

Chapter 14: The Food of Jesus

John 6:22–59

Why did Jesus come into the world? When Jesus says that he came not to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:28), does he mean that he came to be useful in our own goals, ventures, and desires, or does he mean something entirely different? In this “Bread of Life Discourse,” Jesus defines the purpose of his coming with an explanation that stretches from before the foundation of the earth were laid, to his incarnation, earthly ministry, death, and resurrection, and ultimately all the way to “the last day.” But while the scope of this dialogue is breath-taking, Jesus also offends his hearers because of the shocking revelation that they must feed on his flesh and drink his blood in order to be saved (John 6:53–58). What does he mean? Why do the Galilean Jews not believe him? What does Jesus want from us today? In this section, Jesus answers all these questions by teaching that *hungry sinners may feed on life by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus*.

Food that Endures to Eternal Life (John 6:22–34)

John’s description of the crowd’s vigil to prevent the escape of Jesus in John 6:22–24 paints the Galileans in an absurd light. In their great desperation to capitalize on Jesus’ power by making him king (John 6:15) and to get another free lunch (John 6:26), they set up watch through the entire night to make sure that no boat carries Jesus away. After the night has passed, and they have only seen one boat leave—taking Jesus’ disciples, but *not* Jesus (John 6:22)—they still cannot find Jesus. So, when other boats arrive near the place where Jesus multiplied bread the day before, the Galileans get on those boats to cross over to Capernaum where Jesus arrived with his disciples the night before (John 6:23–24). Although John does not tell us this until the very end of this dialogue, the Galileans talk with Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum (John 6:59), which makes it possible that synagogue leaders may have taken part in this conversation, and not the crowd only.¹

A Hungry Crowd

Regardless, it is the crowd who ate with Jesus the day before who asks the first question when they finally find him: “Rabbi, when did you come here?” (John 6:25). From their question we can discern that they are genuinely confused about the fact that Jesus had withdrawn from them, forcing them to sail across the Sea of Galilee to find him.² Now, we observed in our study of the previous passage that Jesus did not rebuke the sign-seekers when they come to him (John 6:2), but that he instead gave them exactly what they want—a sign—without even a hint of rebuke. Jesus tested his disciples (John 6:6), but he did not say anything to the sign-seeking crowd like what he had said to rebuke the faith of the royal official from Capernaum in John 4:48: “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”

Jesus gave a free pass to the sign-seekers about their false faith yesterday, but not today. If Jesus answers their question and tells them the truth of how he arrived in Capernaum by walking on water, their impression of him as “a miracle-worker, powerful enough to lead a revolution and to provide prosperity for all” will only grow, and perhaps they will seek to make him king again.³ Ignoring their question altogether, Jesus instead rebukes them, saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (John 4:26). Now, when Jesus criticizes the crowd’s seeking for him “not because you saw signs,” he does not mean that they have suddenly repented from their sign-seeking, false faith (John 6:2; cf. John 2:23–25; 4:43–45, 48). Instead, Jesus is exposing their hearts for their failure to respond to Jesus’ signs with faith. Instead, “they expect nothing greater from him than to live happily and at ease in this world.”⁴ Their desires are “not for the heavenly and permanent, but for the earthly and perishable.”⁵ The Incarnate Son of God stands before them to teach, to shepherd, to intercede, to reign, and to lay his own life down as a sacrifice for them, but they only want to fill their bellies again.

Food that Endures to Eternal Life

Nevertheless, we should not overlook the fact that it “is grace on Jesus’ part that he allows these people to find him; he is still willing to work upon their souls.”⁶ Therefore, after rebuking their false faith, Jesus then warns them and pleads with them to repent: “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal” (John 6:27). As with the dialogue with the Samaritan woman (John 4:10, 14), Jesus promises to *give* eternal life. D. A. Carson writes, “[Jesus’] point was not that they should attempt some novel form of work, but that merely material notions of blessing are not worth pursuing.”⁷ In spite of their hard, greedy hearts, Jesus continues to warn about the vanity of material blessings while he holds out the promise of eternal life to any who will believe.

But with this contrast between food that “perishes” and “food that endures to eternal life,” Jesus also seems to be alluding to the two trees in the garden of Eden: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. The Lord God warned Adam about eating from the first tree, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17). The food of that tree would lead to death, and it stands in comparison to the tree of life. After the Fall, God decided to set a guard of cherubim with a flaming sword in front of the entrance to the garden of Eden after saying, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” (Gen. 3:22). The Greek translation (Septuagint) of the phrase “live forever” is *zēsetai eis ton aiōna*, and it is the equivalent to what Jesus describes as the food that endures “to eternal life”: *eis zōēn aiōnion*. Adam and Eve chose to eat the food that perished rather than the food that endures to eternal life.

