

Women's Bible Study Talk

John 6:41-71

We come today to a pivotal point in Jesus' ministry. There are many truths here that may be difficult to comprehend completely, with our limited, finite human minds, but nevertheless they are important truths that we can understand to the extent necessary for our faith. Let us approach the text with humility as we try to understand Jesus' teaching about salvation through faith in Him. Jesus has spoken to others earlier in the book using metaphors to explain spiritual realities that human words cannot completely express. He spoke to Nicodemus about being "born again" as a way of explaining regeneration. He spoke to the woman at the well about "living water," as a way of explaining the work of the Holy Spirit that brings new life. In last week's study Jesus said I am the bread of life, the first of seven I am statements Jesus makes in the book of John. He was speaking to the crowds that followed him to Capernaum after he had miraculously fed them on the other side of the lake. He had spoken to them about who he is – the giver and nourisher of the spiritual life within his disciples.

As we begin today's study, there is likely a change of place and audience. It probably takes place in the synagogue in Capernaum as indicated in verse 59 and discussion is between Jesus and "the Jews," which usually refers to the leadership and probably primarily the synagogue leaders in Capernaum. As Jesus expands his assertion to be the bread of life, I'd like to focus on three ideas by scripture sections: 1 unbelief and God's activity in salvation, 2 what it means to believe in Jesus, and 3 responses to Jesus and the gospel.

Let's read verses 41-51. You can follow along in your booklet.

So, the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that 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?’” 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. 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.

In this first section we see the unbelief of the Jews. The passage begins on the Sabbath in the synagogue with the Jews grumbling about Jesus’s claim to be the “bread that came down from heaven.” This is a grumbling that is an unbelieving grumbling. It relies on their own understanding of Scripture to discredit Jesus. At the time, there were two major opinions about the origin of the Messiah. One group of rabbis believed that when the Messiah appeared, no one would know where he came from (John 7:27). The other believed that Jesus would be from Bethlehem (as attested by the rabbis who told Herod where Jesus would be born in Matthew 2:4-5). In any case, the Jews essentially say, “How can he be the Messiah? We know his parents and we know the town he’s from.” It’s interesting that Jesus doesn’t engage with

them around this issue, pointing out that he was born in Bethlehem and that it was a virgin birth. That might be our response. Instead, he deals with the real issue—their unbelief and lack of understanding of the Father. For all their study of scripture, they have not seen the Father or Jesus in the pages of scripture. They have studied and debated points of doctrine but have not recognized him when he came and have not received him, as recorded in John 1:11. Jesus says that no one has “seen” the Father, meaning that no one has truly understood him. The usage of “seen” is something like when I would be struggling with a difficult math problem or puzzle and I finally get it. I might say “I see that now,” meaning I understand. The Jews failed to understand the character of their God and focused on minor details. It is really no different today. Unbelieving people reject Jesus because they object to what the scripture says. They say it doesn’t agree with science, or opposing truths seem to be unable to be reconciled in their minds, or it doesn’t seem that Jesus and/or the people of God are tolerant and inclusive, values of our day.

Why this inability to believe? It was not for lack of knowledge, but that the Jews did not see Jesus for who he was and believe in him. As J.C. Ryle points out, their wills were corrupted. Every person is unable to see the truth and follow Jesus because he doesn’t want to. Therefore, God must be active in salvation. As Jesus states, “No one can come to me unless the Father draws him.” We are unable to come to Jesus unless in some mysterious way, God, the Holy Spirit works within us to believe and follow Jesus as Lord. This is a hard teaching and one that is offensive to our natural thoughts about having a choice. We want to believe that there is something good in us that has

caused us to respond to the gospel, but Jesus clearly teaches differently here. It's the activity of the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to the truth and makes us willing to respond. In addition, as James Boice points out, the word used for draw here always suggests resistance to the power that draws. It is the word for "drawing" a heavy net full of fish to shore, or Paul and Silas being dragged before the court in Philippi. This is surely not very complimentary to us. To many, including those who heard Jesus teaching that day, as well as to modern day Americans, it is offensive.

In addition, there is no example in scripture where this resistance has been effective. So, God always completes the drawing of the one he has chosen to bring to himself. As Jesus says in verse 37, "All that the Father gives me will come to me." C. S. Lewis tells of his conversion to belief in God in this way: "In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." Later he came to acknowledge that Jesus was the Son of God. A few years ago, there was a movie made of C. S. Lewis' conversion experience called "The Most Reluctant Convert." I took my grandson to see it. On the way home I asked him what he thought about it. He said, with some offense in his voice, "It's as if he had no choice." The unbeliever is offended by what seems to be this lack of choice, but sisters, for those of us who believe and understand our spiritual blindness before we came to Christ, it is an opportunity to give thanks to God for his effectual calling of us to himself.

