in the fact that Jesus is nearby and he is in charge. In spite of our frequent failures, he will provide.

As I have studied this book I have become convinced that there is a direct correlation between our ability to be content and our ability to believe that Jesus is the true bread of life. He alone can meet the deep needs that we keep hoping others will meet.

John 6:22-70 is a follow-up discussion on the lesson of the loaves that we looked at two weeks ago. Here Jesus is responding to questions and answers. There are four groups involved in this discussion: 1) the crowd (25-40) (we looked at this last week); 2) the Jews (41-59); 3) a larger group of disciples (60-66); and 4) the twelve disciples, with Peter as their spokesman (67-71).

Apparently, the conversation with the crowd that began on the hillside has continued in the synagogue with the Jewish leaders. Their reaction to Jesus' claim to be the bread of life is given in verses 41-42:

The Jews therefore were grumbling about Him, because He said, "I am the bread that came down out of heaven." And they were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?"

We can imagine their reaction. They turned to each other and said, "What is he talking about? Come on, how can anybody come down from heaven? We know this man! He grew up in Nazareth, just over the hill. We know Joseph and Mary, his mother and father. He is a carpenter's son." They had no understanding of his unique origins.

Their reaction was to doubt his claim for, like many today, they were the victims of incomplete facts. They didn't have all the evidence—and they weren't looking for it either. We don't know whether they knew about the angels and the shepherds, the wise men, and all the wonder of that night in Bethlehem when the heavenly hosts sang the word of hope to a lost world. If they did, they had forgotten about it. And they had forgotten about the wonderful things they had heard Jesus say and do. They had forgotten about the miracles and all of the lives he had restored. They had forgotten about the feeding the five thousand just a day earlier.

Jesus doesn't answer their question. Instead, he tells them why it is they would even ask such a question. It is because they are ignorant and untaught, says Jesus. (Remember he is speaking to the best taught group of Biblical scholars in the world). They think they know all there is to know about Jesus' paternity, but he insists that they don't know his Father at all. Listen to what he said to them:

Jesus answered and said to them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught of God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. Not that any man has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate

the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh."

Their grumbling shows them to be of the same spirit as their fathers who grumbled both before and after the manna was provided for them in the desert. Jesus points out that their unbelief is essentially a moral, not an intellectual problem.

And it always is! John has already said that people love the darkness more than the light. They don't want to be exposed to the light. They don't want to hear from the Father. Belief is never accomplished through intellectual argument. So long as man remains confident in his own ability, without divine help, to assess the meaning of his experience, he cannot believe. No, God must take the initiative to reveal himself. And when he does, John says, it is not in the manner of the savage constraint of a rapist, but in the gentle wooing of a lover. There is an inner opening of the eyes and the ears of our soul so that at last we can understand the implications of his life. It is by an insight, an illumination implanted within us.

This need for internal illumination, Jesus tells these scholars, was stated in the Hebrew Scriptures. He reminds them that the prophets foretold that one of the marks of the Messianic age would be a renewed revelation from God: "And they shall all be taught of God." Jeremiah looked forward to a new covenant, when God would put his law in the minds of his people and write it on their hearts. Many of us here this morning have had that experience. It may happen suddenly or slowly. It may happen painfully. Often in the Scriptures we read the words, "And the Lord opened their eyes so that they understood." That is what is necessary. And when we are drawn to Jesus, our responsibility is to believe.

Jesus is the only authorized spokesman for God! You cannot know God without eventually coming to know Jesus. That cannot be! You can't say (as I have heard people say), "I love God, but I can't handle this business about Jesus." Jesus is the only authorized revealer of the Father that man can discover. If you are truly seeking God, you will be drawn to Jesus.

These Jews have another question:

52 The Jews therefore [began] to argue with one another, saying, "How can this man give us [His] flesh to eat?" Jesus therefore said 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 yourselves. He who eats 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. He who eats 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 he who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me. This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate, and died, he who eats this bread shall live forever." These things He said in the synagogue, as He taught in Capernaum.

All through this gospel we have come across people who are confused because they did not see past the symbols that Jesus used to the reality of which he spoke. In chapter 2 he said to the Jews, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again." They immediately thought he was talking about the beautiful building that stood on top of Mt. Moriah. But John said that he was speaking about the temple of his body, which the building symbolized. In chapter 3, when Nicodemus was told by Jesus, "You must be born again," he immediately asked, "How can I get back in my mother's womb?" He was thinking about gynecology, but Jesus was talking about eternal life. In chapter 4, when Jesus said to the woman at the well, "If you knew who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water," she thought he was talking about plumbing. To this she replied, "Give me that water so I won't have to come here anymore." But Jesus led her to see that he was talking about the gift of life. And so when he speaks here about eating flesh and drinking blood, he is not talking about cannibalism, but about inner food, inner sustenance, that which we were meant to live on.

These Jews were still hung up on ineffective symbols which they were relying on for faith. They were still looking back across the centuries when their fathers were fed manna in the wilderness, unable to see the reality to which that symbol referred.

I know people like that today. They get hung up on symbols and put their trust in ceremonies. They trust the fact that they were baptized or joined a church or were confirmed in a religious ceremony. They are trusting in the symbol of life instead of life itself. But Jesus makes it clear that these are merely symbols of a deeper reality, and that deeper reality is the content of his words.