A similar poor choice of food shows up in the story of Israel’s wilderness wanderings, surrounding the manna that came down from heaven: “Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, ‘Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at’” (Num. 11:4–6). Despite the suggestions of the Galilean crowd that all they ever wanted was to eat from the bread that Moses gave to the Israelites (John 6:31), the history of Israel presents a very

different picture: their forefathers loathed the manna they received, and they preferred going back to their bondage and death in Egypt to eat there rather than continuing to eat the manna. Then, when the Israelites come to the border of the land of Canaan—a land where God promised to give his people *life* if they kept his covenant (Deut. 30:15–20)—the spies told them about the goodness of the land by describing its *food*: “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with *milk and honey*, and this is its *fruit*” (Num. 13:27). Nevertheless, out of fear that God would not protect them or provide for them in the land, the people of Israel decide among themselves to choose a new leader in order to go back to Egypt (Num. 14:1–4). As in the garden of Eden, God held out the promise of *eating* and enjoying *life*, but they instead chose to go back to their death, and because of this God condemned those people who had seen his glory displayed in Egypt, but nevertheless rejected the Promised Land, to die in the wilderness (Num. 14:20–23). They did not embrace the life-giving food God was promising to them, and because of that, they perished in the wilderness. Additionally, we may also note that when the Israelites then changed their mind and tried to enter into the Promised Land, God handed them over to defeat in battle “by the sword” (Num. 14:43). As with the flaming sword of the cherubim in front of the garden of Eden, God’s place is again guarded from rebels by a sword.

Beyond these two stories, this tale of two meals appears at multiple points in the Bible. Consider the meal that Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel ate in the presence of the Lord (Ex. 24:9–11) against the false feast “to the LORD” that Aaron gave before the golden calves (Ex. 32:1–6). Or, the meal from the king’s table offered to Daniel, Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Mismatch), and Azariah (Abednego) that would have defiled them, versus the life-giving meal of vegetables and water that did not defile them (Dan. 1:8–16). Or, consider the contrast in Revelation 19 between the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9) and the feast of the armies who are gathered against the Lamb—those armies themselves *become* the “great supper of God” to the birds who eat their conquered, dead flesh (Rev. 19:17–18).

If Jesus is indeed alluding to these stories that join the concepts of *eating* with *life and death*, then Jesus is making an astonishing claim: the Galileans are still seeking to eat food that will lead to their death (just like the food of Egypt and the food of the knowledge of good and evil), but Jesus is instead telling them to seek the food that will lead to life—just as the people of God were offered life (typologically and symbolically) by eating from the tree of life and from the milk, honey, and fruit in the Promised Land. The hunger of the Galileans is the hunger of a broken, fallen state of humanity, where they must not only toil in thorns and thistles for their food because of God’s curse on the ground (Gen. 3:17–19),⁸ but where they also misunderstand the fact that their physical hunger points beyond itself to their spiritual hunger for life in union with Christ. But if this is indeed true, there is a major question that Jesus has not yet answered: How will Jesus permit them to eat this life-giving food if the pathways are guarded by the sword?

The Works of God

Then, just as the Samaritan woman misinterpreted Jesus’ *spiritual* offer to give her living water, pointing out that Jesus had no bucket with which to draw *physical* water (John 4:11), so now the Galilean Jews misinterpret Jesus’ question by asking, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” (John 6:28). Where the Samaritan woman seems genuinely curious about how to comply with the request and the offer that Jesus made to her, the question of the crowd suggests that they are

not so genuine. Grammatically, the crowd asks their question with verbs in the subjunctive mood, which expresses wishes, doubts, or hypothetical situations, rather than the indicative mood, which expresses facts and realities. R. C. H. Lenski writes, “note the deliberative subjunctive in the question, which suggests doubt on the whole subject, or a wish to do something, not being certain what that ought to be; this is quite different from the present indicative....The subjunctive would take Jesus’ answer under advisement; the indicative would ask for Jesus’ orders.” A day earlier they wanted to make this man king, and now they want to explore Jesus’ offer with caution!

Patently, Jesus again insists on the necessity of believing in him: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29). The bread that Jesus fed to the crowd a day earlier was *not* the food that will never perish, but will endure to eternal life. Instead, that imperishable, eternally enduring, life-giving food is faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God whom the Father sent into the world for us and for our salvation. The crowd has come hungry again for another physical meal, but Jesus seeks to redirect them to a deeper hunger. As Augustine remarks, “Why are you getting your teeth and stomachs ready? Believe and you have eaten.”¹⁰ In addition to failing to understand the kind of food that Jesus would give them, the crowd also fails to understand the “work” that Jesus points them to. He does not ask them to set themselves to some Herculean effort in the hopes that they can put Jesus in their debt somehow; instead, he is telling them that if they believe in the one whom the Father has sent, then Jesus will *give* to them this infinitely satisfying, life-giving food: “they do not consider that God bestows upon us, by the hand of the Son, all that is necessary for spiritual life.”¹¹

“What sign do you do?”

