

Bread from heaven
Exodus 16:4
John 6:41 – 59
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
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What is the worst thing that you have ever eaten?

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I have eaten a few bizarre things through the years: goats' brains, jelly fish, water buffalo, and sea cucumber. My son Aaron loves to tell people that his favorite Peruvian food is anticuchos: grilled marinated beef heart. Done right, anticuchos are really good. The Chinese have a saying that if *it shows its back to the sun, you can eat it*. That is not to say that you want to eat it, of course. But, you probably can eat it.

In our household we taught our children a prayer we call *The Missionary Prayer*.

Lord, where you lead us we will follow.
What you feed us, we will swallow.

One evening Lois Ann placed on the table a lovely dinner that was a culinary stretch for our children. Aaron looked at the food before us and announced to the table, *I think we need to say the missionary prayer tonight*. We have also taught our children that one of the secrets to eating food that may be outside of what you expect or are used to eating is that you can eat just about anything if you have enough bread to accompany it. Bread is found just about everywhere in the world. With enough bread, you can get just about anything down.

Food plays a key part in many Bible stories. The first thing to note is that food in the Jewish world is an expression of faith.

Food in the Jewish world is an expression of faith – Exodus 16:4

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.

God tells Moses that the manna he would send would in fact be a test. It will test the people's willingness to walk according to God's instructions, his law. How the people responded to the manna was a way to reveal the heart. Would the people be willing to organize their lives according to the food laws God would give to them?

Food was a very big deal in the ancient Jewish world. (It remains a significant matter among devout and practicing Jews today.) There are many food regulations in the Jewish religion. There are foods that may be eaten and foods that are not to be eaten. In shorthand these rules are referred to as kosher laws. They are the rules that specify both what may be eaten and the way in which the food may be prepared and served. For example, one of the basic kosher regulations is that meat and dairy products are not to be mixed. For this reason, kosher homes and restaurants will

keep separate distinctively colored dishes: one for meats, the other for dairy. Typically, breakfast and lunch will consist only of the foods compatible with dairy products, whereas supper will be the meat meal of the day.

I first realized how seriously religiously observant Jews take these kosher regulations flying between New York and Tel Aviv on El Al, the Israeli Airline. It was a full 747: about 400 people on the plane. El Al serves only kosher meals. And yet, when supper was being served I noticed that the flight attendants were spending a great deal of time identifying a significant number of particular passengers and providing them with meals that had been prepared by specific kosher catering kitchens. For many on board, the kosher meals of El Al Airlines were not *kosher enough*. Further, even among those who kept stringent kosher regulations there was sufficient variety and disagreement to require multiple kosher caterers to satisfy the observant requirements of the Jewish faithful on board.

With this background of the importance and place of food regulations in mind, we can see how Jesus' claim to be the bread of life was shocking to his Jewish listeners.

Jesus' claim to be the bread of life

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Every good and pious Jew of the first century would associate the image of bread that came from heaven with the miraculous manna that appeared every morning to feed the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness between their release from slavery in Egypt and their arrival in the Promised Land of Canaan. For this reason, Jesus' claim to be *the bread from heaven* puzzled his hearers. How is he, Jesus, similar to the miraculous food God provided their forefathers in the wilderness?

Jesus takes the imagery further. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." *This bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world*, says Jesus. Jesus is saying that in some way he is like the manna that sustained the Hebrews in the wilderness. The manna sustained the Israelites in the wilderness. Jesus will offer his *flesh* – more on the use of that word in a moment – and it will sustain the world. What he offers is for the world. His work will spread beyond the borders of the Jewish community.

Taking his message even further, Jesus' words become downright hard to hear. ⁵³ Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my

blood is real drink.⁵⁶ **Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.** The difficulty and hardness of these words of Jesus result in a massive defection of Jesus' followers. In verse 66, we are told that many disciples turned away from following Jesus that day. People who had been followers of Jesus stopped following because his words were so difficult, even offensive. Obviously Jesus had left his copy of **How to Win Friends and Influence People** at home that day. Church Growth consultants would have told him that you don't say such things if you want to grow big churches. His disciples told him⁶⁰ "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Let's take the truth of the disciple's words at face value: this is a hard saying. What does Jesus mean by it? What would he have us know and learn and believe? First, dismiss the slander.

First: Dismiss the slander

First, we need to dismiss one of the standard slanders propagated against the church by its enemies. There is no suggestion or intent in Jesus words of anything cannibalistic. His words are not meant to be understood in any literal, material way. Cannibalism is, and remains, something abhorrent.

