

The Bread of Heaven – the Only Way to Life!

John 6:52-71 (text)

2 June 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 a.m.

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Right through the ages, many a human being has found the greatest peace and joy in Jesus Christ. And the irony is: if you consider the circumstances of some of those people, then these often had nothing peaceful about them, but were actually circumstances that were very depressing – circumstances that were often painful due to setbacks, illnesses, or wars, or persecution. And yet, when these people learned of Jesus and received Him as their Saviour, they instantly found the greatest joy combined with the most blessed peace despite their earthly turmoil!

No wonder Jesus Himself said, “If you receive Me – if you have a personal relationship with Me – then you will have life;¹ which means your life will have meaning here on earth!” “Yes, even if you go through hardship/trials, you will find meaningful answers to your life!” “You see, I, your Lord, am familiar with your suffering.” “But here’s good news: I have conquered the source of your hardship – the evil one!”

“So, in Me, *your life on earth* will find meaning!”

“But, look, in Me you will also have *eternal life*, for he who believes in Me will live even though he dies!”

My brother & sister, such people through all of history (and there were many) have all found peace in Jesus!

- There’s the Apostle Paul who, even in prison and with blood oozing from his back, sang hymns of praise to God!²
- There are the other apostles who, for joy in Christ, suffered hardship!
- There are the Christian Martyrs! Remember e.g. Polycarp, the 2nd Century pastor of Smyrna, who, in the face of his persecutors, said, “How could I blaspheme my King & Saviour whom I have served for 86 years!?”³
- In more modern times, there’s also the example of Blaise Pascal and John Newton who, despite their frail bodies, had tears of joy and peace, the instant they received Jesus as their Saviour!
- And I’m sure that even in *this* church there is more than one who can testify to this fact, i.e. that there is life in Jesus Christ!

So, here is the main message of our text: **There’s only one way to life – i.e. a personal relationship with Jesus Christ!**

Here are three points by which our text opens up this message:

- Bread of Heaven
- Hardened Hearts
- A Timely Question

¹ Cf. e.g. Jn 6:47, 51, 53, 54, 57

² Cf. Acts 16:16-24

³ “86 years have I served him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”

For more on Polycarp, cf. e.g. **Christian History Institute** at <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp/>

Bread of Heaven

Jesus is teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum.⁴

Just the previous day, He was on the other side of the Sea of Galilee⁵ where He had multiplied five loaves & two fishes for a crowd of which the men alone were 5,000! And after that miraculous feeding of the crowd, just the food scraps that they picked up were twelve baskets full!

What a miracle!

So, no wonder, after that miracle, Jesus had to escape from the crowd, for they wanted to take Him by force⁶ and make Him their King⁷ – a king on their terms; yes, a king whom they hoped would throw off the Roman oppression, i.e. a king of *this* world!!

But, today (at the event of our text), Jesus is back in Capernaum in their synagogue!

And many who had eaten of the previous day's miracle food, are now also in that synagogue, for they wanted more food – food for their bodies!!

Jesus told them: “You come to Me not because you saw the miraculous sign yesterday, but because you ate your fill of the loaves I multiplied!”⁸

Then, Jesus told them as much as, “Aim for longer-lasting food – yes, for food that will last you for all eternity!”

They asked Him, “But how do we get this food?”

Said He, “Just believe in Him whom God has sent!”⁹ “Yes, just believe in Me!”

Then, can you believe it, as if they had not seen that great miracle just the day before, they asked Jesus, “But if You want us to believe in You, then give us a sign – yes, a sign like the Manna which Moses once gave our forefathers in the desert!”

Says Jesus, “You think *that* was something!?” “No, that manna-bread fed only your ancestors' *bodies* – and only *for a time*, because, eventually, even that bread could not keep them alive forever!” “But I tell you what *true* bread is! True bread is what My Father gives you from heaven!¹⁰ Yes, true bread is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world!”

They answered (in v.34), “Sir, give us this bread always!”¹¹

⁴ It's not sure whether this teaching happened on the Sabbath, because, in those days, the people also had services on Monday and Thursday (Cf. Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of the Gospel according to John [In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.244]).

⁵ On the grassy shores of Bethsaida

⁶ ἀρπάζειν – a Present Infinitive Active from the verb ἀρπάζω^a: to grab or seize by force, with the purpose of removing and/or controlling—‘to seize, to snatch away, to take away.’ ἐκέλευσεν τὸ στράτευμα καταβὰν ἀρπάσαι αὐτὸν ἐκ μέσου αὐτῶν ‘he ordered soldiers to go down (into the group) and snatch him away from them’ Ac 23:10; ἔρχεται ὁ πονηρὸς καὶ ἀρπάζει τὸ ἐσπαρμένον ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ ‘the Evil One comes and snatches away the seed that was sown in his heart’ Mt 13:19. In Mt 13:19 the context as a whole is figurative, but a more or less literal rendering of ‘snatches’ or ‘seizes’ is probably satisfactory (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 220). New York: United Bible Societies).