In addition to the night-long vigil and the pursuit of Jesus by sea, the crowd now adds this absurdity to their shame: “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (John 6:30–31).¹² Again, it is only a day earlier that they identified Jesus as the prophet and wanted to make Jesus king after his extraordinary miracle (John 6:14–15), and now they ask him to perform a sign? This is not an honest intellectual question, but malice and blindness to the power of God revealed in Jesus Christ.¹³ For the Samaritan woman, one sign was enough, so that after Jesus revealed his prophetic insight into her sinful sexual past, she began to inquire about true worship, and eventually went to tell her townspeople to “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29). These Galilean Jews, on the other hand, ask for additional proof on top of the overwhelming proof that they witnessed with their own eyes the day before.

Wisely, Jesus rejects the premise of their question. They are imagining that, at best, Jesus might be someone on equal footing with the great Moses. Jesus, rather than pointing out the fact that he *just* performed a Moses-like miracle of feeding Israelites in the wilderness (which would be true), instead points to the shortcomings of Moses in that miracle. Namely, *Moses* did not perform the miracle! Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32–33). Moses simply relayed to the Israelites what God said he would do: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you...’” (Ex. 16:4).¹⁴ But, if the crowd really wants a miracle, Jesus tells them that they are

witnessing a miracle in their midst. In Jesus, the Father *is giving* them (present tense) the *true* bread from heaven, who comes down from heaven and gives life (again, present tense) to the world.¹⁵ Don't miss the connection to Jesus' discourse from John 5 with the Judean Jews: *the Father* gives the true bread from heaven in the Son, and *the Son* gives life to the world. The Father gives life *in and through* the Son (John 5:21, 26).

In response to Jesus' offer of living water, the Samaritan woman said, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water" (John 4:15). In a similar way, the crowd now asks Jesus for the bread of God that he is speaking about: "Sir, give us this bread always" (John 6:34). They ask the right question to gain the right bread, but sadly, they do not really mean what they say, as the rest of the dialogue will make clear.¹⁶

The Bread of Life (John 6:35–51)

At this point, Jesus speaks to them directly: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). This is first of seven "I am" statements in the Gospel of John where Jesus uses metaphors to describe himself.¹⁷ He is "the bread of life" (John 6:35), "the light of the world" (John 8:12), "the gate" (John 10:9), "the good shepherd" (John 10:11), "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25–26), "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), and "the vine" (John 15:5). Each of these statements reveal something significant about Jesus, his relationship to the Father, and the salvation he offers to his people, beginning with this statement about the eternal satisfaction that Jesus provides all those who come to him in faith. Everyone who comes to Jesus will no longer hunger, and everyone who believes in Jesus will never thirst—very similar promises to what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again" (John 4:14).

Yet, Jesus does not speak *only* of faith in the most basic, passive sense, but also of the nature of our relationship with Jesus that proceeds from faith. We do not simply assent to the truths that Jesus teaches and then move on with our lives, but the images of eating and drinking suggests that the ongoing satisfaction we are looking through comes through faith that is lively, active, and intimate. As John Calvin writes:

I readily acknowledge that there is no other way in which we eat Christ than by believing; but the eating is the effect and fruit of faith rather than faith itself. For faith does not look at Christ only as at a distance, but embraces him, that he may become ours and may dwell in us. It causes us to be incorporated with him, to have life in common with him, and, in short, to become one with him, (John 17:21.) It is therefore true that by faith alone we eat Christ, provided we also understand in what manner faith unites us to him.¹⁸

Are you hungry? Come to Jesus Christ and eat! Are you thirsty? Come to Jesus Christ and drink! He will satisfy the deep longings of your soul when you come to him in faith. In this way, Jesus describes the sweep of a believer's life—we find our satisfaction when we look for it in Jesus Christ alone. In saying this (as well as his encouragement not to work for food that perishes; John 6:27), Jesus identifies himself as the fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah:

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” (Isa. 55:1–2)

Come to Jesus Christ, the bread of life, and you will never hunger or thirst, for he will satisfy and delight you!

Irresistible Grace

Tragically, not everyone will come to Jesus—most immediately, Jesus speaks to the crowd of Galileans, saying, “But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe” (John 6:36). Jesus is the bread of life who has come down from heaven, and all who come to him in faith will be satisfied and delighted in him. Nevertheless, these Galileans—the same people who readily believed him to be the prophet and a powerful king only the day before—look upon him and are unwilling to believe. How can this be? What keeps them from faith and from the deep satisfaction of the souls?

