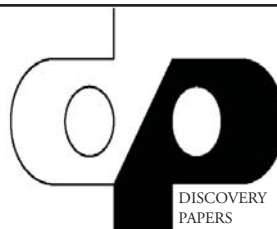




## “YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE”



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John 6:51-71  
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Numbers are important but they can be misleading. Data points, records, and statistics can mark a trend but they can't interpret the trend. The sixth chapter of John begins with a multitude surrounding Jesus. It ends with twelve disciples. And Jesus said to the remaining twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Our text will guide us in discovering the reason for the dramatic departure, the shrinking of thousands of seekers to a dozen disciples.

We'll begin with John 6:51-59:

**I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever (a summary of statements he has made before). And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”**

The final sentence in this verse is mysterious and disturbing and those who heard it recoiled from him.

**<sup>52</sup>The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” <sup>53</sup>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. <sup>54</sup>Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. <sup>55</sup>For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. <sup>56</sup>Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.**

**<sup>57</sup>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. <sup>58</sup>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.” <sup>59</sup>Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.**

The wilderness crowd (perhaps as many as 10,000 including women and children) had already shrunk considerably. This interaction takes place in a synagogue (v. 59) in Capernaum. The formal setting suggests a willingness to learn on the part of those present, motives more serious than just seeking signs and clamoring to be fed.

In John 3:1-10 Nicodemus was cut off by Jesus when he tried to treat a metaphorical statement (‘you must be born again’) as if it were intended literally (‘entering a second

time into his mother’s womb’). Nicodemus was a teacher in Israel and should have known better. We see a similar high standard for students in 6:53-56. Jesus was not describing cannibals or zombies when he spoke of eating flesh and drinking blood. It is clear that he’s using a metaphor and he expects those in attendance at this synagogue (they are called ‘his disciples’ in v. 60) to understand this kind of teaching. However, the metaphor is very disturbing and is intended to be.

Jesus’ imagery has overtones of temple sacrifice yet no animal is in view. Looking to the future, the Lord sees his own gruesome death and insists that it is the only path to life for sinners (like those he was teaching). Profound dependence upon his saving death is the only way for us to have lasting fellowship with him and therefore have access to the Father. Jesus’ hearers preferred to believe he was speaking nonsense than to know anything about what loomed in the future—nails, thorns, thirst, abandonment. They did not want to be confronted by their need for such a savior.

I was not raised in the church and, except for a few Christmas Carols and some out-of-context Bible stories, I didn’t know anything about the Scriptures. When I was 15 I was invited to a youth weekend camp at which the speaker gave a dramatic talk detailing the suffering of Jesus on the cross. I had never heard anything like that before and was both amazed and captivated. Confronted with the terrible suffering of Christ, the reality of my sin, the depth of his love, I knew my life would never be the same. Jesus used disturbing language in the synagogue in Capernaum for the same reason the camp speaker did—to awaken grateful faith in hearts that were complacent about sin.

In Capernaum Jesus was challenged for his disturbing description of our predicament, but there is a better alternative. Charles Wesley (no surprise) gives us language for proper gratitude.

*How can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Savior’s blood  
Died he for me who cause his pain  
For me who him to death pursued*

*Amazing Love, how can it be  
That thou my God shouldst die for me  
Amazing Love, how can it be  
That thou my God shouldst die for me*

Feeding on Christ results in our salvation and promises

resurrection on the last day. It also describes ongoing intimacy with the Lord. The Greek verb *meno* (to abide) is found in v. 56. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. Jesus uses the same word in an agricultural metaphor in John 15:5 (NASB): “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

What does abiding look like? It is modeled in Jesus’ dependence on the Father. Day after day Jesus drew on the loving presence of his Father to give him all that he needed. Jesus rejoiced and wrestled in prayer. He meditated on the written word and saw lessons of God’s presence in nature. He refused the tempter and lifted up the humble. He is our example of ‘feeding on’ a life-giving person who is greater than ourselves. “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.”

John 6:60-66:

**When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”**

This grumbling is reminiscent of the nation of Israel challenging Moses’ leadership as they wandered in the wilderness; another point where this chapter draws on Exodus themes.

**<sup>61</sup>But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? <sup>62</sup>Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup>It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup>But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) <sup>65</sup>And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” <sup>66</sup>After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.**

The number of Jesus’ followers had dwindled even further. Yet there was no effort on the Lord’s part to hold onto *market share* by softening his message. Verse 62 points to more amazements that lie ahead—saying in effect “you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” We can follow or turn back. Grumbling and *taking offense* lead nowhere.

Verse 65 raises the issue of God’s initiative in our faith, “No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the

Father.” Jesus made a similar assertion in v. 44. How do these statements fit into this discourse? We read elsewhere in Scripture about the mysteries of human free will and the sovereignty of God, of divine choices and human responsibility. However, I don’t think these doctrines are a concern of Jesus’ here. His emphasis is not on discerning who is left out and who is invited in.

The Lord wants us to be captivated by awareness of divine grace. We are not worthy of God’s attention; we do not deserve his gifts. We have no righteousness of our own to commend us, yet “the Spirit gives life” (v. 63) and the Father “draws us” to him (v. 44). Jesus opposes discontentment by speaking of great truths which should inspire gratitude (see the Charles Wesley lyrics above). Jesus is speaking to “his disciples,” who have been beckoned by the Father, who have heard the “words of the Spirit and of life,” and now are in danger of losing everything by turning back.

John 6:67-71

**So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?”**

An enormous amount is at stake for anyone who is asked this question by Jesus. But in addition to the content of the question and the need for a response, I think we can also hear the tender heart of Jesus who wants his friends to stay at his side.

**<sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, <sup>69</sup>and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” <sup>70</sup>Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” <sup>71</sup>He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.**

We are drawn to Peter’s honesty, aren’t we? He does not claim to be brave and loyal, fully committed whatever the cost. In fact, his answer makes clear that he and the others have been looking for an alternative and found nowhere else to go. Life in Christ is often difficult and we struggle with doubt, but there is no other source of life.

Peter declares that he is compelled by both the statements and the person of Jesus Christ. The savior’s “words of eternal life” are unlike any other. Prophets, preachers, orators, and philosophers abound but no one speaks as Jesus does. And there is no person like him. He is “the Holy One of God”—the unique Son who bears witness to the Father.