

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
6:28-34

28. Then they said to him, What shall we do, that we may work the works of God? 29. Jesus answered and said to them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he has sent. 30. Therefore they said to him, What sign do you show that we may see and believe you? What work will you do? 31. Our fathers ate manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. 32. Then Jesus said to them, Verily, verily, I say to you, Moses did not give you that 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. Then they said to him, Lord, evermore give us this bread.

28.--[*Then they said to Him.*] These words begin one of the most important of our Lord's discourses and one about which the widest differences of opinion prevail. These differences it will be time enough to consider when we come to the passage out of which they arise. In the meantime, let us remember that the speakers before us were men whom our Lord had miraculously fed the day before and on whom He had just urged the paramount importance of seeking food and satisfaction for their souls. For anything we can see, they were Jews in a state of great spiritual ignorance and darkness. Yet even with them our Lord patiently condescends to hold a long conversation. Teachers who desire to walk in Christ's steps must aim at this kind of patience and be willing to talk with and teach the darkest and most ignorant men. It needs wisdom, faith, and patience.

[*What shall we do...works of God?*] This question is the language of men who were somewhat aroused and impressed, but still totally in the dark about the way to heaven. They feel that they are in the wrong road and that they ought to do something. But they are utterly ignorant what to do, and their only notion is the old self-righteous one of the natural man: "I must do something. I must perform some works to please God and buy admission to heaven." This seems to me the leading idea of the question before us. "Your command to labor or work for the meat that endures pricks our conscience. We admit that we ought to do something. Tell us what we must do, and we will try to do it." It is a case of a conscience partially aroused and put on its defense, groping after light. It is like the rich young man who came running to our Lord and saying, "What good thing shall I do?" (Matt. xix.16.)

The expression "What shall we do?" would be more literally rendered, "What do we?" or "What must we do?" or "What are we to do?"

The expression "that we might work" might have been rendered "that we might labor." It is the same Greek word that is translated in the previous verse "labor." The expression "the works of God" cannot, of course, mean "the same works that God works." It means "the works that please God, that are agreeable to God's mind and in accordance with God's will." (Thus 1 Cor. xv.58 and xvi.10.) This is the view of Glassius.

This question, "What shall we do?", we must remember, ought never to be despised. Though it may often be the lazy expression of languid religious feeling, just half awakened, it is, at any rate, much better than having no feeling at all. The worst part of many persons' spiritual condition lies here--that they are quite indifferent about their salvation; they never ask "What shall we do?" Many, no doubt, content themselves with saying "What shall I do?" And like those of whom we are reading, never get any further. But, on the other hand, in many cases "What shall I do?" is the beginning of eternal life, the first step toward heaven, the first breath of grace, the first spiritual pulsation. The Jews on the day of Pentecost said, "What must we do?" Saul, when the Lord met him near Damascus, said, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" The Philippian jailer said, "What must I do to be saved?" Whenever, therefore, we hear a person ask the question about his soul--"What shall I do?"--we must try to help him and put him in the right way. We never know what it may lead to. It may, perhaps, end in nothing and prove a mere temporary feeling. But it may also come to something and end in the conversion of a soul.

29.--[*Jesus answered...This is the work...believe...sent.*] In this verse our Lord takes hold of the expression used by the Jews about "work" and answers them according to their state of mind. Did they ask what work they should do? Let them know that the first thing God called them to do was to believe in His Son, the Messiah whom he had sent and whom they saw before them.

When our Lord calls faith "the work of God," we must not suppose He means here that it is the work of His Spirit and His gift. This is undoubtedly true, but not the truth of the text. He only means that believing is "the work that pleases God" and is most agreeable to God's will and mind.

Of course, every well-instructed Bible reader will remember that, strictly speaking, believing is so far from being a "work" that it is the very opposite of working. "To him who works not, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted to him for righteousness." (Rom. iv.5.) But it is evident that our Lord accommodates His manner of speaking to the ignorant minds with whom He had to deal. Thus St. Paul calls the doctrine of faith the "law of faith." (Rom. iii.27.) It is much the same as if we said to an ignorant but awakened inquirer after salvation, who fancies he can do great things for his soul, "You talk of doing; but know that the first thing to be done is to believe on Christ. This is the first step toward heaven. You have done nothing until you believe. This is the thing that pleases God most. Without faith it is impossible to please Him. This is the hardest thing after all. Nothing will test the reality of your feelings so much as a willingness to believe on Christ and cease from your own works. Begin, therefore, by believing." The very attempt to believe, in such a case, might prove useful.