But what about evangelism? If God is sovereign in his call, then why should we evangelize? First because Jesus commands us to

do so. Secondly, because in some mysterious way we don't completely understand, God is pleased to use the prayers of his people, the preaching and teaching of His Word, and the lives of godly men and women to point others to himself. God delights in using us and making us part of his mission here. What a joy! This knowledge gives us hope to continue to pray for and speak to those who don't yet know the Lord, understanding that the results of this endeavor are not based on our own winsomeness or cleverness, but on the will of God. Third, men are still responsible for their unbelief. John 3:18: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

To conclude these ideas, in Romans 10:13-14, Paul says, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" So, let us continue to pray that God would draw men and women to himself by opening their eyes to the truth of the gospel and as we have opportunity, to share the gospel with those with whom we have contact.

At the end of this section, Jesus reminds them that this bread he offers is better than the manna that their forefathers ate in the wilderness, because that only sustained their physical lives for a time. He adds that he is the living bread that came down from heaven and that the one who eats will not die. This bread he speaks of is his flesh that he will give for the life of the world.

Here Jesus looks forward to his coming crucifixion when he will give up his life, so that those who trust in him can have life.

Let's read the next section together, verses 52-59.

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. 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. Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

In this section Jesus talks about what it means to truly believe. The Jews here respond to how Jesus ended the previous section. He says that the bread that he gives for the life of the world is his flesh. How does Jesus respond to the question the Jews have: How can this man give us his flesh to eat? He doesn't answer the how. He instead reiterates the necessity of not only eating his flesh, but introduces the idea of drinking his blood. In verse 53 he says: "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. There is no spiritual life apart from this activity of eating and drinking on our part.

So what is this eating and drinking? J. C. Ryle says that the flesh and blood of the Son of man refers to the sacrifice of His body, which he offered on the cross when he died for sin. The eating and drinking required for life is to believe in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for sin on the cross. Eating and drinking figuratively and spiritually is believing in Jesus. It is an inward transformation of the heart that responds to who Jesus is and has nothing to do with any physical actions.

When Jesus says “I will raise him up on the last day” he promises that the one who eats and drinks, the believer, will be kept by God’s power and be raised to life even though he has died physically. The believer will never be lost. He will be with Jesus forever. In addition, the one who continues to feed on Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood abides in Jesus. Faith in Jesus’ death for us as the act of supreme love, is necessary on a daily basis, just as eating and drinking daily is needed to sustain our physical life and energy.

Jesus reminds them of what he previously said. He cares that they do not miss the significance of this. Those who feed on the bread he offers, his own flesh and blood, will live forever. This contrasts with the manna that the forefathers ate but did not give eternal life. The Jews object to this teaching. This language is particularly offensive to the Jews because of Old Testament law forbidding the eating of the blood of an animal. They fail to see the truth that Jesus is presenting about himself, and they fail to see their need to come to him that they might have life.

In some branches of Christianity, it is taught that eating Christ’s flesh and drinking his blood refers to the communion service. But this would mean that the act of communion itself would save the

one who partakes, and the rest of scripture shows us that it is faith in God's Son that is what saves and what "eating and drinking" is referring to. The action of receiving communion elements will not save us. Only faith in Jesus as God's sacrifice for sin on our behalf will do that. In addition, this interpretation would require a shift from Jesus speaking about spiritual realities metaphorically, to speaking literally which Jesus has not done at all during this discourse.

The feeding that is described here, is not a once and done feeding. If we did not eat to fuel our physical bodies, we would not survive very long. Likewise, our connection to Jesus, our Savior, suggests that we eat and drink daily. As Jesus says, we need to abide in him as the source of spiritual life and fruit. What does it mean to eat his flesh and drink his blood, to feed upon him daily? God gives the believer a spiritual hunger that expresses itself in a love of God's Word, a desire to seek Jesus in the pages of Scripture. It is a desire to spend time with him, communing in prayer. It is a desire to draw near to him, following as he leads us. On this side of the cross, the communion service is a very special opportunity to receive spiritual nourishment as our eyes are drawn to the one who laid down his life, so that we might have life in Him forever. Jesus truly satisfies the spiritual hunger that we all have. Knowing that I am deeply loved and cared for by the God of the universe who sent his Son to earth to die for me, provides a deep soul satisfaction and security that nothing else can.

As we move to the next section, we see the response of people to Jesus' teaching. Let's read verses 60-71.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it? But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them. “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 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.) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

In this section, the disciples who complain about Jesus hard teaching refers to the broader disciples who continued to follow Jesus around, not the twelve we often refer to as disciples. These were people who were attracted to Jesus because of the signs and wonders he performed and because of the bread that he provided. They really didn't understand the spiritual implications of Jesus's teaching. They were essentially following for what they could gain for themselves and those who turned back were not truly followers or believers in the Biblical sense. They misunderstood what Jesus was saying, focusing on a literal

flesh and blood. When Jesus says “what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before,” it could be understood as a reference to his death on the cross as the means by which he ascends. This is the greatest offense of all. Death on a cross as a common criminal did not fit into the Jews idea of Messiah. Today, our need for the cross is offensive to us in our unregenerate state. We do not like to acknowledge the fact that we are rebels against God, deserving of his just displeasure and wrath, and although God freely invites us to come to him through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus, many will not. He reiterates that unless the Father draws them, they will not and cannot come to Him.

