

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
6:52-59

52. The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, How can this man give us *his* flesh to eat? 53. Then Jesus said to them, Verily, verily, I say to you, Unless ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye 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 meat indeed, and by blood is drink indeed. 56. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me, and I in him. 57. As the living Father has sent me, and I live by the Father, so he who eats me, even he shall live by me. 58. This is that bread which came down from heaven--not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats of this bread shall live forever. 59. These things he said in the synagogue as he taught in Capernaum.

52.--[*The Jews...quarreled, etc.*] This expression shows an increasingly strong feeling among the Jews. When our Lord talked of "coming down from heaven," they "murmured." When He speaks of giving His "flesh to eat," they "quarreled." (It is the word rendered "ye fight" in James iv.2.) In what way the Jews quarreled it is not very clear to see. We cannot suppose that there were two contending parties--one favorable to our Lord and one opposed to Him. It probably means that they began to reason and argue among themselves in an angry, violent, and excited manner, such as St. Paul forbids when he says, "The servant of the Lord must not strive." (2 Tim. ii.24.) The same word is used there as here.

[*How can this man...to eat?*] The likeness should be observed between this question and that of Nicodemus (John ii.4), and that of the Samaritan woman (John iv.11).

There is an implied scornful sense about the expression "this man."

Cyril, in commenting on this verse, points out the unreasonableness and inconsistency of the Jews, above all men, in raising difficulties and denying the possibility of things because they are hard to explain and preternatural. He summons the Jew to explain the miracles in Egypt and those in the wilderness, and he concludes, "There are innumerable things in which if you inquire 'how' they can be, you must overthrow the whole Scripture and despise Moses and the Prophets."

53.--[*Jesus said...I say to you.*] We come now to one of the most solemn and important sayings that ever fell from our Lord's lips. Having brought the Jews step-by-step up to this point, He now declares to them the highest and most startling doctrine of the Gospel.

[*Unless ye eat the flesh...drink his blood, etc.*] When our Lord uses this phrase "unless" at the beginning of a sentence, we generally find something of more than ordinary importance in it. Thus, "Unless a man be born

again," "Unless ye be converted and become as little children," "Unless ye repent." (John iii.3, Matt. xviii.3, Luke xiii.3.) Here He tells the Jews that they "have no life:" no spiritual life, no title to eternal life. They are, in fact, dead: legally dead, spiritually dead, and on the way to the second death, if they do not "eat the flesh and drink the blood" of the Son of man--that is of Himself. In a word, He lays down the principle that eating His flesh and drinking His blood is a thing not only possible but absolutely *necessary* to salvation. It is a thing without which no man can go to heaven.

Considering that the Jewish passover was nigh at hand and that many of our Lord's hearers were probably on their way to Jerusalem to attend it, it seems highly probable that our Lord desired to direct the minds of those He addressed to Himself as the true passover and sacrifice for sin.

The latent idea of the sentence, I firmly believe, is that first passover in the land of Egypt, which was kept on the night when the firstborn were slain. The flesh and blood of the lamb slain that night were the means of life, safety, and deliverance to the Israelites. In like manner, I believe, our Lord meant the Jews to understand that His flesh and blood were to be the means of life and deliverance from the wrath to come to sinners. To a Jewish ear, therefore, there would be nothing so entirely new and strange in the sentence as at first sight may appear to us. The thing that would startle them, no doubt, would be our Lord's assertion that eating *His* flesh and drinking *His* blood could be the means of life to their souls, as the flesh and the blood of the passover lamb had been to their fathers the salvation of their bodies.

But what did our Lord mean when He spoke of "eating His flesh and drinking His blood" as things indispensably necessary to life? This is a point on which wide differences of opinion prevail, have prevailed in every age of the Church, and probably will prevail as long as the world stands.

(a) Some think that our Lord meant a literal "eating and drinking" with the mouth of our bodies, and that the "flesh and blood" mean the bread and wine in the sacrament of the Lord's supper. This is the opinion of almost all the Fathers, though occasional passages may be pointed out in the writings of some which seem irreconcilable with it. It is the opinion of most Roman Catholic writers, but certainly not of all. It is the opinion of some modern English divines, such as Wordsworth and Burgon.