⁷ Cf. Jn 6:15 **Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.**

⁸ Cf. Jn 6:26ff (under next footnote)

⁹ Cf. Jn 6:29 (in the quoted text in the footnote here below)

¹⁰ Cf. Jn 6:32 (in the quoted text in the footnote here below)

¹¹ Cf. Jn 6:26-34 **Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign**

Says He, “I am the bread of life!” “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!”¹²

My brother & sister, of course, with the privilege of hindsight, you & I know that what Jesus was referring to was His crucifixion – yes, His cross-death by which He would set His loved-ones free from liability for their sins!

Hardened Hearts

Amazing that most people in that synagogue could not understand that Jesus was talking in picture language!

So, now they start fighting¹³ with each other. Some are saying, “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” while others were probably saying, “Don’t be silly!” “He does not mean it literally!”

And Jesus? What does He do now?

Well, He continues to speak in pictures! Yes, He speaks in pictures so that those who had hardened their hearts against Him should not understand – yes, those who had not been called by the Father!

And Jesus’ picture language gets now even more graphic! About six times (in six verses) He says that unless people eat of His flesh and drink of His blood, they won’t have eternal life! But if they do eat His flesh and drink His blood, they will have life – yes, will live forever!¹⁴

Wow! Now even some of Jesus’ wider-circle disciples start becoming uneasy!

Of course, you will remember that our Lord had more than just twelve disciples, for remember: He once sent out seventy disciples to go heal the sick and proclaim the Good News that the Kingdom of God has come near!¹⁵

Well, many of these wider-circle disciples are now finding it hard to understand and believe what Jesus is saying – v.60, “*This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?*”

Says Jesus, “*Does this cause you to stumble?*”¹⁶ “Yes, do My words ensnare you?” “Have they caused you to fall into a trap?”¹⁷

*do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?*³¹ *Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’*³² *Jesus then said to them, “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.*³³ *For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”*³⁴ *They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”*

¹² Cf. Jn 6:48-51 “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.*⁴⁸ *I am the bread of life.*⁴⁹ *Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.*⁵⁰ *This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*⁵¹ *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.”*

¹³ Ἐμάχοντο Imperfect Deponent Indicative 3rd Person Plural of the verb μάχομαι: ‘to clash severely, struggle, fight’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 494). New York: United Bible Societies).

¹⁴ John 6:53-58, *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.*⁵⁴ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*⁵⁵ *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.*⁵⁶ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.*⁵⁷ *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.*⁵⁸ *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.”*

¹⁵ Cf. Lk 10:1ff.

¹⁶ So, the NASB

¹⁷ So, Hendriksen (ibid:246), “The verb translated *ensnare* (σκανδαλίζει from σκάνδαλον, the bait-stick in a trap or snare; this crooked stick springs the trap) does not merely signify *offend*, nor, on the other hand, does

But it could not have been *Jesus' words* that are to be blamed for their stumbling! No, it was not the hardness of His *sermon*, but rather the hardness of *their own hearts*! After all, is it not true that they, as disciples, had already seen many miracles performed by Jesus – miracles that had been witnessing to His God-given authority!?

So, how is it that they are so easily offended? Should they not have asked themselves, “But is it not perhaps possible that the words of our Lord have a deeper meaning!?”

Instead, they took Jesus' words in the most literal sense! So, when Jesus spoke of His flesh, they took it in a cannibalistic way! When He spoke of His blood, they, who were familiar with sacrifices, didn't ponder the possibility that He might be referring to His voluntary sacrifice by which He would shed His own blood for them! All *they* saw in their minds were *actual drops of blood*. Then they shuddered at the thought of *drinking* it! And so, these disciples cleanly forgot all the miracles they had seen Him perform. Indeed, like some others in that synagogue, they now suddenly look at Jesus and see Him as a mere man – yes, as just the guy down the road, “...*the son of Joseph, whose father & mother we know!*”¹⁸

So, now Jesus aims His words directly at these wider-circle disciples. And what He says boils down to this: “O, you're so hard to believe!” “What if I should fast-forward for you My whole life-plan here on earth?” “Yes, what if I should take you in a jiff past My suffering on a cross, past My death, past My resurrection, and all the way to *My ascension into heaven!*?” “Yes, what if I should, at this very moment, make you stand next to Me on the Mt of Olives and make you watch how I in My new & glorified body, accompanied by angels, go back into heaven where I came from in the first place!?” “Would you *then* believe that I am the true ‘Bread’ that came from heaven?” “Of course, you would!” “But, some of you have just proved that you are hard of heart – that, with what I have already given you, you just will not believe!”

My brother & sister, re the ascension of our Lord Jesus – well, we celebrated that three days ago, on Thursday! Yes, on Thursday, about 1989 years ago (in about the year 30AD), our Lord Jesus ascended back into heaven!

