

LIFE WITH GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

When Jesus announced to the crowd at the synagogue at Capernaum that he was the "bread which had come down from heaven," they must have been very startled by his remarkable claim. But it is no wonder they were puzzled by what he said.

I well remember an evening some months ago when I was teaching a seminar on prophetic matters, and a young man came up and stood beside me and announced that he was Elijah returned from heaven. I was a bit startled to say the least, especially when I realized he was perfectly serious about what he was saying. He wanted to take over the meeting and teach us because he was convinced he was Elijah. Our reaction, of course, was to disregard his claim. We recognized that he was a troubled and disturbed young man who needed help, and we gently removed him from the meeting so we could go on.

Perhaps some of the people listening to Jesus at Capernaum felt like doing that. John writes in the sixth chapter of his gospel how the crowd in the synagogue reacted to our Lord's words. Verse 41:

The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" {John 6:41-42 RSV}

You can almost see in your mind's eye their reaction, how they turned to each other with cynical looks on their faces and said, "What does he mean? What is he talking about? Come on, how can anybody 'come down from heaven'? We know him." They immediately forgot all the wonderful things they had heard Jesus say and do. They forgot the healings, the miracles of restoration, even the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand which had taken place just a day earlier. There were in that crowd of people who were now questioning his words some who had been fed by his hand. But already they had forgotten his penetrating wisdom, his gracious words. They began to regard him as an ordinary man.

Many people today react that way to any mention of Jesus. In secular circles, people almost invariably take the position that Jesus was a significant figure, a teacher who knew a great deal about life, but he was nothing more than an ordinary man. This is how the crowd at the synagogue reacted: "We know him. Why, he grew up in Nazareth right over the hill. We know Joseph and Mary, his mother and father. He is a carpenter's son. He is just like one of us."

Their reaction was to doubt his claim because, of course, they, like many today, were the victims of incomplete facts. They did not have all the evidence they needed, and they were not looking for it either. We do not know whether they knew about the angels, the shepherds and the wise men and all the wonder of that night when the heavenly hosts sang of the word of hope, and the great star shed its light upon the waiting city of Bethlehem. Even if they knew about it they had forgotten it.

One remarkable thing about the crowd's reaction is that it proves that when Jesus was a boy he was no different than anyone else. He did not do startling, miraculous feats, as some of the apocryphal gospels claim. He grew up in Nazareth just like anyone else. They saw only that, thus they did not know the full story. This is the reason for much doubt today about Jesus. People have never examined the evidence, they have never really looked at the eyewitness accounts of what Jesus did, or read the accounts of what he said.

In his reply to the crowd, Jesus gives the second reason for their doubt:

Jesus answered them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall 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 him who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life." {John 6:43-47 RSV}

It is wonderful to hear how patiently our Lord repeats himself again and again, trying to break through the confusion, the puzzlement, the uncertainty, the doubt that was in the hearts of the people in the synagogue that morning. But Jesus also says a very remarkable thing, and that is, "there must be a further inward enlightenment of the Father." Thus the second reason for these people's doubts about him was an inadequate enlightenment. It is not enough merely to hear the facts about Jesus or to hear the story of his life.

No figure in history has been so widely portrayed in film, in drama, in story, in books, in narrative as Jesus. But hearing about him is not enough. There must be an inner opening of the eyes and the ears of the soul, so that we begin to understand the implications of his life. That is what our Lord is talking about. We need to have our ears opened so that the full meaning of what he did and said becomes evident to us, and we personally see that it involves us. Part of being "taught of God," of being "drawn of the Father" is that we see that we are involved in this; this was meant for us.

My wife and I had dinner last week with a Christian couple from Sacramento. The woman was raised in a nonreligious family and had never gone to church. When she was in high school, some 15 or 20 years ago, Billy Graham held his first crusade in Sacramento. She was invited by some of her friends to go to hear him, and she went out of curiosity. She told us that she sat there, determined not to be influenced by him. She listened to the choir, to the testimonies and the special music, and she said to herself, "I know this man is using this to manipulate these people. He is psychologically preparing them to respond to an invitation." She said she felt very confident that she could withstand what she considered to be manipulation because she knew exactly what he was doing. But then Billy Graham gave the invitation, and she said, "I was the first one to respond! I jumped out of my seat and went down immediately. I was embarrassed because, as I walked down, I saw that I was the very first person to respond." She was converted, born again. Why? Because she was "drawn of the Father."

We think we choose Jesus, but he himself said to his own disciples, "You did not choose me, I chose you," {John 15:16a RSV}. We think that our choices determine our destiny, but there is no greater truth, perhaps, in the Word of God than to realize that our choices are the result of God's drawing. Why do we choose the way we do? To us it seems a natural affair that is all centered on what our wills desire. But the Scripture understands much more about our humanity than that. It reveals that God must draw us to himself or otherwise we would never come. No one would respond if they were not "drawn" of the Father. This is a very strong word. It means "compelled," to be "dragged along." That is how it is used in other places of Scripture.