Let us note in this verse the marvelous wisdom with which our Lord suited His language to the minds of those He spoke to. It should be the constant aim of a religious teacher not merely to teach truth, but to teach truth wisely and with tact so as to arrest the attention of those he teaches. Half the religious teaching in the churches and schools of our day is

entirely thrown away for lack of tact and power of adaptation in imparting it. To profess truth is one thing; to be able to impart it wisely, quite another.

Let us note in this verse the high honor our Lord puts upon faith in Himself. He makes it the root of all religion, the foundation stone of His kingdom, the very first step toward heaven. Christians sometimes talk ignorantly about faith and works, as if they were things that could be compared with one another as equals, or opposed to one another as enemies. But let them observe here that faith in Christ is so immeasurably the first thing in Christianity that in a certain sense it is the great work of works. In a certain sense, it is the seed and root of all religion, and we can do nothing until we believe. In short, the right answer to "What must I do?" is "Believe."

30.--[*Therefore, they said to Him.*] The secret unbelief of the Jews begins to come out in this verse. Nothing so thoroughly reveals the hearts of men as a summons to believe on Christ. Exhortations to work excite no prejudice and enmity. It is the exhortation to believe that offends.

[*What sign do you show.*] The word "you" in this sentence is emphatic in the Greek. It is as though the Jews said, "Who are YOU indeed to talk in this way? What miraculous evidence of your Messiahship have YOU got to show?" There is an evident sneer or sarcasm in the question.

[*That we may see and believe you.*] This seems to mean "that we may see, in the miracle wrought, unanswerable proof that You are the Messiah, and seeing the miracle may thus be able to believe You." This is the common language of many unconverted hearts. They want to see first and then to believe. But this is inverting God's order. Faith must come first and sight will follow.

There is a difference that ought to be marked between the "believing You" of this verse and the "believing on Him whom He has sent," of the preceding verse. "Believing on" is saving faith. "Believing" alone is merely believing a person to speak the truth. The devils "believe Christ," but do not believe "on Christ." We believe John, but do not believe "on him."

[*What work will you do?*] It seems at first most extraordinary that men who had seen such a miracle as that of feeding the five thousand with five loaves and had been themselves of the number fed, and this only twenty-four hours before, could ask such a question as this! Our first thought is that no greater sign or miracle could have been shown. But they speak as if it was forgotten! Surely when we see such proofs of the extreme dullness and deadness of man's heart, we have no reason to be surprised at what we see among professing Christians.

Bucer and Grotius suggest that the speakers here can hardly be those who were witnesses of the miracle of feeding the five thousand. But I see no need for the suggestion when we look round us and observe what human nature is capable of, or even look at the book of Exodus and see how soon Israel in the wilderness forgot the miracles they had seen.

Let us remember that this demand for "a sign," or great miracle, was common during our Lord's ministry. It seems to have been a habit of mind among the Jews. St. Paul says, "The Jews require a sign." (1 Cor. i.22.) They were always deceiving themselves with the idea that they wanted more evidence and pretending that if they had this evidence they would believe. Thousands in every age do just the same. They live on waiting for something to convince them and fancying that if they were convinced they would be different men in religion. The plain truth is that it is lack of heart, not lack of evidence, that keeps people back from Christ. The Jews had signs, evidence, and proofs of Christ's Messiahship in abundance, but they would not see them. Just so, many a professed unbeliever of our day has plenty of evidence around him, but he will neither look at it nor examine it. So true it is that "none are so blind as those that will not see."

Quesnel remarks, "The atheist is still seeking after proofs of a Deity, though he walks every day amidst apparent miracles."

We should observe that the Jews were willing enough to honor Christ as "a prophet." It was the doctrine of faith in Him that they could not receive. Christ the "teacher" is always more popular than Christ the "sacrifice and substitute."

31.--[*Our fathers...written...to eat.*] The intention of the Jews in saying what they do in this verse is plain. They evidently implied a disparaging comparison between our Lord and Moses, and our Lord's miracle of feeding the multitude and the feeding of Israel with manna. It is as though they said, "Although You did work a miracle yesterday, You have done nothing greater than the thing that happened in the days when our fathers were fed with manna in the wilderness. The sign You have given is not so great a sign as that which Moses gave our fathers when he gave them bread from heaven to eat. Why then should we be called on to believe You? What proof have we that You are a prophet greater than Moses?"