(b) Some think that the "eating and drinking" here mean the eating and drinking of heart and soul by faith, not of the body, and that the "flesh and blood" mean Christ's vicarious sacrifice of His body on the cross. They deny entirely that there is any reference whatever to the Lord's supper in the words. They consider that our Lord meant to teach the absolute necessity of feeding by faith on His atonement for sin on the cross. Unless a man's soul lays hold by faith on Christ's sacrifice of His body and blood as the only hope of his salvation, he has no title to or part in eternal life. This is the opinion of Luther, Melancthon, Zwingle, Calvin, Ecolampadius, Brentius, Gualter, Bullinger, Pelican, Beza, Musculus, Flacius, Calovius, Cocceius, Gomarus, Nifanius, Poole, Cartwright, Hammond, Rollock, Hutcheson, Lightfoot, Henry, Burkitt, Whitby,

Leigh, Pearce, Lampe, Gill, Tittman, A. Clarke, Barnes, and most modern divines.

Among Romanist writers, this opinion is held by Cardinal Cajetan, Ferus, and Jansenius of Ghent. Even Toletus, one of the ablest Romanist Commentators on John, admits that the opinions of writers are not unanimous.

(c) Some think that our Lord did not mean any literal eating and drinking, and that He did not refer directly to the Lord's supper when He spoke of His flesh and blood. But they do think that our Lord had the sacrament in view and prospect when He spoke these words, and that He did tacitly refer to that peculiar communion with His flesh and blood, which He afterwards appointed the Lord's supper to be the means of imparting to believing communicants. This is the opinion, *apparently*, of Trapp, Doddridge, Olshausen, Tholuck, Stier, Bengel, Besser, Scott, Alford, and some others.

I decidedly agree with those who hold the second of these opinions. I believe that our Lord, both in this text and all through this chapter, did not either directly or indirectly refer to the Lord's supper; that by His flesh and blood He did not mean the bread and wine; that by eating and drinking He did not mean any bodily act. I believe that by "flesh and blood" He meant the sacrifice of His own body for us when He offered it up as our Substitute on Calvary. I believe that by "eating and drinking" He meant that communion and participation of the benefit of His sacrifice which faith--and faith only--conveys to the soul. I believe His meaning to be, "Unless ye believe on Me as the one sacrifice for sin, and by faith receive into your hearts the redemption purchased by my blood, ye have no spiritual life and will not be saved." The atonement of Christ, His vicarious death and sacrifice, and faith in it, these things are the key to the whole passage. I believe this must be kept steadily in view.

It is easy to call the opinion to which I adhere Zwinglian and low and irreverent. Hard words are not arguments. It is easier to make such assertions than to prove them. I have already shown that many writers, wholly unconnected with Zwingle or Zwinglianism, maintain the opinion. But I submit that the following reasons are weighty and unanswerable:

(1) To say that our Lord meant the Lord's supper in this text is a most cruel and uncharitable opinion. It cuts off from eternal life all who do not receive the communion. At this rate, all who die in infancy and childhood, all who die of full age without coming to the communion, the whole body of the Quakers in modern times, the penitent thief on the cross, all, all are lost forever in hell! Our Lord's words are stringent and exclusive. Such an opinion is too monstrous to be true. In fact, it was to avoid this painful conclusion that many early Christians in Cyprian's time held the doctrine of infant communion.

Ferus, the Roman Catholic commentator, who considers the eating and drinking here to be only spiritual and not to refer to the sacrament, sees this objection clearly and puts it strongly.

(2) To say that our Lord meant the Lord's supper in this text opens a wide

door to formalism and superstition. Thousands would wish nothing better than to hear, "He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood (that is, eats the sacramental bread and drinks the sacramental wine) has eternal life." Here is precisely what the natural heart of man likes! He likes to go to heaven by formally using ordinances. This is the very way in which millions in the Romish Church have made and are making shipwreck of their souls.

(3) To say that our Lord meant the Lord's supper in the text is to make a thing absolutely necessary to salvation which Christ never intended to be so. Our Lord commanded us to use the Lord's supper, but He never said that all who did use it would be saved and all who did not use it would be lost. How many hundreds repent and are converted on their deathbeds, far away from ministers and sacraments, and never receive the Lord's supper! And will anyone dare to say they are all lost? A new heart and an interest in Christ's cleansing blood are the two things needful to salvation. We must have the blood and the Spirit, or we have no life in us. Without them no heaven! But the Scripture never puts between a sinner and salvation an outward ordinance, over which the poor sinner may have no control, and may be unable to receive it without any fault of his own.