Jesus tells how it happens: He calls it, "being taught of God." It is an opening of the understanding. It may happen suddenly, or it may happen slowly. It may happen very painfully. It happens not only to non-believers in order to draw them to the point of faith and conversion, but it happens also to Christians who need continually to be taught of God. Many have had the experience of hearing something they had known for years but had never really understood until something suddenly opened their eyes and they saw what it meant.

One of our members told me last week that he and his wife, who have been sitting in our congregation for years, listening to truth which they thought they understood, found that when painful circumstances came into their lives they became the victims of depression, fears, and anxieties. They tried to find relief by responding to a counseling center in another city, so they went there and sat under the counselor. Slowly and patiently he took them back through the teaching of the Scripture about themselves, and about what God had done, and could do in their lives. As he did so their eyes were opened. Their fears were relieved, their depression was lifted, and they found themselves healed and restored. They said that as they continued to attend here, and as they read some of the messages that had been given earlier, they suddenly realized that what they had learned in that other city was what they had been hearing for years right here. Why? Their eyes had not yet been opened.

How many times in the Scriptures do we see this phenomenon! Speaking of even the disciples, we read, "And the Lord opened their eyes so that they understood," {cf, Luke 24:45}. This is what is necessary. Our Lord

clearly indicates here that God the Father must draw us to himself. What a tremendous assurance it is to realize that when we have come to Christ we have come because God has set his love upon us and drawn us to him!

Then, having been drawn, Jesus says we must believe: "Not that anyone has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father." That is, there is only one authorized spokesman for the Father, and that is Jesus. We must believe him, and in him, because he is the only one, "the only mediator between God and man," {cf, 1 Tim 2:5}. Years ago while I was driving through the state of Alabama, I saw a great billboard on the front lawn of a church that proclaimed in huge letters the words, "This church is the only authorized spokesman for Jesus Christ on earth. " I did not know what church it was, but it was an arrogant claim. That, in effect, is what Jesus is saying here: He is the only authorized revealer of the Father that man can ever discover, therefore he urges us to believe in him.

Then he adds these wonderful words, "He that believes has eternal life." Thus there is a two-step process by which God brings us to himself. He draws us through painful experiences sometimes, through hurt and damage, through loss and disappointment, but also through joys, through unexpected blessings and pleasures, all these things. Some are drawn through the process of years, while others seem to be awakened suddenly, dramatically, like Paul on the Damascus Road. It is all in the control of God. But having been awakened, then our responsibility is to believe, to commit ourselves, to give ourselves to him. Even as Christians we must keep on believing, as our Lord will go on to explain here, keep on eating and drinking Christ!

Jesus gives a third cause for these people's doubt and unbelief. Verse 48:

"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."
{John 6:48-51 RSV}

The problem with these Jews in the synagogue was that they were still looking back across the centuries to the time when their fathers were fed manna in the wilderness. They attributed that to Moses, but Jesus had corrected that already. He said it was not Moses who gave them the manna, it was God. Although that manna kept them alive physically, it could do nothing for them eternally. These people were still hung up by ineffective symbols which they were relying on for faith.

Many people do that yet today. They trust the fact that they were baptized, that they joined a church, that they were confirmed in some religious ceremony or some other symbol of life, rather than life itself. Jesus says this does no good, and the proof of his words is physical death. This is a rather remarkable claim by Jesus. He says that death without him means eternal separation -- death, real death; but physical death with him means to enter into life, and that he alone can give that hope beyond this life, of life eternal with him. No one else can do it.

I think this is one reason why God has never allowed man to make any progress in the realm of preventing death. After centuries of human existence -- millennia, the scientists say -- it is remarkable that no one has made the slightest progress in overcoming it. Despite all the advances of medical science, the tremendous hospitals, the new and remarkable medical equipment, the pretentious claims of doctors and insurance companies, the death rate remains exactly what it has always been -- a flat 100%. We have made no progress. I think God has intended it to remain that way. He is teaching us something. This is part of the "teaching of God" that goes on for all people. Some he will draw clear on to salvation, as they respond, but all people, everyone, shall be "taught of God," and death itself is part of that teaching.

I remember when I was a young man, in my late teens and early twenties, I could not believe that I would ever get old. When I looked at the feeble old people whom I had to live with, and work with, their gray hair and their feeble physical efforts, I thought to myself, "I can't believe that will happen to me. I feel so vigorous and strong. The years stretch on ahead of me. I don't think that is ever going to happen to me." But it has. What bugs me is that I keep getting the senior citizen discount without ever asking for it! Why? Because the body is headed for death. It is decaying; it is headed for corruption.