Second, Jesus' words are not a reference to the Lord's Supper.

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⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

Secondly, - and this may surprise you – Jesus' words are not a reference to the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. People often jump to the assumption that Jesus is speaking about communion because of the similarity in the words that are used. When we celebrate communion we hear the words spoken of the bread and wine: *this is the body of Christ broken for us; this is the blood of Christ, shed for the remission of our sins.* But our Lord gives to us two key indicators that he does not have communion in mind as he speaks these words.

The first is that the word used by Jesus in the text is not the Greek word for **body**,¹ but rather the Greek word for **flesh**.² This word, **flesh**, is more earthy and material. It refers solely to physical nature. In contrast, the Greek word for **body** has a broader range of meaning; it refers to the totality of human personhood. While it certainly includes physicality, its scope of meaning is much wider. In the New Testament, every reference to the Lord's Supper by Jesus or the Apostles speaks of Christ's **body**, not his **flesh**. In other words, the use of the word for **flesh** in this context suggests strongly that Jesus intends something else in the meaning of his words.

The verb in this sentence of Jesus' is in the aorist tense. In the Greek language, the aorist tense is used to signify an action that is completed but has an on going impact into the present. In 2005 I *earned* a Doctor of Ministry degree from Covenant Theological Seminary. The use of the word **earned** in that sentence is in

¹ soma

² sarx

the aorist tense. I earned the degree in 2005. The reality of completing the requirements to earn that degree continues on into the present. Prior to May 2005 my title was Rev. Mark D. Atkinson. From that time forward my official title was Rev. Dr. Mark D. Atkinson.

When Jesus speaks of giving his flesh in this passage he does so in the aorist tense. Jesus' word choice suggests that he has in mind some particular event, accomplishment or action. He refers to a once and for all future act. He is saying that he will do something that will have ongoing impact.

What event does Jesus mean to point to by this image? I believe that the best explanation is that he is referring to his coming sacrifice, his death on the cross.

Jesus is referring to his sacrifice, his death on the cross

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.”

I think that the best – and only logical – explanation is that he is referring to the cross, to the giving of his **flesh** to the cruelty of that instrument of torture. “**This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.**” says Jesus. In the ancient Jewish sacrificial system the word for **flesh** was often used in conjunction with the act of sacrifice. The worshipper would give the **flesh** of the sacrificial animal to the priest to offer to God on the worshipper's behalf. Jesus is saying in this verse that he will offer himself, his flesh, his physical body, as a sacrifice on behalf of the world.

In offering himself, Jesus' sacrifice is a propitiatory sacrifice.

Jesus' sacrifice is a propitiatory sacrifice

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.”

The word **propitiation** refers to an offering given in order to turn away wrath. It refers to what you have to do in order to turn away someone's anger toward you.

Imagine a husband who forgets to give his wife a card on their wedding anniversary: to forget a wedding anniversary is a significant failure. The husband, when he realizes his failure, picks up the phone, calls the florist and orders a dozen roses. The roses are a propitiation. They are an attempt to turn aside his wife's justifiable anger and disappointment at his failure to remember their wedding anniversary.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is a propitiatory sacrifice. It is offered to appease, or remove wrath. Last week in worship we sang together the wonderful song “In Christ Alone.” In the second verse we sang;

'Til on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live, I live

Jesus' death propitiates. It turns aside wrath.

The question to ask at this point is this: whose anger was propitiated, whose wrath was turned away? From what are we saved?

From what are we saved?

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."

In the Christian community we speak of faith as being the revelation of salvation. We say that in Christ we are saved. But what is it that we are saved from? What is it that Christ rescues us from? We say that we are saved from our sins. We are saved from death and destruction. We are saved to new life. But ultimately, standing behind all of these truths, is the reality that what we are saved from is the wrath of God. It is God's wrath that must be appeased. It is his wrath that must be propitiated. We stand as guilty sinners before a holy and righteous God. We deserve punishment for our sins. We deserve death for our rebellion and disobedience. The wrath of God's holy nature burns white hot against the darkness of our disobedience. His righteous anger must be propitiated. It must be turned aside. And yet, there is nothing that you or I can do to turn it aside. There is nothing available within our ability to offer as propitiation. If God is to be propitiated, it must come from outside of our efforts.

