

## **Eating: How Good It Is! (Part Four)**

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***Forerunner*, "Personal," June 2001**

The Bible frequently employs a parallel between physical and spiritual eating. Such verses as Jeremiah 3:15 say, "And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." Here, God appeals to His people, promising to supply leaders who will provide them with good things to feed the mind, if they will turn to Him in repentance. The apostle Paul adds in Acts 20:28, "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd [*feed*, KJV] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Paul's admonition to church elders shows that elders have a primary responsibility to provide good spiritual food to those they were ordained to pastor.

In John 6:63, Jesus focuses our attention on the source of the words that truly promote growth and sound-mindedness: "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." "Life" implies a quality beyond what is available to mankind by nature. This verse provides a firm basis to connect God's pure Word—with its wisdom and guidance as the foundation of a sound mind—to an abundant life.

Jesus speaks about spiritual food and its energizing power. Some are tempted to rely almost solely on the ministry to feed them. However, other portions of Scripture clarify that Christians cannot let the pastor carry the entire load of providing their spiritual diet. Each Christian has a major responsibility to seek his own spiritual nourishment with the pastor seen primarily as—but not limited to—a guide moving the flock steadily toward the deeper things of God's Word.

As one follows Jesus' teaching, an intriguing change of emphasis occurs. By analogy, He becomes the spiritual food for His followers. This dovetails beautifully with His statement, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life," in that He personifies the Word of God.

### **Eating the Word of God**

The day after feeding the 5,000 from one boy's lunch, as recorded in John 6, this miracle becomes the springboard for a lesson on where the Christian should go to receive the best spiritual nourishment for his mind. After Jesus perceives that the people seek Him out to be fed physically again, He knows that they do not properly understand what they had witnessed the day before. They do not understand the significance of the miracle in identifying Him as the Messiah, perceiving it merely as a means of getting food to fill their empty stomachs. There they are, hungry again.

In John 6:26-27, Jesus cautions His disciples about allowing the wrong focus to dominate their lives because it is so easily done:

Jesus answered them and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."

In this world, providing for our physical life requires a great deal of time and energy for most of us. This necessary activity, in addition to countless other distractions working to grab our attention, makes concentrating on seeking spiritual nourishment a responsibility that demands vision combined with discipline in the use of time.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 adds its emphasis:

And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you to know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.

God's Word is just as essential to spiritual life as food is to physical life. Just as one must discipline himself to provide and eat physical food, so must one exercise discipline to seek and ingest spiritual food. If one will not do this, then, just as physical health will decline without adequate food, a person's inadequate spiritual diet will lead to spiritual disease. At the very least, one's quality of life will be severely compromised.

In Deuteronomy 8, God merely states that life has psychological aspects and does not indicate whether bread or God's Word is more important. It only states that God's Word is needed for life. By drawing attention to everlasting life in John 6, Jesus clarifies that what goes into the mind for processing and assimilation is far more important than what goes into the stomach.

The quality of what enters the mind will be the major factor that determines the quality of life. Jesus first emphasizes, using the imperative tense, that we should strive for the food that endures, that is, satisfies forever. He wants us to recognize its potential. Merely reading God's Word and putting it into the mind is just the beginning of its usefulness. We must combine further actions to our reading because the Word's ultimate effect does not magically happen. Principally, we must also believe it and put it into action.

Jesus uses the phrase "which the Son will give you," referring to the words ("food") that endure to everlasting life (John 6:27). However, His audience no more understands what he is talking about than the woman at the well knew what He meant by providing living water (John 4:10). Like her, they give what He says a completely physical meaning. At least they understand that work is involved. In verse 28 they ask, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus replies in verse 29, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."

### **Faith Is Work**

There are at least two possible ways to understand what He means. The first is that God is always working to produce faith in His people so they can properly use their free moral agency. The second, however, is the primary meaning because they ask what *they* had to do. Jesus replies that godly work for the individual is believing in or on Him as Messiah.