That is a symbol of the spirit -- the spirit in man is headed the same way unless the Lord of Life intervenes. That is what Jesus is saying. He is the bread from heaven, the Giver of life, real life, and only those who receive that life overcome the effects of death upon the spirit and the soul of man. This is his claim. Here Jesus gives the first hint that this is going to require his death. He puts it very plainly, "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

That leads to the next paragraph, where the Jews again are disturbed by this saying. Verse 52:

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" 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; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. 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 ["by means of the Father," literally], so he who eats me will live by means of me. {John 6:52-57 RSV}

Those marvelous words represent what was apparently a very offensive statement to these Jews. It sounds that way even to us if we take his words literally. Talk about eating human flesh and drinking human blood turns many people off. Evidently those listening to Jesus felt that way. You can hear the cynicism in their voices: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat? What does he think we are -- cannibals?" This was most offensive to Jews because they had been taught all through the centuries that God did not want flesh in which there remained any blood. The word "kosher" means to cleanse; and it particularly refers to the preparation of meat. The Jews cannot eat any meat that has not had all the blood drained from it. In Israel last year I visited a factory where chickens were killed and canned for food for the Israelis. Every one of those chickens, thousands every day, had to be killed and its blood drained by a rabbi, otherwise it could not be sold on the Israeli market. Thus the thought of drinking blood was most offensive to these Jews.

But Jesus makes very clear that he must do this. He has already answered the question they asked, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat," by saying that he will give his flesh for the life of the world. That can only mean death, and they are troubled by that. Behind their protest is the feeling that their sins are not that bad, that it should not require death to clear up their difficulties.

Many people are right at that point today. They do not want to believe that their problems come from something so bad within themselves that it requires death to cure it. Most think they are pretty good people. They may need a few changes, a few New Year's resolutions, a little adjustment in behavior, they feel, but they are not that bad. Yet everywhere in Scripture, both Old and New Testaments alike, there is this emphasis upon the necessity for blood, for a death, in order to cure and deliver us from the evil grip of sin in our lives.

This is why the Jews protest Jesus' words.

In these words our Lord reveals the absolute necessity for receiving his life: "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." That is unequivocal, isn't it? There is no doubting what he has to say. This is absolutely essential to real life. If you do not have this, you are on a temporary slide into ultimate corruption and total death. The most you can do is merely preserve life for awhile, hold it at arm's length, but death is inevitable unless you know the One who gives life. Then Jesus shows how that life is real: "For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." It is the real kind of life that God intends for us.

His next statement is that our desire for intimacy can never be fulfilled without this: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." This sharing of life with Jesus will, later on in this gospel, become the theme for the Upper Room Discourse. I do not think you can find any theme more exalted, more remarkable, more mysterious than this -- the sharing of life between us: "You in me, and I in you," {John 14:20 RSV}. That is the way Jesus put it.

Those are very simple words, mere monosyllables, but to understand what they mean is to grasp the very

center of truth itself. "You in me, and I in you" -- this reflects our universal hunger for intimacy. What lies behind our desire to know the private lives of movie stars, athletes, etc.? We all drop names of famous people we have been with because there is a deep hunger in all of us to be intimate.

The most intimate physical act is sex, which is a way of sharing life together. Sex has been accurately described as "the urge to merge." That is what happens physically, but it also happens psychologically. Friendship is a form of sexuality, or intimacy. When you are with a friend, what do you do? You tell your friend what you have been doing, and ask what he or she has been doing; you share your secrets. That is the urge to merge at the psychological level.

When we think about the greatness, the glory, and the wonder of God, what do we want? True worship is the desire to merge with God, for him to possess us and we to possess him. That is what Jesus says happens when we eat and drink his life. When we come and believe in him, and keep coming and keep believing in him, we grow into an intimate relationship with God.

Finally, Jesus has modeled this for us: "As the living Father sent me, and I live by means of the Father [this was the secret of his life], so he who eats me will live by means of me." That is a wonderful description of the Christian life. Jesus lived by means of the Father, and we are to live by means of him in everything we do.

This morning I saw a paragraph in a Christian pamphlet that said something instructive on this:

Pride blinds us to our continuing need for a Savior. We acknowledge that Christ changed our life, but now we view ourselves as in control, competent to make good decisions, wise enough to avoid the wrong turns we once made. We may forget that the victory we walk in is his victory, given to us as a free gift of God. He is our Master and he has the right to control our lives. We cannot save ourselves and we still can't. Our lives are in his hands.

Thus the Christian who learns this, and practices daily a sharing and dependence on the life of Jesus, is the one who experiences life as Jesus intended it to be.

Our Lord sums this all up in these closing words:

"This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever." This he said in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. {John 6:58-59 RSV}

Have you learned how to live by means of him?

Have you learned how to share your work, your family life, your personal life with Jesus, to operate in dependence upon his wisdom, his supply of grace, his forgiveness of failure, to bring all of your life constantly back into connection with him?

That is what he is after.

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, we are reminded not so much that we once were saved from hell by faith in Jesus (although that is part of it), but that we share his life. His blood, a symbol of death, has cut us off from what we once were in Adam. We now have freedom to be what we ought to be. The bread is his life imparted to us: His strength, his grace, his power to rise up and obey what he says.

When Jesus said these words in the synagogue at Capernaum he was not thinking of the Lord's Supper, but of his death and resurrection.

The Lord's Supper looks back on that, as these words in John 6 look forward to it. Let us remember that this is how we are to live throughout the week in everything we do.

Title: Life with God
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Gospel of John
Scripture: John 6:41-59
Message No: 19
Catalog No: 3849
Date: January 15, 1984

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