The word "manna" would have been more correctly rendered "the manna," *i.e.*, "the well known and famous manna."

Let us note in this verse how prone men are to refer back at once to things done in the days of their "fathers" when saving religion is pressed home on their consciences. The woman of Samaria began talking about "our father Jacob"--"Are You greater than our father Jacob?" (John iv.12.) The Pharisees "built the sepulchres of the prophets." (Luke xi.47.) Dead teachers have always more authority than living ones.

Let us mark that the miraculous feeding of Israel in the wilderness with manna is spoken of by the Jews as a notorious historical fact. Our Lord, moreover, in the following verse entirely assumes the truth of the miracle. The modern attempts to deny or explain away the miraculous facts recorded in the Old Testament are here, as well as elsewhere, entirely irreconcilable with the manner in which they are always spoken of in the New Testament. He that denies Old Testament miracles is assaulting the knowledge and veracity of Christ and the Apostles. They believed them and spoke of them as historical facts. We never need be ashamed of being on their side.

Let us observe the acquaintance with Scripture which the Jews exhibit. They quote the 78th Psalm (ver. 24,25) as a sufficient proof of the fact they had just mentioned. A certain knowledge of Scripture, unhappily, may often be found in a very unbelieving heart. Knowledge of the letter of Scripture, at any rate, seems to have been very common among the Jews. (See Deut. vi.6,7.)

Whether or not they applied the sentence they quoted to Moses rather than God, I think admits of a question. Our Lord's words in the following verse would rather lead one to think that they meant that "Moses gave them bread from heaven."

32.--[*Then Jesus...verily...Moses did not...heaven.*] The object of our Lord in this verse is very plain. He replies to the argument of the Jews, that the miracle of the manna was a greater miracle than any He had come into the world to work, and that Moses was consequently a greater prophet than He was. Yet in the words He uses, it is not very easy to settle where the stress should be laid and what is the precise word on which the point of the answer rests.

(a) Some think that it means, "It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but God." They lay the stress on *Moses*.

(b) Some think that it means, "Moses did not give you bread from the real heaven of heavens where God the Father dwells, but on a material food from the upper part of that atmosphere which surrounds this earth." They lay the stress on *heaven*.

(c) Some think that it means, "Moses did not give the true spiritual bread from heaven, though he gave you bread." They lay the stress on "*that* bread."

The second of these opinions seems to me quite inadmissible. The distinction between the heaven where God dwells and the upper region of our atmosphere was not, I believe, in our Lord's mind when He used the language He uses here. Moreover, it cannot be denied that the manna, though only material food, was heavenly food: *i.e.*, food supplied by God's miraculous interposition.

The true view seems to me to be contained in the first and third opinions taken together. The Greek bears it out by putting the word "not" in the very forefront of the sentence. "It was not Moses who gave you that bread from heaven, and even the bread that was given you was not that true bread which endures to everlasting life."

[*But my Father...from heaven.*] The use of the present tense should be noticed in this sentence. The idea seems to be, "What Moses could not give you, even the true bread which feeds the soul, my Father does give you, and is actually giving you at this moment, in that He gives you myself."

The expression "gives you" must not be supposed to imply actual reception on the part of the Jews. It rather means "giving" in the sense of

"offering" for acceptance a thing which those to whom it is offered may not receive. It is a very remarkable saying, and one of those which seems to me to prove unanswerably that Christ is God's gift to the whole world, that His redemption was made for all mankind, that He died for all and is offered to all. It is like the famous texts, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John iii.16.), and "God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son." (1 John v.11.) It is a gift, no doubt, which is utterly thrown away, like many other gifts of God to man, and is profitable to none but those who believe. But that God nevertheless does in a certain sense actually "give" His Son, as the true bread from heaven, even to the wicked and unbelieving, appears to me incontrovertibly proved by the words before us. It is a remarkable fact that Erskine, the famous Scotch seceder, based his right to offer Christ to all on these very words and defended himself before the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland on the strength of them. He asked the Moderator to tell him what Christ meant when He said, "My Father gives you the true bread from heaven," and got no answer. The truth is, I venture to think, that the text cannot be answered by the advocates of an extreme view of particular redemption. Fairly interpreted, the words mean that in some sense or another the Father does actually "give" the Son to those who are not believers. They warrant preachers and teachers in making a wide, broad, full, free, unlimited offer of Christ to all mankind without exception.