Jesus explains that faith is not a matter of intellect (Are you *smart* enough to recognize Jesus for who he is?) or willpower (Are you *strong* enough to believe in Jesus, despite the cost?) or holiness (Are you *good* enough to believe in Jesus), since every part of our nature as human beings is corrupted by sin. Instead, for a sinner to come to faith (whether a sinner among the crowd of Galileans, or a sinner living today), *God* must do a gracious work in that sinner to lead him or her to faith in Jesus. Here is what Jesus says:

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:37–40)

The faith of believers is not primarily about something that the *believers* do, but about the interaction of the Father and the Son. The Father, from all eternity past, has chosen to save a people—those whom the Bible calls God’s “elect.” Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, praises God for the love that he has lavished on his elect, writing: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has *blessed us in Christ* with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, *even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love *he predestined us* for adoption as sons *through Jesus Christ*, according to the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:3–5). Notice both *when* election took place: we were predestined for adoption as sons before the foundation of the world. Then, notice *how* (or, better, *in whom*) the election took place: the Father blessed us in Christ, chose us in Christ, and predestined us through Christ. The Father chose some for salvation before the foundation of the world *in Christ*.

This is the plan that Jesus references here. The Father is giving him a people, and every one of those elect whom the Father is giving to his Son will come to him without fail. There will not, and there *cannot*, be a failed hand-off between the Father and the Son, so that all will whom the Father

chose in Christ will also come to Christ. How can Jesus be so confident? Quite simply, he is confident because of the Holy Spirit, who will bring to Jesus all those whom the Father has given to his Son. Although Jesus does not explicitly describe the work of the Holy Spirit here, he does so elsewhere in this Gospel. For example, Jesus told Nicodemus “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Later, during the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus will tell his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth....He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore, I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13, 14). The work of the Spirit is to give new birth to sinners so that they might believe in Christ; then, the Spirit leads us ever deeper into all the truth of Christ—that is, to eat and drink from Christ. By this gracious work of the Holy Spirit, the elect whom the Father gives to his Son will unfailingly and irresistibly come to Christ in faith.” In the so-called “Five Points of Calvinism” (or, better, the “doctrines of grace”), this idea that those whom the Father gives to the Son will unfailingly come to him by the power of the Holy Spirit is commonly referred to as the doctrine of “Irresistible Grace.”

Perseverance of the Saints

Next, Jesus explains *his* part in this gracious work of redemption that the Father planned in and through his Son from before the foundation of the world: “whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” Importantly, Jesus is not here speaking about *how* one comes to Jesus, but about what will happen *after* someone comes to Jesus. In other words, Jesus does not qualify the absolute predestinarian promise that *all* whom the Father gives to him will come to him by suddenly appealing to our choices, of whether or not we will *choose* to come to him. Nothing in this world or beyond can thwart the Father’s plan to give his Son a people—and especially, *you* cannot thwart God’s plan through your sin. Your salvation belongs to God, from before the foundation of the world, to the point when the Father sent the Son to die for his elect, and all the way to the point in the future when the Son returns to judge the world and raise up his people to the resurrection of life (John 5:29).

It is that last part of God’s redemptive plan that Jesus has in view here—the question of whether we will persevere all the way until the end. D. A. Carson’s explanation is worth quoting in full:

The second part of this verse is frequently misunderstood. Formally it is a ‘litotes’, a figure of speech in which something is affirmed by negating its contrary. Thus, ‘a citizen of no mean city’ means ‘a citizen of a rather important city’. When Jesus says *whoever comes to me I will never drive away*, the affirmative that he is expressing in this fashion is often taken to mean ‘whoever comes to me I will certainly welcome’. The second part of the verse then becomes a softening of the predestinarianism in the first part. But in fact, the affirmation expressed by this litotes is rather different: ‘whoever comes to me I will certainly keep in, preserve’. The flow of the verse is then as follows: All that (a singular neuter is used to refer to the elect collectively) the Father gives to Jesus, as his gift to his Son, will surely come to him; and whoever in fact comes (by virtue of being given by the Father to the Son), Jesus undertakes to keep in, to preserve. The second part of the verse moves from the collective whole to the individual, and from the actual coming (consequent on being part of the gift) to preservation.