Archbishop Cranmer remarks in his *Defense of the True Doctrine of the Sacrament*: "The Romanists say that good men eat the body of Christ and drink His blood only at that time when they received the sacrament; we say that they eat, drink, and feed on Christ continually so long as they are members of His body. They say that the body of Christ which is in the sacrament has its own proper form and quantity; we say that Christ is there sacramentally and spiritually without form or quantity. They say that the fathers and prophets of the Old Testament did not eat the body nor drink the blood of Christ; we say that they did eat His body and drink His blood, although He was not yet born or incarnate."

Ferus says: "We must take hold of Christ's flesh and blood, not with our hands, but with our faith. He therefore who believes that Christ has given up His body for us and has shed His blood for the remission of our sins, and through this places all his hope and confidence in Christ crucified, that man really eats the body and blood of Christ."

Cardinal Cajetan, quoted by Ford, says: "To eat the flesh of Christ and to drink His blood is faith in the death of Jesus Christ. So that the sense is this: if ye use not the death of the son of God as meat and drink, ye have not the life of the Spirit in you.

The opinion which many hold--that although our Lord did not directly mean the Lord's supper in this text, He did refer to it indirectly and had it in view--seems to me very vague and unsatisfactory and only calculated to confuse our minds. Our Lord is speaking of something which He says is absolutely and indispensably necessary to eternal life. Where is the use of dragging in an ordinance which is not absolutely necessary and insisting that He had it in view? The truth of the matter, I believe, lies precisely in the opposite direction. I believe that *afterwards*, when our Lord appointed the Lord's supper, He had in view the doctrine of this text and used words intended to remind the disciples of the doctrine. But *here* I believe He was speaking of something far higher and greater than the Lord's

supper. When He spoke of the lesser thing, I have no doubt that He intended to refer to the greater and to turn the disciples' minds back to it. But when He spoke as He did here of the greater thing, I am quite unable to believe that He intended to refer to the lesser.

If our Lord did really refer to the Lord's supper when He spoke of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, it seems impossible to understand how Roman Catholics can deny the cup to the laity. "Drinking Christ's blood" is distinctly said to be as necessary to eternal life as "eating Christ's body." Yet the Romish Church will not allow the laity to drink Christ's blood! It is evidently the pressure of this argument which makes some Roman Catholic writers deny that this passage refers to the sacrament. It is a mistake to suppose that they are unanimous on the point.

Rollock starts the question why our Lord did not plainly tell His hearers that by eating and drinking He meant not a bodily but a spiritual act: viz., believing. He replies, that in this as in every case, our Lord did not strive so much to make men understand *words* as to beget feeling and experimental acquaintance with *things*. When the heart really begins to feel, words are soon understood.

The distinction that Alford and some others draw between the "flesh" and "blood" in this text appears to me very doubtful. They think that "eating the flesh" refers generally to participation in the benefits of Christ's incarnation and ascension with a human body into heaven; and that "drinking the blood" refers specially to an interest in the benefits purchased by His death. I am not satisfied that this is correct. At the 57th verse, our Lord, speaking briefly of the truth just before enunciated, only says, "He that eats Me, even he shall live by Me." Surely "eating" there stands for participation in the benefits of Christ's death as well as life!

My own impression is that both "flesh and blood" are mentioned here by our Lord to make it certain to the Jews that He spoke of His *death* and of the offering of His whole body in sacrifice on the cross. The body of the sin offering was just as essential a part of the sacrifice as the blood. (See Lev. iv.1-12.) So also the body of the passover lamb had to be eaten as well as the blood sprinkled. The "flesh and blood" are both mentioned here because our Lord had in view the offering of Himself as a sin offering, and because He would make it sure that He meant the "death" of His body to be the life of man's soul. It is not Christ incarnate merely, but Christ crucified as our atonement and sin offering that man must feed upon if he would have life.

54.--[*Whoever eats...drinks...life.*] This verse is just the converse of the preceding one. As it had been said that without eating and drinking there was no life, so it is now said that he who eats and drinks has life. These words, as I have already remarked, appear to me to make it impossible to interpret the passage of the Lord's supper. Myriads are communicants who have no spiritual life whatever. Every one, on the other hand, who by faith feeds his soul on Christ's sacrifice for sin has even now everlasting life. "He who believes on Him is not condemned." "He who believes on Me has everlasting life." (John iii.18; vi.47.)

