

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
6:41-51

41. The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. 42. And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that he says, I came down from heaven? 43. Jesus therefore answered and said to them, Do not murmur among yourselves. 44. No man can come to me except the Father who has sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. 45. It is written in the Prophets, *And they shall all be taught by God*. Therefore, every man who has heard and has learned of the Father comes to me. 46. Not that any man has seen the Father, except he who is of God; he has seen the Father. 47. Verily, verily, I say to you, He who believes on me has everlasting life. 48. I am that bread of life. 49. Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness and are dead. 50. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. 51. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

41.--[*The Jews then murmured at Him.*] The verb is here in the imperfect tense. It seems to mean, "the Jews were then murmuring, or beginning to murmur about Him." It was a murmuring that went on among themselves concerning our Lord and was not openly expressed. "At Him" would be more literally rendered "about Him."

I venture to think there is a break, pause, or slight interval implied at this point of the conversation. The speakers called here "the Jews" do not appear to be the same who followed our Lord over the lake after being fed with the loaves and fishes and began the conversation by saying, "When came thou hither?" (Ver. 25.) They would rather appear to be the principal people, or leaders, in the synagogue at Capernaum. They had probably heard our Lord's words to the people who had followed Him over the lake, and were murmuring at them. To my own mind, it is by no means clear that there was not at this point a change in the *place* where the conversation was carried on. Up to this point, it looks as if the conversation was carried on in the open air. At this point our Lord may have gone into the synagogue, and the rulers of it may have taken up the subject and been murmuring about it when He went in. I throw out this theory with diffidence. It must at least be conceded that the expressions at verse 25--"when they had found Him at the other side of the sea...when came Thou hither?"--can hardly be supposed to mean that our Lord was *then* in the synagogue. On the other hand, it is perfectly clear from verse 59 that the latter part of His discourse, at any rate, was spoken "in the synagogue at Capernaum." Where, then, I ask, does the slight break come in which is necessary to reconcile these beginning and ending statements? I reply that it seems to me to come in here, at this very 41st verse. The language, I think, implies a slight pause in time and a change in the speaker. Stier, I am aware, calls this idea "highly artificial." But I cannot see any force in the objection, and

I see much difficulty in any other view.

Cyril remarks that a readiness to murmur seemed to be hereditary with the Jews. From the days when they murmured in the wilderness, it was always the same.

[*Because He said, I am the bread...from heaven.*] It does not appear that our Lord had actually used these words. We must therefore suppose that the Jews constructed the saying out of three things that our Lord had said. One was, "I am the bread of life;" another, "I came down from heaven;" and another, "The bread of God is he (or it) which comes down from heaven."

42.--[*Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph?*] The word "this" in the Greek has a latent sneer of contempt about it which our English version cannot fully convey. It is as if they said, "Is not this fellow," etc.

The expression "the son of Joseph" shows what was the impression that the Jews commonly had about our Lord's birth. They believed Him to be the naturally begotten son of Joseph the husband of Mary. The annunciation by the angel Gabriel, the miraculous conception, the miraculous birth of our Lord, are matters of which the Jews apparently had not any knowledge. Throughout the whole of our Lord's ministry, we never find them mentioned. For some wise reason a total silence was observed about them until after our Lord's death, resurrection, and ascension. It was not probably till after the death of the Virgin Mary and all her family that this great and deep subject was allowed to be much brought forward in the Church. We can easily see that an unhallowed curiosity might have risen on questions connected with the incarnation, which would only have done harm.

[*Whose father and mother we know.*] These words seem to show that Joseph was still living at this time. They could hardly have been used if Joseph was dead. They also show that Joseph and Mary were known at Capernaum, where this conversation was held. They had either removed there from Nazareth, or else were so connected with Capernaum and such frequent visitors there that the inhabitants knew them.

[*How is it then that he says.*] These words would have been more literally rendered, "How then does this fellow say?" Again, like the beginning of the verse, there is something scornful in the phrase.

[*I came down from heaven.*] The thing that seems to have vexed and angered the Jews was that our Lord should so openly declare His divine origin by talking of "coming down from heaven." They were offended at the idea of one so lowly in dress, circumstances, and position taking on Himself to say that He was one who had "come down from heaven." Here, as elsewhere, Christ's humiliation was the great stumbling-block. Human nature would not so much object to a conquering Christ--a Christ with a crown and an army, a Christ with wealth to shower on all His followers. But a Christ in poverty--a Christ preaching nothing but heart religion, a Christ followed by none but poor fishermen and publicans, a Christ coming to suffer and die and not to reign--such a Christ was always an offense to many in this world and always will be.

Rollock remarks, with great truth, that with many persons "reasoning" (so called) is the grand obstacle to conversion.

43.--[*Jesus answered and said.*] This phrase is almost the same as that used in chapter 5 verse 19, when our Lord began what many think was His formal defense of Himself before the Sanhedrim. It leads me to think, as I have already said, that there is a slight break at this point of the chapter, and a slight pause, if only of a few hours, in time. Our Lord knew by His divine knowledge that the Jews were murmuring and saying contemptuous things about Him, and He therefore took up their thoughts and made a reply to them.