In other words, as Jesus uses it, faith is itself a work. Labor is involved in faith because living faith requires activity to meet the definition given in James 2. As the apostle says, faith without works is

dead, and such "faith" is in reality not even faith. Some, especially evangelical Protestants, object to this because they feel it creates a "works" salvation.

Their objections, though, are so much sound and fury without biblical substance. Jesus says at least a dozen times in different ways that salvation is by grace. Biblically, merely believing or agreeing with God or some biblical doctrine is of itself no better than being dead. Dead things produce nothing because nothing is working to produce anything. This is why Paul in Hebrews 3 can use "unbelief" and "disobedience" interchangeably. In other words, if a person only agrees, he merely has a preference, and his works will be at best inconsistent and sporadic. If a person has living faith, however, his belief will be a conviction, and works will occur.

Paul declares in Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

A simple illustration will help us understand. Imagine being the root of a tree. The root does a tremendous amount of work in producing the tree's fruit. It draws moisture and nourishment in the form of minerals from the soil, processes them to some degree, then passes them on to the rest of the tree. However, the root could do none of this unless the minerals and water were freely given and available for it to do its work.

Similarly, faith is a gift, like the water and minerals, freely given by God to produce certain works. Like a tree root, we have a measure of control because we have a part to play—working to believe and use what God has given—in producing the fruit of the Spirit. Thus, faith is simultaneously a gift and a work. It is a gift because the Son of Man gives it to us (John 6:27) and a work because we must exercise it (verse 29). As a food, faith is very nourishing for the mind, necessary for mental soundness and an abundant life. It will not be present in us unless we work to assimilate it by believing it.

The people respond to Jesus' claim by saying, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (John 6:30-31). They say, in effect, "If You are greater than Moses, then perform a sign greater than that which Moses did when he gave Israel bread from heaven." They obviously do not believe His claim to Messiahship.

### **The Bread of Life**

In verses 32-33, Jesus makes His first obvious move to reveal that we are to eat of Him: "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give 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." Put into modern English, Jesus says, "Moses was merely God's agent who gave directions to the people on how to collect the manna. My Father in heaven is the real Giver. Even if you consider Moses to be the giver, he did not give the real heavenly bread. The Father is right now giving the real bread from heaven. I am that real bread of life." Jesus is the One we are to ingest and assimilate into our lives.

Jesus does not mean that manna had no physical value but that it was not a means of sustaining spiritual life. Nothing physical can do this. Physical things may please us, even exhilarate us, but they can give no lasting sense of well-being.

Clearly, Jesus intends that we understand all of this spiritually, including the word "life." Life, as Jesus means it, is the way God has lived from eternity. In and through Christ, we can share in it if we will "eat" Him, the "bread" of that life. In verse 34, the people reply, "Lord, give us this bread always," showing that they now understand enough to desire the bread but not its spiritual application. In verse 35, then, He responds by identifying Himself undeniably as the bread of life, adding, "He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." He declares that He is the only permanent satisfaction for the human desire for life and that attaining this satisfaction hinges on belief, a commitment to Him based on trust.

When we connect this final thought with verses 26-29, it becomes clear that faith, which enables the establishment of an intimate fellowship and union with Him, makes it possible to ingest and assimilate Him spiritually. By assimilating Him spiritually, as we assimilate bread physically, man can attain everlasting life.

The faith or belief Christ means is a deep-seated commitment exercised by humbly coming to Him as one who knows that he has nothing and needs everything to have the kind of life God lives. Much as a plant turns towards the sun, one with a commitment like this will turn to Him for everything, knowing that without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

John 6:36 is discouraging, as Jesus says, "But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe." He understands that those standing before Him and listening to the very words of life do not have this kind of faith. Thus, they have no commitment. However, verse 37 makes a first encouraging step, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out." He is speaking of those whom the Father would give Him as disciples from that time forward, including us, and all these can have this faith and commitment. The Father Himself elects, chooses, each one, giving each the necessary gift of faith, as Ephesians 2:8 shows.