The Talmud speaks of "eating and drinking" the Law. What was especially offensive to these Jews was that Jesus took this metaphor and applied it to himself: "Eat of Me; drink of Me." But it is a very helpful metaphor. Eating and drinking amounts to assimilating another body into your own. Life is transferred from the body of the one eaten to the eater. You are what you eat. The bacon and eggs you ate this morning will become you tomorrow! It is a mystery, but it happens.

Had the Jews listened they would have had their

answer to this puzzling question. Jesus said earlier, in verse 35: "he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." Eating is what keeps you from getting hungry. (Nothing kills the appetite like eating!) So eating is coming. And drinking prevents thirst, so drinking is believing. Eating and drinking, then, are analogous to coming and believing.

Jesus explains that that process is analogous to his own relationship to the Father. He lived by feeding on the Father, and we are to live by feeding on him. As he will tell his disciples later in the Upper Room, the secret of life is, "I in you and you in Me"—my life given over to him and his life given over to me.

Many therefore of His disciples, when they heard [this] said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?"

The word difficult there is not referring to being difficult to understand, but to being difficult to accept. We might translate it "harsh." It is difficult in that we have to lay down our independence and come to Jesus. That is hard for us.

And Jesus knew this:

But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble? [What] then if you should behold the Son of Man ascending where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father." As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore.

Notice that now his disciples are offended. (This is referring, as we see in verse 67, to a larger group of disciples, not the twelve). Jesus asks them, "Does this offend you? Would you be offended if I told you this in my ascended state?" No, of course not. What is offensive to them is that it appears that it is a mere man who is making these claims.

And then Jesus gives them a principle: It is only the Holy Spirit who gives life. Human activity (the flesh) profits nothing. That is not a principle that we easily accept. What is it that disturbs us? It is that we don't want to rely on supernatural means to get through life. We want to make it on our own. And if we can't pick up the check, we want at least to leave the tip. That's why we want to add some human activity (a sacrament like baptism) to salvation—because we want to take some of the credit for it. But Jesus re-

moves all that when he says that the flesh profits nothing.

That's why we need a wilderness: because a wilderness experience strips us of our self-sufficiency. It is only there, in the wilderness, that we will accept supernatural food. There is where we give up our idols that we have been depending on for life.

That is what these Jews should have seen as they looked back on the manna in the wilderness. When the nation of Israel was brought out of the Egyptian captivity, and they had victoriously come through the Red Sea, their enemies destroyed, where do we find them? In a wilderness. Why did they not immediately enter the Promised Land? Moses told them why in Deut. 8:2,3: "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna [supernatural food] which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."

God puts us in wilderness experiences where we cannot cope in order to humble us, so that we might learn not to trust in our own resources but to depend on him.

We see this in David's life. When he was anointed by Saul, the prophet whispered in his ear, "You shall be the next king." Immediately after that, David defeated Goliath in a magnificent display of faith. But then where do we find him? On a throne, ruling over Israel? No. He is in a wilderness, being chased by a mad king and unable to fight back. Even when it was within his power to get revenge he could not do so because he knew that he must trust God as he prepared for kingship. In that wilderness David poured out his heart to God. More than fifty of his psalms record his lamenting. In the wilderness David learned that his own resources were not sufficient. In the wilderness he learned to say.

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters...*

There were no green pastures, no still waters in the wilderness. But there, in the midst of that dry and barren land, David learned that God would feed him. God would transform the wilderness into a green pasture, and God would turn stones into bread.

This was true also of Jesus. Remember what happened after his baptism and that visible display of the assurance that he was King and the Father's beloved Son. Where do we next find him? The Spirit immediately led him to a wilderness. As he was preparing to

be King over his people, he had to trust his Father while he hungered and thirsted for forty days. Afterwards the angels provided him with supernatural food.

This is what God is doing in our lives as well. We should not be surprised if we are in a wilderness this morning; it is because God is preparing us for kingship. He is helping us to see that we were never meant to live as wanderers seeking our own food for sustenance. These longings for something apart from ourselves are put there by God himself. Our mistake is in trying to fulfill them in our own way, apart from him. But he is faithful to remove all the props, all the idols, so that we will turn to him, the true Bread of life, and feed on him.

So it is not out of God's plan if you find yourself hungry and thirsty today. It is not out of God's plan that you find yourself stumbling over rocks and stones in a wilderness rather than walking sure-footed in a green pasture. It is there, in our own wilderness, hungry and spiritually bankrupt, that we are fed by God with supernatural food, the true Bread: the life of the Lord Jesus himself.

Samuel Rutherford has a wonderful word for us here:

If God had told me some time ago that he was about to make me as happy as I could be in this world, and then He should begin by crippling me in arm or limb, and remove from me all my usual sources of enjoyment, I should have thought it a very strange mode of accomplishing His purpose. And yet, how His wisdom is manifest even in this. For if you should see a man shut up in a closed room, idolizing a set of lamps and rejoicing in their light, and you wished to make him truly happy, you would begin by blowing out all his lamps, and then throw open the shutters to let in the light of heaven.

This is what God is doing with us. He is blowing out the lamps so that we might see the true Bread of life and come to him that he might feed us.

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