The word "whoever" would have been more simply and literally rendered "He who."

The "presentness" of a true Christian's privileges should be remarked here again: "He has eternal life."

The Greek word for "eats" in this verse and 56 is quite a different word from that used in the 53rd verse. The reason of the difference is not very clear, and no commentator has hitherto explained it. Leigh, Parkhurst, and Schleusner all agree that the Greek word used in this verse ordinarily denotes the eating by an animal, in contradistinction to that of a man. Leigh observes that the word "notes a continuance of eating, as brute beasts will eat all day and some part of the night." I venture to suggest that the word is purposely used in order to show that our Lord meant the habit of continually feeding on Him all day long by faith. He did not mean the occasional eating of material food in an ordinance.

The word is only used in this and the 56th, 57th, and 58th verses, and in Matt. xxiv.38 and John xiii.18.

[*I will raise him up at the last day.*] These words are a fourth time repeated, and purposely, in my judgment, to show who they are of whom Christ is speaking. He is not speaking of all who receive the Lord's supper, but of those persons who are "given to Him by the Father," "who see the Son and believe on Him," who "are drawn by the Father and come to Christ." (John vi.39,40,44.) These are the same persons who eat His flesh and drink His blood by faith. To them belongs the privilege of a part in that first and glorious resurrection when Christ shall call His people from the grave at His second coming.

55.--[*For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.*] The word "indeed" here would be more literally rendered "truly," and the word "meat" answers to our word "food." The meaning is, "My flesh is more truly food and my blood is more truly drink than any other food and drink can be. It is food and drink in the highest, fullest, noblest sense--food and drink for the soul, food and drink that satisfies, food and drink that endure to everlasting life." (See 35th verse.)

Rollock remarks that the best way to understand this verse is to make trial of Christ and to feed on Him by faith. We shall soon discover how true the words are.

Ferus suggests that there may be a latent reference here to the forbidden fruit that Satan promised should be "meat and drink indeed" to Adam and Eve. *This* stands out in contrast to *that* food. By eating the food Satan held out, came sin and death; by eating the food Christ holds out, comes life and heaven.

56.--[*He who eats...drinks, etc.*] These words are precisely the same as those at the beginning of the 54th verse, and there is no reason why "whoever" there should not have been "he who" as here. In the one case, the man who eats and drinks Christ's flesh and blood is said to possess eternal life, and in the other, to be intimately joined to Christ. But it

is the same person.

[*Dwells in Me, and I in him.*] This expression is meant to convey to our minds the close and intimate union that there is between Christ and a true Christian. Such a man is said to dwell, or abide in Christ, and Christ to dwell, or abide in him. Christ is the house or home or hiding place within which the believer's soul, as it were, resides; and Christ dwells in the believer's heart by His Spirit, comforting, nourishing, and strengthening him. (See 1 John iii.24 and iv.15,16.) See also John xv.4 where "Abide in Me and I in you" might have been equally well rendered "Dwell in Me and I in you."

Just as "food and drink" received into a man's body become part of the man's self and are incorporated into his system and add to his health, comfort, and strength, so when a man by faith feeds his soul on Christ's sacrifice for his sins, Christ becomes, as it were, part of himself and he becomes part of Christ. In a word, there is as intimate a union between Christ and the believer's soul as there is between a man's food and a man's body.

57.--[*As the living Father, etc.*] This verse explains the intimate union between Christ and the true believer by a far higher and more mysterious figure than that of the union of our food and our body. The illustration used is drawn from that unspeakable and inexplicable union which exists between the two First Persons in the Trinity--God the Father and God the Son. It is as though our Lord said: "Just as the Father sent Me into the world to be born of a woman and take the manhood into God--and even though I am among you as man I live in the closest union and communion with God--even so the man that by faith feeds his soul on my sacrifice for sin shall live in the closest union and communion with Me." In a word, the union between Christ and the true Christian is as real and true and close and inseparable as the union between God the Father and God the Son. While the Son was in the world, the carnal eye discerned little or nothing of His union with the Father. Yet it was a true thing and existed. Just so the carnal eye may see little or nothing of the union between Christ and the man who feeds by faith on Christ. Yet it is a real true union. Just as the Son, though equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, does live in an ineffable and inscrutable way through and by the Father--the Son never being without the Father nor the Father without the Son--so in like manner the man that feeds on Christ enjoys spiritual life only through and by Christ. Is not this St. Paul's thought: "I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me." "To me to live is Christ." (Gal. ii.20; Phil. i.21.)