[*Do not murmur among yourselves.*] This seems a mild hint that they need not waste their time in murmuring. It neither surprised our Lord nor discouraged Him. It is as though He said, "Your murmuring is only what I am prepared to expect. I know what human nature is. I am not moved by it. Think not that your unbelief will shake my confidence in my divine mission or prevent my saying what I do. I know that you cannot naturally understand such things as I am speaking of, and I will proceed to tell you why. But cease from these useless murmurings, which neither surprise nor stop Me."

Webster thinks that the idea is the same as that in John iii.7-12: "I have harder things still to say." (See v.28.)

44.--[*No man can come...Father...draws him.*] The connection between this verse and the preceding one is not clear. Like many passages in St. John's writings, the language is elliptical and the link must be supplied. But the precise link in the present case is not very evident. I believe it is something of this sort: "You are murmuring among yourselves because I speak of coming down from heaven, and you are making my apparently low origin an excuse for not believing on Me. But all the time the fault is not in my sayings but in your lack of grace and your unbelief. There is a deeper and more solemn truth to which you seem totally blind, and that is man's need of God's grace in order to believe on Me. You are never likely to believe until you acknowledge your own corruption and ask for grace to draw your souls to Me. I am aware that it needs something more than argument and reasoning to make anyone believe in Me. Your unbelief and murmuring do not surprise Me or discourage Me. I neither expect to see you nor anyone else believe until you are drawn by my Father." This, or something like it, seems to me the connecting link. One thing, at any rate, is certain: our Lord did not mean to excuse the unbelief of His hearers. He rather desired to magnify their danger and guilt and to make them see that faith in Him was not so easy an affair as they supposed. It was not knowledge of His origin alone, but the drawing grace of God the Father which they needed. Let them awake to see that, and cry for grace before it was too late.

The general lesson of the sentence, apart from the connection, is one of vast importance. Our Lord lays down the great principal "that no man whatsoever can come to Christ by faith, and really believe in Him, unless God the Father draws him so to come and inclines his will to believe." The nature of man since the fall is so corrupt and depraved that even when Christ is made known and preached to him, he will not come to Him and

believe in Him without the special grace of God inclining his will and giving him a disposition to come. Moral suasion and advice alone will not bring him. He must be "drawn."

This is, no doubt, a very humbling truth, and one which in every age has called forth the hatred and opposition of man. The favorite notion of man is that he can do what he likes--repent or not repent, believe or not believe, come to Christ or not come--entirely at his own discretion. In fact, man likes to think that his salvation is in his own power. Such notions are flatly contradictory to the text before us. The words of our Lord here are clear and unmistakable and cannot be explained away.

(a) This doctrine of human impotence, whether man likes it or not, is the uniform teaching of the Bible. The natural man is dead and must be born again and brought to life. (Eph. ii.1.) He has neither knowledge, nor faith, nor inclination toward Christ until grace comes into his heart. Man never of himself begins with God. God must first begin with man. And this beginning is just the "drawing" of the text.

(b) It is the doctrine of the Church of England, as shown in the 10th Article, and of every protestant confession of faith which dates from the 16th and 17th centuries.

(c) Last, but not least, it is the doctrine of experience. The longer ministers of the Gospel live, the more do they find that there is something to be done in every heart which neither preaching, teaching, arguing, exhorting, nor means of grace can do. When all has been done, God must "draw" or there is no fruit. The more the holiest Christians are examined, the more general is their testimony found that without grace they never would have been converted, and that God "drew" them or else they never would have come to Christ. And it is a curious fact, moreover, that many who profess to deny man's impotence in theory often confess it in their prayers and praises, almost in spite of themselves. Many people are very low Armenians in print or in the pulpit, but excellent Calvinists on their knees.

When our Lord says, "No man can come to Me," we must carefully remember that it is *moral* inability and not *physical* inability that He speaks of. We are not to suppose that any man can have a sincere and hearty wish to come to Christ and yet be prevented by some mysterious impotence. The impotence lies in man's will. He cannot come because he will not come. There is an Old Testament sentence which throws much light on the expression before us. It is said of Joseph's brethren that "they hated him and *could not* speak peaceably to him." (Gen. xxxvii.4.) Anyone must see at a glance what the "could not" means. They "could not" because they would not.

When our Lord says, "Except the Father draws him," we must not suppose that the "drawing" means such a violent drawing as the drawing of a prisoner to a jail or of an ox to the slaughterhouse--a drawing, in short, against a man's will. It is a drawing which the Father effects through the man's own will by creating a new principle within him. By the unseen agency of the Holy Ghost, He works on the man's heart (without the man himself knowing it

at the time) and inclines him to think, induces him to feel, shows him his sinfulness, and so leads him at length to Christ. Everyone that comes to Christ is so drawn.