Now we can begin to understand what Jesus' means. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." What he means is this. When I eat food, it sustains my life materially. The food I eat nourishes my body. It gives me energy. It keeps me alive physically. The manna kept the Israelites alive in the wilderness. But manna solved only a physical need, not the spiritual need of being a sinful person in the presence of a holy God. What Jesus means in this image is that his propitiatory sacrifice upon the cross is what enables our spiritual rebirth. He bore our punishment. By his stripes we find healing. Christ's sacrifice upon the cross solves our spiritual problem with God.

The fact of Christ's sacrifice is important. It, together with the resurrection, is the most important event in human history. However, Jesus' words make clear that the fact of his sacrifice is not enough. The reality of the cross must be appropriated and applied to our lives.

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⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.

The imagery of eating and drinking refers to appropriating the reality of the cross into our inner most being and through out the scope of our lives, claiming the cross as *our* propitiation. What we eat, we take into ourselves. It becomes part of us. The cross, the reality of Christ's sacrifice, needs to become part of our identity, our

understanding, our belief and conviction. We must comprehend, embrace and rejoice in the cross.

Think of some of the hymns that we sing during the season of Lent.

In the cross of Christ I glory,
 Towering over the wrecks of time
All the light of sacred story
 Gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life overtake me
 Hopes deceive and fears annoy
Never shall the cross forsake me
 Lo it glows with peace and joy.

Or,

When I survey the wondrous cross,
 On which the Prince of glory died,
My greatest gain I count but loss
 And pour contempt on all my pride.

These hymns point to the truth that as we grow in faith the meaning, significance, greatness and glory of the cross grows ever richer in our understanding. We see the greatness of Christ. We see the awesome majesty of the cross. We see the power and purposes of God revealed.

We see it. But not everyone sees it. Why does not everyone see the greatness of Christ?

Why does not everyone see the greatness of Christ?

⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

The question that may be asked at this point is this, *why does not everyone see the greatness of Christ or the glory of his cross?* You and I are here this morning because in some measure we perceive the centrality of Christ's crucifixion in the story of the world's history. You see it. You may not see it as clearly as you wish, but you perceive it. Why is it that not everyone who hears the great message of Jesus Christ responds to it? Why would people hear it and simply walk away indifferently?

This is a question that must be answered on two levels. The first level on which we answer is from a human perspective. From a human perspective there are things that blind us to the truth of Christ.

In the case of the ancient Jews, many had clear and certain expectations of what the Messiah's coming would be like. In their minds they knew what they wanted and therefore what to expect. They wanted a new king, like King David, only one who would be even more impressive and powerful. They resented the rule of the Romans in their land; they expected the Messiah to lead them into independence in much the

same way in which Moses had led them from bondage in Egypt. The Jews expected one thing. When Jesus is presented to them, he is not what they expected. This in turn becomes a stumbling block. Many of those around Jesus said to themselves, *wait a minute! We know him. He's Mary's son. We know his family. He is simply the son of Joseph the carpenter.* The assumption is that if God is going to send his Messiah, surely the Messiah will be born of noble birth, in rich and powerful settings and not to a poor family in a backward town to be raised as a carpenter.

This tendency to reject Jesus because he does not fit our assumptions about how God would be at work in our world continues unabated today. Muslims reject Jesus precisely because he was crucified. They believe that God would not allow such a thing to happen to one whom He had sent. Feminists reject Jesus because he is male. They want a goddess they can identify with, one made in their own image. Philosophers reject Jesus because they see no need for God. Darwinians reject him because they see no need for salvation. Many moderns reject him simply because in our world of amusements and distractions they simply have not got time to ponder or think about eternal matters.

And yet, Jesus challenges our assumptions. In this passage he says of himself, ³⁸ *for I have come down from heaven.* Those who heard him knew that for him to claim that he came from heaven was tantamount to claiming that he was the promised Messiah. For us today there is still a challenge in Jesus' words. He is claiming that he has come from heaven, and that he has come from God in some unique capacity and for some special purpose. Any who hear his claim are forced to decide, to come to some conclusion, as to what they think regarding Jesus' claim that he has come from God for some special purpose.

But there is another level in which this question must be answered. We can talk about all the reasons people offer for their rejection of the message of Christ. But equally important is to ask the question: *"How is it that some come to faith at all?"* Why do some come to confess and believe in Jesus? Jesus tells us explicitly: those who turn to Christ turn because God draws them.

Those who turn to Christ, turn because God draws them

⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

Jesus tells us the answer. Those who come to Christ, come because God has called them according to his sovereign purpose. We are not capable of coming of our own initiative. If we come to him, it is because he has called us and drawn us to himself. Jesus leaves us in no doubt about this, ⁴⁴ *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.* Only those whom God the Father gives to Christ can and will come to him. In order for us to first come, God must draw us to Christ. He must break through the fog, the expectations, the prejudice and the distractions. We choose him only after he has first chosen and called us.