Even Hutcheson, the Scotch divine, though a strong advocate of particular redemption, remarks: "Even such as are, at present, but carnal and unsound, are not secluded from the offer of Christ, but upon right terms may expect that He will be gifted to them."

The expression "true" in this place, when applied to bread, means "true" as opposed to that which is only typical, emblematical, and temporal. The manna was undoubtedly real true food for the body. But it was a type of a far better food and was itself a thing which could not benefit the soul. Christ was the true spiritual food of which the manna was the type. (Examples of "true" in this sense may be seen in John i.9; xv.1; Heb. viii.2; ix.24.)

33.--[*The bread of God is he, etc.*] At first sight this verse seems to mean that "Christ coming down from heaven and giving life to the world is the true bread of God, the Divine food of man's soul." But it may well be doubted whether this is the precise meaning of the Greek words. I think, with Rollock, Bengel, Scholefield, Alford, and others, they would be more correctly rendered, "The bread of God is that bread which comes down from heaven."

(a) For one thing, the Jews do not appear to have understood our Lord as yet to speak directly of Himself or of any person. Else why should they have said, "Lord, give us this bread." Moreover, they did not murmur when they heard these words.

(b) For another thing, our Lord does not appear as yet to reveal fully that He was the bread of God. He reserves this till the 35th verse, and then declares it. At present He only gives a general intimation of a certain

Divine life-giving bread.

(c) For another thing, it is more in keeping with the gradual unfolding of truth, which appears so strikingly in this chapter, to suppose that our Lord begins with a general statement than to suppose that He speaks at once of Himself personally. First (1), the bread generally; then (2), I am the bread; then (3), the bread is My flesh; then (4), except ye eat the flesh and drink the blood, no life, etc. Such seems the gradual steps by which our Lord leads on His hearers in this wonderful chapter. I freely admit that the point is doubtful. Happily, whether we read "the bread of God is He" or "the bread of God is that bread," the doctrine is sound, Scriptural, and edifying.

The expression, "the bread of God," seems equivalent to the expression of the preceding verse, "the true bread." It is that real satisfying food for the soul which God has provided.

The expression, which "comes down from heaven," is an assertion of the Divine origin of that spiritual food which God had provided. Like the manna, it came down from heaven, but in a far higher, fuller, and deeper sense than the manna did. It was "that personal bread" of which they would soon hear more distinctly.

The expression, "gives life to the world," implies a contrast between the "bread of God" and the manna. The manna only supplied the hunger of the twelve tribes of Israel: viz., 600,000 men and their families. The bread of God was for the whole world and provided eternal life for every member of Adam's family who would eat of it, whether Jew or Gentile.

We should mark, again, what a strong argument these words supply in favor of the doctrine of Christ being God's gift to all. That all the world has not life from Christ and does not believe in Him, is undoubtedly true. But that life is provided in Christ and salvation sufficient for all the world, appears to be the natural interpretation of the text.

34.--[*Then they said...give us this bread.*] There is a striking resemblance between the thought expressed in this verse and the thought of the Samaritan woman when she heard of the living water that Christ could give: "Sir, give me this water that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw." (John iv.15.) In both cases we see desire called forth and excited by our Lord's words. There is a vague sense of something great and good being close at hand and a vague wish expressed to have it. In the case of the Samaritan woman, the wish proved the first spark in a thorough conversion to God. In the case of the Jews before us, the wish seems to have been nothing more than the "desire of the slothful," and to have gone no further. Wishing and admiring are not conversion.

Let us note, carefully, that there is nothing hitherto to show that the Jews understood our Lord to call *Himself* the "bread of God," or "the true bread." That there was such a thing as the true and satisfying bread, that it must be the same as that "meat which endures to everlasting life," they seem to have concluded. And that it was something which our Lord could give, they inferred. But there is not a word to make us think they saw it

at present to mean Christ Himself. This is a weighty argument in favor of that view of the preceding verse which I have tried to support: viz., that it ought to be translated "the bread of God is that bread," not "He."

There is some probability in Lightfoot's remark that our Lord's hearers, like most Jews, had their minds stuffed with foolish and superstitious notions about great banquets and feasts which they expected Messiah to give them whenever He appeared. They had a tradition that Leviathan and Behemoth were to be slain and their flesh made into a great feast for Israel when Messiah came. Our Lord, possibly, had this tradition in His mind and desired to turn the minds of the Jews to the true food which Messiah had come to give.