

Jesus' Flesh and Blood

Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John has a difficult passage that is often misunderstood. Yet it's actually loaded with immense importance for Christians. We need to understand it, so I offer this study. The text is as follows: **"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. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day'"** (vv. 53-54). This is an exceedingly compelling claim, for one's salvation hangs on doing what Jesus demands here. The Roman Catholic Church alleges that this is fulfilled by all who partake of communion (their mass). I think we can discount that. The Lord's Supper is to remind us of what Jesus did and that He's coming back. Evangelical commentators dismiss the passage as simply metaphor. It's another way, they write, of Jesus saying, "believe in Me." OK. So it's metaphor. But there's still lots more here. Let's think about the background to this astonishing claim that Jesus makes here.

In the Garden, in Genesis Chapter 3, the first couple sinned and became alienated from God (and tragically from each other as well) by eating. They ate a certain fruit that was forbidden to them. Some commentators say the sin was in the disobedience. OK, no argument with that. Yet, God had already (Chapter 2) identified the fruit as having certain unique and important qualities, so eating was more than just a disobedient act. It was actually ingesting something they were not to have in them. As a result, death came upon the human race. Eating led to death. And so all humans were constituted sinners, alienated and condemned. In time, the Son came to reverse that. We must now eat that which is holy and good, what God *wants* us to eat, which leads to life, life everlasting. It's the Person of the Son.

In Leviticus Chapter 17, the Israelites were absolutely forbidden to ingest blood. This wasn't just another of the many food laws. This was special: **"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar . . . "** Blood represented life! It was special in God's eyes. So no wonder when the Jews heard Jesus say this in John Chapter 6 they were horrified. Jews *never* ate blood! Yet what Jesus is saying is not that they were to do something that was forbidden. Rather, He was saying that they were deliberately to ingest His blood because that would be taking into them His holy and eternal life. Now, God wanted His people to ingest blood – the blood of the Son, that is, the life of the Son. We're to take into us the Son?! How?

In Chapter 3 of his book, Ezekiel was uniquely commissioned to his ministry as a prophet to Judea. **"Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which He unrolled before me. . . And He said to me, 'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth, and He gave me the scroll to eat"** (2:9 to 3:1,2). Ezekiel had to eat God's Word. That's how God's mind, God's words and thoughts entered into his life. Now Jesus is the Logos, the living Word (John 1:1,4,14). The Scriptures reveal God. But Jesus reveals God more fully. So, when Jesus demands that we eat His flesh and blood, that is, His Person, He intends that we take into us His Word. By taking His Word into us, by incorporating or embodying His Word, we are transformed. By diligent study and meditation on His Word, His thoughts and values and priorities become ours. And we become like Him.

The idea of ingesting something that has cosmic significance is Scriptural. Two examples: First, in Genesis Chapter 4, Cain slew his brother Abel. We read, **"The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand'"** (vv. 10-11). The ground took into it the blood of a murder, a hideous act. So the ground had to be cursed. We're such committed materialists we can't understand such a notion. But this has meaning to God, who likens the earth to ingesting blood – *and being changed by it*.

And the second example is even more compelling. **"When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law"** (Deuteronomy 27:2-3). The Israelites were instructed that, when they had

entered into the promised Land, they were to write God's Words (that is, Torah, the Books of Moses) in a plaster coating on large stones that were then to be set up on Mount Ebal. Why? What's this all about? It was so that when it rained, the words carved in the plaster would wash into the ground. The ground of the Land, in other words, would ingest the Word of God. The Land of Israel is special and unique. It – and only it, of all the land masses on this globe – has the Word of God *in* the ground. And it's there, in the ground, forever! The Land of Israel is holy and special because it contains the Word of God, that is, the will of God and the revelation of God. And God's promises regarding the Land, namely that He has deeded it to Israel. If the ground could take in the Word of God, so must we.

The Passover event also involved eating flesh, and it involved blood. It too may help us to understand our passage in John chapter 6. In Exodus Chapter 12, the Israelites were to take a lamb, slay it, and then to eat the meat that was roasted over a fire, and to display the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their houses where they eat the lambs. That lamb was not a sin offering. The lamb provided redemption from bondage to Pharaoh and Egypt. It provided deliverance, and it represents propitiation. The lamb, a substitute sacrifice, provided protection from God's fierce judgment. We know that the lamb was a type of Christ. What the Israelites did that night was proleptic of what believers would need to do in our era, trust in the Lamb of God for salvation. Christ did for us on a vastly greater scale – on a *cosmic* scale – what that lamb did for the Israelites that night in Egypt. So perhaps this adds to why Jesus in John Chapter 6 requires that we eat His flesh. But what about the blood? It's possible that eating His blood protects our soul as that blood in Exodus 12 protected those children of Israel. (But I admit this is speculative.)

What have we learned? The terms, "flesh" and "blood" are a figure of speech, more specifically it is synecdoche. That term means, in literature or communication, that a part or parts can stand for the whole. So "flesh" and "blood" refer to the life of Jesus. Yet Jesus surely also chose to use these words, especially the word "blood," to indicate the violent death He was soon to suffer. We are to take into ourselves the Person of Christ. That's how we have eternal life. That's how we become holy. That's how we can reflect the glory of God, for which we were created. We do it by taking in the Word of God.

Paul refers to this concept in a slightly different way. He calls it "union with Christ." He calls it "putting on the new man." He calls us to imitate Jesus. The idea is the same. We need to be transformed. That's why Paul in his letters not only teaches us positional truths, but practical ways to live that please God as well. Theologians refer to this concept of taking into us Christ as regeneration and sanctification. The indwelling Holy Spirit in the life of a believer enables us to do this as we engage the Word of God.

This is *exceedingly* important to us. If we think all we need to do is "make a decision for Christ" at some time in our life, and maybe go to church some Sundays, and that's all there is to being saved and on the way to heaven, we're mistaken. In our passage, Jesus said, "Unless . . . you have no life in you." That's as serious a statement as can be made!

The Bible is a unique book. It's not like any other book, which we can leave on the shelf unopened, or we can read it, as we please. The Bible is God's revelation of Himself. We encounter the living God when we're in His Word (see Isaiah 66:2b). We *must* know the Word of God. We need to reflect deeply on it. And we need to live it, that is, we need to express it in our lives. God's values need to be our values. His priorities, our priorities. *And His thoughts our thoughts.* Isaiah condemned the Nation of Israel for ignoring God's Word. When he wrote, **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord"** (Isaiah 55:8), what he meant was, "BUT THEY SHOULD BE!" God had revealed to His people His will, and He held them responsible for knowing it and obeying it. Same with us. We can't be passive Christians. **"Do not refuse Him who speaks"** (Hebrews 12:25).

To ignore the Bible is to ignore God. Atheists ignore God, and they will suffer terribly for it. May we not join in such foolishness! We were saved, after all, to be in an intimate relationship with the living God, the Creator of heaven and earth. He is the greatest reality there is. So let's commit to knowing God and to enjoying Him. And to knowing His will for us and doing it.

May Christ be formed in us, found in us, for His glory!