John 6:38-40 contains one of the most comforting and encouraging of all promises:

For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

The "I" in these three verses is very emphatic! To show this emphasis, some translations read, "I Myself." He personally promises to follow through, fulfilling the Father's will, and to guard and preserve those given Him to the very end! He is virtually ensuring a calling that cannot be revoked, a foundation that cannot be shaken in any way, a seal or promise that cannot be broken and a life that cannot perish! He practically guarantees the salvation of the saints! This is God's promise through Jesus Christ to "everyone who sees the Son."

However, it becomes obvious in verses 41-42 that the Jews do not "see" Him because they say, in effect, "How can He say He came down from heaven when we know who His father and mother are?" Their emotions have reached the pitch of dissatisfied, sullen grumbling. They are saying to

each other, "We have known Him since childhood. How does He expect us to believe Him?" They are not taking His words in and believing and assimilating them as part of themselves for use in improving the quality of their lives.

Jesus thus ignores their grumbling disbelief and continues with His teaching on His work to save those the Father gives Him: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day" (verse 44). "Draws" paints an interesting word picture. He says that the Father does not merely beckon or advise us but forcefully, powerfully pulls us to Christ, as if by a rope. One commentator says it is an irresistible activity! A man may try to resist, even to the extent of Jonah, but his resistance will ultimately prove ineffective.

When this word is used elsewhere, it describes fishermen dragging a net full of fish into shore or onto a boat. Paul and Silas are dragged into the forum. Paul is dragged out of the Temple. The rich drag the poor before the judgment seats. So Jesus is saying that from beginning to end of the salvation process, the effective power at work is from above, and it is a forceful process rather than a polite and hopeful invitation.

### **Involved in the Entire Process**

Verses 45-46 continue the theme yet open a new avenue of discussion: "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore 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." More is here than readily meets the eye because we must understand it in its wider context. He is not speaking of merely being taught by God but rather indicating the entire transformation process.

This section of the discourse began with Jesus saying that He will do everything in His power to save the person God gives to Him. He then established that the Father begins the process through a powerful drawing. He goes on to declare that the transformation from human glory to divine glory is also from God. Paul writes in II Corinthians 3:18, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." Jesus thus encapsulates the entire salvation process as driven from above. Christians are still responsible to do works of submission, but the Bible always shows God in control and driving the entire process.

Our human responsibility resides in the word "heard" (verse 45), which encompasses not only hearing but also believing and producing faith. This touches again on "eating" the Word of God. Paul says in Romans 10:17 that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Through the work of hearing and analysis, we assimilate God's Word into use in our conduct.

Verses 47-51 reinforce the strategic role eating—listening to and believing in—God's living Word, Jesus Christ, plays in producing everlasting life:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.

The knowledge that one gains by listening to and applying God's Word results in the greatest of all possible blessings: everlasting life. Remember, eternal life is quality of life as God lives it, as well as endless life.

Notice also that those who believe already have this life. It is the gift of Jesus Christ. Those who have believed have "eaten" Him, and thus He calls Himself the Bread of Life. This Bread does what no other bread, even manna, can do. It works to impart spiritual life and banish spiritual death. He adds that He is the "living bread," implying that He lived in the past, is living in the present, and will live in the future. He will always be there to provide nourishment. Further, we must not just taste this Bread. Once the process begins, we must eat it continuously so that we can assimilate Him into us and begin living life in Him and He in us.

Up to this point, Jesus has insisted that He, not manna, is the true Bread of Life. Now, He adds a new thought: This Bread will give His life in the flesh so the world may also live. He means that we cannot have everlasting life without also "eating," believing, accepting, assimilating, His voluntary, vicarious death by crucifixion for us. The Father gives the Son, and the Son gives Himself. Apart from this sacrifice, Christ ceases to be bread for us in any sense.

Verse 52 shows that the Jews again interpret His words in a strictly literal sense: "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" How utterly impossible it is for those who do not believe, who do not "come to Him," to understand the mysteries of salvation! Their hearts are ever ready to quarrel, scoff and resist.