So, unlike the people in that Capernaum synagogue, you & I have *seen* that ascension in the Scriptures! So, for you & me the “picture” has been completed! Is your heart hardened? Scary thought – could it be that even in this church there are people who are like Jesus' wider-circle disciples – yes, church-members who have read God's Word and listened to many sermons, yet, who never really believed in Him?

Says Jesus (in v.63), ***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.***

In other words, stop thinking that I was asking you *literally* to eat My body or *literally* to drink My blood!

My brother & sister, once before, our Lord had to go at length to explain to Nicodemus that with “born-again” He did not mean we should *literally* enter again our mothers' wombs! No, Jesus meant it *spiritually* – a spiritual rebirth!

Well, in the same way, Jesus is now explaining to these hard-of heart disciples that, *in a spiritual sense, we have to be closely united with Him – we have to feast upon Him; that we should not just have an occasional relationship with Him! But, says He, “If you're going*

it mean *kill*; it means: *cause to fall into a trap*, here in the figurative sense; hence *cause to sin*. Jesus, therefore, is asking whether by His sermon these hearers have actually been seduced or led into sin.”

Interesting how also the Hebrew translation of the New Testament has rendered these words in very much the same way as Hendriksen. This is how it reads: הֲזֶה הָיָה לָכֶם לְמוֹקֵשׁ: (= ...was this for you a trap?) (Cf. The New Testament in Hebrew, by the Society for Distributing Hebrew Scriptures. Edgware, Middx. HA8 7LF. England)

¹⁸ Cf. Jn 6:42 ***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?’”***

*to be Mine – if you’re going to participate in the life that I have come to give – you have to devour My flesh and drink My blood!” In other words, our Lord is calling for a wholehearted pursuit of union with Him, without which there is no spiritual life! Thus, mere religion will not do it! Mere church attendance will not do it! The only way that gets you & me into heaven is to be in Jesus!*¹⁹

Well, Jesus knew that some people just would not believe. So, says He (in v.65), “***This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.***”

Then? What happened next?

Well, our text tells us (in v.66) that ***many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him!***

Scary thought! Is that what could happen with some of us if our faith in Christ gets tested? Our text says, many of His disciples turned back from Him, also back *to their old ways* – to how they lived & believed before they knew Him... which brings us to the last point...

A Timely Question

What does our Lord now do?

Well, He turns this negative situation into good use! Yes, Jesus now does what Joshua once did when he confronted Israel with the idolatry of their fathers, and then put them to the test, saying: “...***choose this day whom you will serve...***”²⁰

Indeed, Jesus now uses the falling-away of so many of His disciples – He uses *that* as an opportunity to have the faith of the Twelve not just tested but also *strengthened!*

And so, He asks the twelve, “***You do not want to go away also, do you?***”²¹

My brother & sister, have you ever contemplated going away from Jesus?

I have – many times! But, by God’s grace, I have always come back to the same counter-question as Simon Peter: “*Lord, to whom (else) shall I go!?*”

Shall I go to *Mohammad* – to the Koran and the Hadith? No, for I’m convinced that I will not find life there, because the canon of God’s Holy Word closed nearly 600 years before Mohammad was even born!

Shall I go to any of the philosophers this world has produced – yes, to Socrates or Plato, or to Karl Marx or to Immanuel Kant or to Jean-Paul Sartre? No, for these all only argue from a human perspective!

Shall I find ultimate meaning in the words of the pop songs of this world? No, for these, too, give only under-the-sun short-term joy!

But I shall go, and go *again & again* to Jesus – and *stay* with Jesus, for look, Jesus is the only One who has come and convincingly and authoritatively taught (and personally & self-sacrificially demonstrated) that He is from God; that He is man’s only Saviour; that He is who He claimed to be – the Son of God – true God and true man (yet without sin)!

¹⁹ My adaptation of the words of Sproul RC for which see Sproul’s audio sermon on Jn 6:52-71 at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/hard-sayings/>

²⁰ Cf. Josh 24:14-15, “***Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵ And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.***” (Emphasis mine)

²¹ Cf. Jn 6:67 (NASB)

So, by God's gracious doing, just like Peter so have I always come back stronger than before, professing, "*Lord Jesus, You have the words of eternal life, and I have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God!*"²²

My brother & sister, young people, I pray that all of you can say the same – and *from your heart*, so that none of us here in this building will, like the twelfth disciple (Judas Iscariot), hide behind Peter's confession!

Within a few minutes, you & I will be sitting at the Lord's table! I pray that, not just here at the table but always, your and my personal & individual relationships with Jesus will be as close as this morning's bread and wine will be with each one of us after we have swallowed it and it has become a part of us!

AMEN (2357 words excluding footnotes)

²² The words of Jn 6:68b-69 in personalised form.

Here they are as Peter spoke them: "***Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.***"