This interpretation is suggested by the verb *ekballō*, ‘drive away’ or ‘cast out’. In almost all of its parallel occurrences, it is presupposed that what is driven out or cast out is already ‘in’. ‘I will never drive away’ therefore means ‘I will certainly keep in’. This interpretation, however strongly supported by the verb, is required by the context, the next three verses.²⁰

These next three verses, then, are critical for the message of John 6:37b. First, Jesus says that the Son will never cast out any who come to him, because he has come to do his Father’s will (John 6:38), and his Father’s will is that Jesus should lose nothing of all that the Father has given him, but should raise the entire elect people up on the last day (John 6:39). It is also the Father’s will for people to come to the Son in a unique, specific way: by looking on the Son and believing in him (John 6:40). All that the Father gives to the Son will irresistibly come to the Son by the work of the Holy Spirit, and of all those who *do* come (that is, the entirety of the elect), the Son will unfailingly preserve them, including by raising them up from the dead on the last day. In the Five Points of Calvinism, this doctrine that the Son cannot lose a single one of all whom the Father give to him—including *you*—is commonly referred to as the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints.²¹

The Doctrines of Grace

In the western world where we cherish personal choice, free will, and self-determination, the doctrines of grace can seem confusing. We do not like the idea that our salvation comes to us from outside of us and by God’s grace. We want to claim the credit for at least a part of our salvation, but Jesus explains that salvation comes as a work of his magnificent grace from first to last. We are miserable sinners, deserving nothing but God’s wrath and condemnation. In spite of that, God so loved us that he chose us in Christ from before the foundation of the world, and when Jesus came into this world, he came to execute the mission of redemption that his Father had planned in him from the beginning. Today, in the grind of life and the onslaught of temptation, we need these promises to continue believing that we cannot ruin God’s eternal plan. John Calvin frames the pastoral nature of Jesus’ promise to us:

[Christ] is not the guardian of our salvation for a single day, or for a few days, but that he will take care of it to the end, so that he will conduct us, as it were, from the commencement to the termination of our course; and therefore he mentions the last resurrection. This promise is highly necessary for us, who miserably groan under so great weakness of the flesh, of which every one of us is sufficiently aware; and at every moment, indeed, the salvation of the whole world might be ruined, were it not that believers, supported by the hand of Christ, advance boldly to the day of resurrection. Let this, therefore, be fixed in our minds, that Christ has stretched out his hand to us, that he may not desert us in the midst of the course, but that, relying on his goodness, we may boldly raise our eyes to the last day.²²

The way in which we boldly raise our eyes to the last day is not to evaluate whether *we* are good enough, or to try to peer into the eternal decrees of God to determine whether we have been predestined to life.²³ Rather, the way in which we lift our eyes to the day of our resurrection is by fixing our eyes on Jesus, who promises to resurrect us (John 6:40). Let all those who are hungry and thirsty come to Christ, and let all those who are weary and burdened by the weight of sin look to

Christ as well. It is the will of the Father that all those who look to Christ in faith will never be lost, but raised up on the last day.

Grumbling Israelites in the Wilderness

Given the extraordinary nature of what Jesus says here, it is perhaps not surprising that the Jews “grumbled about him, because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven’” (John 6:41). They believe that they know the origins of Jesus because they know Joseph and Jesus’ mother (John 6:42), and therefore they do not believe that Jesus has come down from heaven. In the narrative, John chooses the word *grumbled* deliberately, since this is the same word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to describe the unbelief of the Israelites when they “grumbled” not only against Moses, but ultimately against the Lord (Ex. 16:2, 7, 8; 17:3; Num. 14:2, 27, 29, 36; 16:11, 41; 17:5). The Galileans insist that they will follow Jesus if only he continues to feed them, as did Moses in the wilderness; however, by grumbling against Jesus, they follow in the footsteps of their ancestors who did not faithfully follow Moses either. As much as these people rejecting Jesus think that they are faithful disciples of Moses (cf. John 9:28), Moses will eventually accuse them of rejecting the true bread of life who has come down from heaven (cf. John 5:45–47).

The Drawing and Teaching of the Father

Jesus gives further details regarding what he just taught in John 6:36–40 by telling them not to grumble against him, and that faith in him will only come as a result of the work of God:

Jesus answered 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 will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.” (John 6:43–47)

So, the Father gives his elect to the Son by *drawing* (John 6:44) and *teaching* (John 6:45; cf. Isa. 54:13) them. Additionally, Jesus restates his own role in the work of salvation: “And I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44). Once again, this does not mean that the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, is excluded from this work of redemption, but simply that Jesus has not begun to fully reveal the Spirit’s role apart from a few brief mentions (John 3:5–8).²⁴ The Father will draw and teach *by* the Holy Spirit, so that it is the *Holy Spirit* who will open ears to hear and hearts to learn from the Father and thereby come to Jesus in faith for eternal life and for resurrection on the last day. The external works of the Trinity are inseparable, so that you cannot separate the Father’s drawing and teaching from the Holy Spirit’s regeneration or from the Son’s work of redemption.