### **My Blood Too!**

Jesus does not back down in the face of their scoffing. Instead, He strengthens His statement about eating His flesh by adding that one must also drink His blood! He moves from something that seems foolish to His audience to the outright absurd:

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, 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 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, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever." (verses 53-58)

These people knew well that Leviticus 17:10-11 forbids the eating of blood. They should have understood that He was not speaking of literally drinking the blood coursing through His body. If they knew Him from His youth, as they had earlier claimed, they should have known He was the most law-abiding person they had ever witnessed. What Jesus means is: "He who accepts, appropriates and assimilates and understands My sacrifice as the only ground of his salvation remains in Me and I in Him." This is why He adds, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood dwells in Me and I in Him." He is the living Word.

As physical food and drink are offered, accepted and eaten, so also must Christ's sacrifice be offered, accepted and eaten. As the stomach assimilates the physical, so His sacrifice is spiritually assimilated in the heart of believers. As food nourishes and sustains the physical body's life, so Christ's sacrifice nourishes and sustains spiritual life.

Again, the Jews react, but this time, interestingly, it comes from "many of His disciples": "[W]hen they heard this, [they] said, 'This is a hard saying, who can understand it?' When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples murmured about this, He said to them, 'Does this offend you?'" (verses 60-61). Like their fellow Jews, they were uncomprehending and displeased.

Jesus, however, moves on undeterred: "What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (verses 62-63). Jesus' answer to their incomprehension is to point them to His authority, saying in effect, "If you see the Son of man ascending to heaven, will this not prove where He came from, as well as the authority of His words that you just heard? My flesh cannot benefit you. Stop thinking that I was literally asking you to eat My flesh or drink My blood. It is My spirit, My person in the act of sacrificing Myself, that bestows and sustains spiritual life, even everlasting life. The words that I have spoken to you are full of My spirit and therefore My life." Unbelief lay at the root of their problem, so they could not understand.

From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus knew that such unbelief would be the normal response to His message. He expected it because faith is a gift of God, not given to all men, but only to those He calls and graciously bestows with the abilities to hear with understanding and believe. God has given us a precious and wonderful gift in the ability to believe and thus to establish a relationship through faith whereby He transforms us into His image. The evidence that we possess this gift is that we understand and yield in obedience so that the transformation can take place.

Our responsibility is to believe, and if we do, the works will follow. Sometimes believing does not come easily because our minds are already so full of misinformation. Faith is a work in that it frequently requires mental labor to process raw knowledge into firm conviction. When it becomes a conviction, we have assimilated it, and it becomes practical and usable in daily life.

### **Passover and Symbolism**

Of course, what Jesus explains in John 6 is a figurative reference to taking Passover. However, we must understand that far more is involved than just eating the bread and drinking the wine that represent His body and blood.

II Corinthians 4:7, 10-11 clarifies this:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. . . . [We are] always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

In truly eating the Passover—that is, personally and with comprehension reconfirming the acceptance of His sacrifice—we take into ourselves the death and life of Christ. When we eat food, it goes into

us, and when assimilated, it becomes part of us, enabling us to live and accomplish. This is the process He is teaching here. The only difference is that it is a spiritual process, and it becomes the means of spiritual accomplishment. Beyond this, He also has in mind our taking all the instructions contained within God's Word into our minds and making them practical in our lives.

I Corinthians 10:1-4 adds to this important concept:

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

Paul draws on some of the same imagery and teaching vehicles as Christ. In the wilderness, the Israelites ate manna and water that nourished them and enabled them to progress on their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Those things were spiritual only in that they came from the spiritual God and were spiritually supplied. They are also types of Christ. In the biblical imagery, then, by their literal eating of manna and drinking water, Christ was empowering them to endure all the way to the Promised Land. We are to understand that, likewise, He also empowers us when we eat of Him spiritually.

John 15:4-5 confirms:

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

Understanding the symbolism contained within Christ's teaching that we must eat Him can provide us a great deal of wisdom. He is our ever-present help who sustains, intercedes for, and nourishes us so that we might be spiritually strong and growing. Eating Him is a constant and sure source of guidance, comfort, and encouragement. In Him God supplies all things necessary for making it to His Kingdom. We must always remember that without Him we can do nothing.