Whether our Lord is here speaking of His human nature or of His Divine nature, is not quite clear. I incline to think, with Cyril and Chrysostom, that it is the Divine nature.

Rollock remarks that we have three living Ones spoken of here: The living Father, the living Son, and the living believer. As we are sure of the life of the Father, so we may be sure of the life of the believer. The three lives are linked together.

Hutcheson remarks: "Christ's living by the Father is not only a pledge of

our life, but our life holds also some proportion or similitude to His. For as He has life communicated by eternal generation, so by regeneration we are made partakers of the Divine nature."

Winer remarks that the Greek preposition rendered "by" in this verse means literally "on account of," and that the sentence means, strictly and properly, "I live owing to the Father." That is, "I live because the Father lives." Schleusner and Parkhurst say much the same.

The "living Father" is a remarkable phrase. It is like the "living God." (John vi.69, Acts xiv.15, Rom. ix.26, 2 Cor. iii.3, vi.16, 1 Thess. i.9, 1 Tim. vi.17.) It must mean the Father who is the source of life, who "has life in Himself." (John v.26.)

58.--[*This is that bread, etc.*] Here our Lord sums up the whole discourse. He reverts to the saying with which the Jews had begun--about the fathers eating manna in the wilderness--and repeats the main points He would have His hearers carry away. These points were as follows: (1) That He Himself was the true bread which had come down from heaven to feed the world by the sacrifice of Himself. (2) That they must not cling to the idea that their fathers had ever eaten this true bread, for they all died in the wilderness and their souls received no benefit from the manna. (3) And that those, on the contrary, who would eat of the bread He had come down to give, should live forever, have everlasting life, and their souls never die. It is as though He said, "This sacrifice of Myself is the true bread from heaven of which I spoke at the beginning. The eaters of this bread are in far better circumstances than your fathers when they ate manna in the wilderness. Your fathers died in spite of the manna, and beside that, received from it no spiritual benefit whatever. He, on the contrary, who by faith eats the bread of my sacrifice for sin, shall have everlasting life and his soul shall never die." All the expressions in the verse, we should remark, have been used frequently in the discourse, and now all are grouped together and presented in one view.

59.--[*These things he said...synagogue...Capernaum.*] This verse is not sufficiently noticed, I venture to think. I ask anyone to compare it with the beginning of the discourse in this chapter at the 25th verse: "When they had found Him on the other side of the sea, they said," etc. Are we to suppose that they found Him in the synagogue? I cannot think it. To me it seems that there must have been a slight break or pause in the discourse. It began at the landing place or outside the city. It was resumed, after a short interval of a few hours perhaps, in the synagogue. And, as I have said before, the break appears to me to be at verse 41.

Both the discourse of this chapter and that of the preceding one have this point in common: that they seem to have been delivered before formal assemblies of Jews.

In concluding the notes on this very important passage, I take occasion to express my entire dissent from the common opinion held by many, that the sixth chapter of John was intended to teach the true doctrine of the Lord's supper as the third was intended to teach the truth about baptism. My own opinion is flatly contrary. I hold that in neither chapter are the

sacraments referred to at all. I believe that the third chapter was intended to counteract erroneous views about baptism by teaching the far higher truth of spiritual regeneration. And I believe that the sixth chapter was intended to counteract erroneous views about the Lord's supper by teaching the far higher truth of the necessity of feeding on Christ's sacrifice by faith. In fact, the true antidote to wrong views of baptism and the Lord's supper is a right understanding of the 3rd and 6th chapters of St. John's Gospel and the whole of St. John's first Epistle. Writing, as St. John did, the last of the inspired writers, I believe he was divinely inspired to record things which the Church of Christ needed most to know. And I regard it as a most striking fact that while he altogether omits to describe the institution of the Lord's supper and says little or nothing about baptism in the Gospel, he dwells at the same time most strongly on these two mighty truths which he foresaw were in danger of being forgotten: viz., the new birth and faith in the Atonement. Surely it is possible to honor baptism and the Lord's supper without thrusting them in everywhere in our interpretation of Scripture.