As in the dialogue with the Judean Jews (John 5:37–38), Jesus also now tells the Galilean Jews that they have never seen the Father, and that only the one who is from God has seen the Father (John 6:46). Of course, Jesus is talking about himself as the Incarnate Son of God, sent from the Father to do the will of the Father. The Father puts forth his Son that all might believe on *him*, so that the Father might save his elect *in* and *through* Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. No one can come to the Father except through Jesus, and no one can come to Jesus apart from the

Father's drawing and teaching work (by the Holy Spirit), and Jesus does nothing apart from the power of the Holy Spirit who remains on him (cf. John 1:32), and nothing apart from his Father's will (John 6:38). In this way, the external works of the Trinity are indivisible and inseparable in this great work of salvation.

The Living Bread

Jesus now returns to the main metaphor and imagery for this passage:

“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. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (John 6:48–51)

Earlier when Jesus explicitly contrasted himself as the bread of life from the bread that the Israelites ate during the days of Moses (John 6:32–35), the focus of his contrast fell on the fact that Moses did not give the manna. Here, the focus of Jesus' contrast falls on the fact that those who ate that manna perished in the wilderness (John 6:49). Jesus began this dialogue by urging the Galileans to stop working for “food that perishes” and to opt instead for “food that endures to eternal life” (John 6:27), which could have been taken to mean either that the *food* or the *eater* will perish or live, but here Jesus clarifies his meaning: it is not the *food* they seek that will perish, but *they themselves* will perish unless they eat from him, the bread of life and the living bread that came down from heaven.

Again, Jesus has already clarified that this eating is faith (John 6:35)—not the kind of faith that is only intellectual, but the kind of faith that drives us to feed on Christ by looking to him in faith (John 6:40). In the very last verse of this section, Jesus intensifies his imagery, saying that “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51). In the incarnation, John earlier told us that the eternal Word (the Word who was *God*; John 1:1) became “flesh” (John 1:14).²⁵ It is only through the Son's incarnation that the life in God (John 1:4) can reach us. All humanity descended from Adam inherited Adam's original sin and guilt, so that the human nature has been broken since the Fall. Apart from the incarnation of the Word, the redemptive work of the Father's giving to his Son the elect is impossible—as is eternal life for humanity, and the final resurrection of life on the last day. By uniting the Godhead to human nature in the incarnation, Jesus used his flesh as the instrument of redeeming and reconciling the elect to himself. Now, all those who come to Jesus Christ in faith are united to Christ's life-giving flesh by the Spirit, so that his death on the cross is *our* death, and his resurrection is *our* resurrection. Christ died for us, and Christ was raised for us, so that he may raise us up with him on the last day. This is why the flesh of Jesus—in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection—is the bread that he gives for the life of the world (John 6:51).

Eating Flesh and Drinking Blood (John 6:52–59)

As the *grumbling* of the Jews (John 6:41) connects this story with the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites, the same thing happens when we read that the Jews “disputed among themselves” (John 6:52), for the ancient Israelites “disputed” or “quarreled” against Moses (Ex. 17:2) and against the Lord (Num. 20:3).²⁶ And, as it was an extraordinary thing for Jesus to claim to be the

bread of life who has come down from heaven (John 6:42), it is even more extraordinary for Jesus to say that he will give them his flesh to eat. Is this man advocating some bizarre form of cannibalism?

Jesus does not back down from this claim, but redoubles it by insisting that they must not only eat his flesh, but also drink his blood:

So Jesus 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 you. Whoever 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 feeds 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 whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” (John 6:53–58)

Certainly, the idea of drinking Jesus’ blood is a horrifying idea on a visceral level, but the Jews have additional reasons against drinking blood because God explicitly forbade drinking any animal’s blood (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; 17:10, 12, 14). The reason God gave against drinking blood, though, gives us some insight into what Jesus means here: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life” (Lev. 17:11). According to the law, the blood spilled as a sacrifice is capable of making atonement only because it carries in it the life of the sacrifice. Jesus is not telling us that we must eat his literal flesh and drink his literal blood, then. He has already told us that he fulfills our hunger and our thirst by coming to him in faith (John 6:35)—that is, he has already defined the fact that this imagery of eating and drinking serves as a metaphor for faith.²⁷

In this connection, we might return to the earlier discussion of the *swords* that guarded both the way back into the garden of Eden from Adam and Eve, and the Canaanites who defeated the Israelites who attempted to enter the Promised Land after God had forbidden them entry. In both cases, God put judgment and death to protect the way back in to eat from the life in those places, and Jesus tells us that the same thing holds true for him. This time, however, Jesus himself promises to pass under the flaming sword of judgment at the cross where his flesh is broken and his blood shed. By his death on the cross and his resurrection life, Jesus opens up the way for his people to eat safely from the tree of life forever (Rev. 22:2), without fear of judgment or condemnation. Where Israel failed to enter into the Promised Land, and where Adam failed to eat of the tree of life, Jesus offers *himself* as the bread of life. He is the second Adam who opens up the gate to life that we might eat the food that endures to eternal life through his life, death, and resurrection.²⁸