On any given Sunday, there are numerous people that come to hear the scriptures taught. Perhaps they are seekers, many are professing Christians. But, as Jesus said to the disciples who surrounded him, “some of you do not believe.” As Bruce Milne has observed, “Being a true believer will involve going the way of the cross...it will mean following him loyally when his truth is hard to understand and even harder to apply, when his claims seem largely contradicted by tangible realities, and when the multitudes turn away from him and we find ourselves part of a small and ostracized minority.”

As Jesus sees many turning away from following him, he asks the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well? Peter, as we often see, speaks for the group when he says, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have BELIEVED and have COME TO KNOW that you are the Holy One of God.” As Peter confesses his faith, he is not expressing that he

understands everything or that it all makes sense, but that Jesus is the Son of God, the one who shows the way to the Father.

James Boice points out that the order of Peter's words shows that faith comes before understanding, we have BELIEVED and have COME TO KNOW. Peter came to believe in Jesus as Messiah, before he understood many things about God's ways. It sounds strange to us to believe in something before we are sure of it. We want to test a person or an idea before we trust. In Hebrews 11:3 it says, by faith we understand. The normal order of having knowledge before believing is reversed because God's ways are so much higher than ours. We cannot understand the mind of God and often do not understand his ways, so we must trust first and then assurance, insight and knowledge come later. Peter's certainty came not from just seeing the miracles or hearing Jesus speak, but from the work of God within him to enlighten him as to who Jesus was and to create belief in his Son.

One of my granddaughters often presents me with difficult questions concerning the Bible or the Christian faith. For some of these questions, there is not an answer in the scriptures. When I respond to her, I usually say something like this: This is where faith comes in. If God is so great and powerful as to be able to create and sustain this world, doesn't it make sense that his ways are beyond our ability to completely comprehend, there are things we can't grasp? Our best scientific efforts can't even completely understand the material world. How much less can we completely understand God's ways in spiritual matters. But God tells us all we need to know in order to put our trust in him. We need to trust him with the things we don't understand. Belief and trust come before understanding. And even as we gain

understanding of God's ways, it will never be complete until we see him face to face.

In contrast to Peter's confession, Jesus speaks of a dark reality among the twelve. Jesus speaks of one who is "a devil, or one who is doing the devil's work. He also says that he has chosen the twelve, implying, of course, that he chose this one as well. Jesus knew from the time he chose Judas that he would betray him. The other disciples had no knowledge or inkling that this was the case, even at the last supper where they ask who it is that Jesus is talking about who would betray him. They did not suspect Judas's disloyalty.

Why would Jesus choose the betrayer as one of his own inner circle of twelve? He was chosen as one of the twelve, but was not one who truly believed in Jesus. The obvious answer is that Jesus needed to go to the cross to procure our salvation. But surely a betrayer could have come from another place. As I reflected on this, my thought was that this exalts the grace of our Lord. Throughout Jesus' ministry he treated Judas just as he did the others. He knew the end result, yet he showed grace toward him. At the last supper, he washed his feet as he did the feet of his other disciples. He was troubled in his spirit when he thought of Judas's betrayal. What grace toward sinners Jesus displayed! After his betrayal, Judas declared that he had betrayed innocent blood. He knew at that moment that Jesus was perfectly innocent of any sin.

Judas's inclusion in the twelve also warns us that we can be in proximity to Jesus, hearing his Word taught and fellowshiping among his people and yet not have believed personally in Jesus. It shows that we may expect to find unbelievers within the visible

church. We should not be surprised that there are Judases among the followers of Jesus, even in church pulpits, on church boards or teaching Sunday School. Many times, they are not recognized as imposters, just as the others did not recognize Judas's disloyalty,

Here are a few of James Boice's thoughts as he closes his exposition on this section. Peter or Judas?

Here are two men brought together in the space of just three verses—Peter and Judas. One made a great confession. About the other we have a disturbing revelation. Which one most characterizes you? Both were with Jesus. Both gave evidences of a genuine interest in religion. But with one it was real; he was there because of Jesus. The other was there only for himself, or for what he could derive from the relationship. May I make it even more personal? What are you in Christianity for? Is it for Jesus? Or is it for yourself?

I'll add to that. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world? Will you follow him? Jesus says in Matthew 16:24 "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The road may not be easy, but as Jesus promises, it is more than we could imagine or hope for here. The promise is that this life that Jesus gives brings us into an eternity of joy and delight in our Father's presence. By God's grace may many more respond to His gracious invitation to know him and receive the life he offers through Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.