This truth of Christ's can be hard to accept. We want to flatter ourselves into thinking that we sought God. We believe that we had greater spiritual sensitivity than others that has enabled us to search him out. Jesus tells us that it is exactly the opposite. We do not seek God. We run from him. The only way we ever find him is if the Father draws us.

God, in his sovereign purpose elects those whom he has chosen. His purpose is to give them new life through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Those whom he has chosen are, initially, spiritually dead, like the rest of Adam's helpless race. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they are regenerated and given new life. They are born again. The word *regenerated* means simply that they are given this new life by the power of God. What happens is that by this act of regeneration, those whom God has elected begin to hunger and long for the things of God. Previously they were dead to these things. But now, God awakens and develops within them a new spiritual life. Through contact with Christians, through Bible Study, listening to Christian tapes or radio, reading Biblically centered books, attending conferences, participating in worship, etc, this new believer is brought to the point where they begin to see clearly and can understand the things of Christ. They now have a love for God. And, they begin to see the full horror and reality of their own rebellion against God and the scope of their sinful nature. Part of the awakening process includes this disturbing discovery. Think of someone who has been in an auto accident that has severely damaged his or her face. Imagine that first time when the bandages are removed and a mirror is provided and they slowly, tentatively, look at what, until now, they could not see. They must look, but are appalled nonetheless. So too for the new creature in Christ, they begin to see themselves as God sees them.

It is at this point that a person who is seeking God may first become self aware of that search. It is at this point that they are brought to a moment of confession of faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. However, though this may be the first they are aware of it, God has, nonetheless, been at work in their lives previously to this point. In other words, the supernatural act of regeneration precedes and makes possible the subsequent act of repentance and turning in faith toward Jesus Christ. The act of conversion and repentance could not happen if God had not at first been at work calling, drawing and giving new life.

Some Christians find Jesus's teaching on this topic objectionable. They insist that there must be the decisive element of human choice. They will argue that God does not choose us until we choose him. They say that Jesus Christ is the perfect gentleman. He will not impose himself upon us until we give him the green light that it is acceptable to us that he do so. They say that when Jesus knocks at the door of your heart, that there is no handle on his side of the door. The handle is on your side, and, until you open it, Jesus will not come in.

The problem with these images, aside from the fact that they stand in clear opposition to Jesus' plain teaching in this passage, is that they minimize our bondage to sin and its reality in our lives. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. The problem with being dead is that you are dead. The dead do not take the initiative. The dead are unresponsive. Whatever is done is done *to* the dead, not *by* the dead. In the case of God's elect, what he does is give to them new life.

R. C. Sproul tells the story of his debate with a man regarding this question. During the debate, the man explained how the Greek verb in this passage refers to the act of drawing water out of a well. Sproul accepted his explanation of the meaning of the word and then asked; *How do you get water from a well? Do you*

stand at the top of the well and yell: here water, here water, here water? As surely as it takes a bucket to draw water from a well, it takes God's strong hand to draw sinners from being dead in their sins.

God is sovereign. He is sovereign over all creation. He is sovereign over history. He is sovereign over the world about us. He is sovereign over the political world, the economic world, the cultural world. He is sovereign over the human soul. It is not within our power to come to him. If we come, it is because he has called us and drawn us with a strong hand to save. Praise be to his name.

Conclusion

Jesus speaks these words not as a reference to communion but to his coming sacrifice. It is his sacrifice upon the cross that serves as the center point of human history. It accomplishes what we are incapable of doing by our own effort or sacrifices: it turns away God's wrath directed at our sinfulness. Jesus will give his flesh to the cruelty of the cross in order that God's anger be appeased. At the same time, we are called to lay claim to Christ and his sacrifice. It is to be the defining reality of our lives, part of who we are, how we think, and how we live. And yet, not everyone in our world apprehends the greatness of Christ and the glory of his cross. The reason is that the barriers and impediments to faith are so great that in our natural state we could never even come to Christ by our own effort. As Jesus taught, we must be drawn. God must bring us to faith. Thus, from beginning to the end, the glory of the salvation he offers belongs to God alone.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.

Exodus 16:1 – 7

16 They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³ and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?”

John 6:35 - 59

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 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’?” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ 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— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ 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.”

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ 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.” ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.