Feed on Christ by Faith

Jesus, then, is urging us to feed on him by receiving his atoning, sacrificial death by faith. Jesus’ promise is that “He who accepts, appropriates, and assimilates my vicarious sacrifice as the only ground of his salvation, remains in me and I in him.”²⁹ This is not only a single event of conversion in our lives (although it is not less than that), but this feeding on and drinking Christ accounts for the *totality* of our discipleship. Again and again, we go back to Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected for us as our only hope: “For this ‘eating’ and ‘drinking’...works itself out as a lasting fellowship

between him and those who believe in him—on their part as a continual centering on him who gave himself for them, on his part as his indwelling in them with all his gifts and power (cf., e.g., 7:37, 38).³⁰ We feed on Christ in the same way that we “devour’ books, ‘drink in’ a lecture, ‘swallow’ a story...‘ruminate’ on an idea or poem (ruminate = chew the cud), or ‘chew over’ a matter”—by continual attention, contemplation, and worship that we give to him.³¹

The incarnation, when the Word became flesh, is the linchpin upon which this whole work of redemption takes place. Unless Jesus takes on human flesh, he cannot be the bread of life to those who come to feed on him by faith. But, the incarnation is only the beginning of the story, not the whole of it. In the flesh, Jesus must shed his blood as an atoning sacrifice for us, for his life is in his blood. If we would be saved, we must feed on his sacrifice by faith, and if we do, we will never hunger or thirst (John 6:35); we will abide in Christ and him in us (John 6:56); we will live because of Christ; and Christ will raise us up in resurrection on the last day (John 6:39, 40, 44).

The Lord’s Supper

What is Jesus really talking about here? When he speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, are we to understand that he is telling us that we cannot live apart from eating the Lord’s Supper? No. Jesus tells us explicitly that he is speaking about faith (John 6:35). Furthermore, if we take his words to refer to the Lord’s Supper, we must understand him to mean that salvation is impossible apart from receiving the sacrament of the bread and the cup, something that Scripture nowhere else teaches.³² And, on the other hand, we would also be forced to believe that all who receive the Lord’s Supper will be saved by it, even though Paul speaks explicitly about those who improperly receive the Lord’s Supper and are not saved by doing so, but rather eat and drink judgment on themselves (1 Cor. 11:29).³³ Finally, Jesus speaks consistently in this passage that we must eat his “flesh,” whereas the passages about the institution of the Lord’s Supper always speak about the bread as Christ’s “body.”³⁴ For many reasons, it is clear that Jesus does not have the Lord’s Supper in mind here.

Nevertheless, as John Calvin explains, “at the same time, I acknowledge that there is nothing said here that is not figuratively represented, and actually bestowed on believers, in the Lord’s Supper; and Christ even intended that the holy Supper should be, as it were, a seal and confirmation of this sermon.”³⁵ To put this idea another way, both the *words* of Jesus’ sermon here and the *sacrament* of the Lord’s Supper point together to the same reality: Jesus Christ crucified for us. To say that this refers directly to the Lord’s Supper is to allow the tail to wag the dog or to put the cart before the horse—it is to confuse the sign with the thing signified. Jesus here teaches about his *person* and his *work* of redemption—and the Lord’s Supper does the same through the sign of the bread and the wine. As F. D. Maurice writes, “If you ask me, then, whether he is speaking of the Eucharist here, I should say, ‘No.’ If you ask me where I can learn the meaning of the eucharist, I should say, ‘Nowhere so well as here.’”³⁶ We are not saved by receiving the Lord’s Supper, but through faith in Christ. Nevertheless, Jesus gives us his Supper to strengthen our faith in his atoning work on the cross. Therefore, when we come to the bread and the wine, Christ calls us again to feed on his flesh and to drink his blood—not as though we were literally chewing his body and ingesting his blood, but by finding our delight and satisfaction in him again through *faith*.

Discussion Questions

1. What perishable “food” do you work for? Why do you find that “food” so enticing? How does it really compare to the imperishable, satisfying food that Jesus offers us in himself?
2. What is your emotional response to the idea that the Father gives the Son the elect, so that “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37)? How does that idea clash with modern ideas of personal choice and free will? Does this lead you to resent God’s grace, or to find yourself humbled and awed before the love and sovereignty of God?
3. What does Jesus mean by describing himself as “the bread of life”? What does the image of feeding on Christ’s flesh and drinking Christ’s blood teach us about our discipleship? How does Jesus help us understand how to find our satisfaction in him?
4. Is Jesus talking about the Lord’s Supper? Why or why not? What *can* we learn about the promises of the Lord’s Supper from this passage? How should this change the way we receive the bread and the wine?

Notes

1. In John 6:41, Morris draws attention to the shift of subject to “the Jews”: “There is nothing unlikely in the supposition that the earlier words were spoken near the lake, and that the scene now shifts to the synagogue. Yet as the dialogue flows on, it appears that Jesus’ opponents are the same as in the previous section.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 327.)
2. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 223.
3. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 230.
4. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 239–40. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.iv.html>>
5. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 224.
6. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 449.
7. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 284–85.
8. Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 51.
9. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 454.
10. Augustine, “Homily 25,” in *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40*, I/12, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009), 439.
11. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 243. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.iv.html>>
12. “The citation cannot be found in this precise version in the Old Testament; we are dealing, rather, with a combination of a number of terms that are central to this whole context (cf. Ex. 16:4 and 15). One can also refer to Ps. 78:23, 24, which also mentions the heavenly character of the bread that God, through Moses, gave to Israel in the wilderness (“he...opened the doors of heaven...and gave them grain from heaven. Humans

ate the bread of angels”).” (Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 226.)

13. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 245. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.v.html>>

14. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 233.

15. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 459.

16. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 287.

17. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 92.

18. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 250. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.vi.html>>

19. “In the first place, he says, that all whom the Father giveth him come to him; by which words he means, that faith is not a thing which depends on the will of men, so that this man and that man indiscriminately and at random believe, but that God elects those whom he hands over, as it were, to his Son; for when he says, that whatever is given cometh, we infer from it, that all do not come. Again, we infer, that God works in his elect by such an efficacy of the Holy Spirit, that not one of them falls away; for the word give has the same meaning as if Christ had said, “Those whom the Father hath chosen he regenerates, and gives to me, that they may obey the Gospel.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 252. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.vi.html>>)

20. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 290.

21. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 235.

22. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 253. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.vi.html>>

23. “And if it is the will of God that those whom he has elected shall be saved, and if in this manner he ratifies and executes his eternal decree, whoever he be that is not satisfied with Christ, but indulges in curious inquiries about eternal predestination, such a person, as far as lies in his power, desires to be saved contrary to the purpose of God. The election of God is in itself hidden and secret; the Lord manifests it by calling, that is, when he bestows on us this blessing of calling us.

They are madmen, therefore, who seek their own salvation or that of others in the whirlpool of predestination, not keeping the way of salvation which is exhibited to them. Nay more, by this foolish speculation, they endeavor to overturn the force and effect of predestination; for if God has elected us to this end, that we may believe, take away faith, and election will be imperfect. But we have no right to break through the order and succession of the beginning and the end, since God, by his purpose, hath decreed and determined that it shall proceed unbroken. Besides, as the election of God, by an indissoluble bond, draws his calling along with it, so when God has effectually called us to faith in Christ, let this have as much weight with us as if he had engraven his seal to ratify his decree concerning our salvation. For the testimony of the Holy Spirit is nothing else than the sealing of our adoption, (Romans 8:15.) To every man, therefore, his faith is a sufficient attestation of the eternal predestination of God, so that it would be a shocking sacrilege to carry the inquiry farther; for that man offers an aggravated insult to the Holy Spirit, who refuses to assent to his simple testimony.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 254–55. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.vi.html>>)

24. “The question may be asked: Why is it that in the teaching of Jesus (12:32) this drawing activity is ascribed to the Father (6:44) and to the Son (12:32) but not to the Holy Spirit? We answer: a. As long as the Holy Spirit has not been poured out, we cannot expect detailed teaching with reference to him; b. nevertheless, in the night of the betrayal Jesus did refer to the drawing power of the Holy Spirit, though the words used are different (14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 14; see esp. the thirteenth verse of that chapter); and c. the work of regeneration which is specifically ascribed to the Spirit (3:3, 5) is certainly included in this process of drawing a sinner from death to life!” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 239.)

25. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 295.
26. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 94.
27. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 288–89.
28. Although neither makes this specific point, I am indebted for this line of thinking to Crowe, *The Last Adam*, and to Lane G. Tipton, “The Image of God: Biblical-Theological Foundations,” Oct. 15, 2016. Accessed April 15, 2017. <http://reformedforum.org/rf16_01_tipton/>
29. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 242.
30. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 243.
31. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 99.
32. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 312.
33. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 266. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.vi.html>>
34. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 295.
35. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 266. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.ix.html>>
36. Cited in Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 313.