Scott remarks: "The Father, as it were, cures the fever of the soul; He creates the appetite; He sets the provisions before the sinner; He convinces him that they are wholesome and pleasant and that he is welcome; and thus the man is drawn to come and eat and live forever."

The well-known quotation from Augustine, which seems so great a favorite with many commentators on this text, appears to me defective. He argues that God's drawing of men to Christ is so entirely a drawing through man's will that it is like drawing the sheep by offering it food, like drawing and alluring a child by offering him nuts. But there is this wide difference--that both the sheep and the child have a natural taste and inclination for the thing offered; man, on the contrary, has none at all. God's first act is to give man a will to come to Christ. As the 10th Article of the Church of England says, we need "the grace of Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will."

The theory that all members of the Church and all baptized people are "drawn by God" appears to me a most baseless theory, and practically a most mischievous one. It would reduce the "drawing" to nothing, and make it a thing which the majority of Christians resist. I believe the drawing is a thing that belongs to none but God's elect and is a part of the procedure by which their salvation is effected. They are chosen in Christ from all eternity and then drawn to Christ in time.

There are several very important principles of theology connected with this remarkable sentence, which it may be useful to put down together before we leave the passage.

(a) We must never suppose that the doctrine of this verse takes away man's responsibility and accountability to God for his soul. On the contrary, the Bible always distinctly declares that if any man is lost, it is his own fault. He "loses his own soul." (Mark viii.36.) If we cannot reconcile God's sovereignty and man's responsibility now, we need not doubt that it will be all plain at the last day.

(b) We must not allow the doctrine of this verse to make us limit or narrow the offer of salvation to sinners. On the contrary, we must hold firmly that pardon and peace are to be offered freely through Christ to every man and woman without exception. We never know who they are that God will draw, and have nothing to do with it. Our duty is to invite all and leave it to God to choose the vessels of mercy.

(c) We must not suppose that we, or anybody else, are drawn unless we come to Christ by faith. This is the grand mark and evidence of anyone being the subject of the Father's drawing work. If "drawn," he comes to Christ, believes, and loves. Where there is no faith and love, there may be talk, self-conceit, and high profession. But there is no "drawing" of the Father.

(d) We must always remember that God ordinarily works by means, and specially by such means as He Himself has appointed. No doubt He acts as a Sovereign in drawing souls to Christ. We cannot pretend to explain why some are drawn and others are not drawn. Nevertheless, we must carefully maintain the great principle that God ordinarily draws through the instrumentality of His Word. The man that neglects the public preaching and private reading of God's Word has no right to expect that God will draw him. The thing is possible, but highly improbable.

(e) We must never allow ourselves or others to waste time in trying to find out, as a first question in religion, whether we are drawn of God the Father, elect, chosen, and the like. The first, and indeed the main, question we have to do with is whether we have come to Christ by faith. If we have, let us take comfort and be thankful. None come to Him unless they are drawn.

Augustine remarks: "If you do not desire to err, do not seek to determine whom God draws and whom He does not draw, nor why He draws one man and not another. But if you yourself are not drawn by God, pray to Him that you may be drawn."

The words of the 17th Article of the Church of England are weighty and wise: "We must receive God's promises in such wise as they are generally set forth to us in Holy Scripture; and in our doings, that will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God."

Whether the "drawing" of God the Father is irresistible or not is a point on which good men differ greatly. My own opinion is decided that it is irresistible. Those whom the Father draws and calls, always "obey the calling." (See 17th Article of the Church of England.) As Rollock truly remarks, there is often a great fight and struggle when the drawing grace of God first begins to work on the soul, and the consequence is great distress and depression. But when grace once begins, it always wins the victory at last.

[*I will raise him up at the last day.*] This is the same sentence that we have had twice already and shall have once again. Whosoever does come to Christ and has the great mark of faith shall be raised by Christ to a life of eternal glory at the last day. None come but those who are "drawn;" but all who do come shall be raised.

45.--[*It is written...taught of God.*] Our Lord here confirms the doctrine of the necessity of divine teaching by reference to the Scriptures. He had told the Jews nothing but what their own Scriptures taught and what they ought to have known themselves. It is not quite clear whether our Lord referred to one particular quotation or to the general testimony of the prophetic Scriptures. The words of Isaiah (liv.13) are most like the sentence before us: "All thy children shall be taught of God." The Greek of the Septuagint version of that text rather favors the idea that our Lord referred to it. On the whole, however, I incline to the opinion that no one particular text is referred to. It was the general doctrine of the prophets that in the days of the Gospel men should have the direct teaching

of God.

The words do not mean that under the Gospel all mankind or all members of the professing Christian Church shall be "taught of God." It rather means that all who are God's children and come to Christ under the Gospel shall be taught of God. It is like "this is the true light that lights every man" (John i.9), where it does not mean that all are lighted, but that such as are lighted are lighted by Christ.

[*Every man...learned...comes to Me.*] The meaning of this sentence seems to be, "Every man that comes to Me has first heard and learned of the Father." It is useless to talk of being taught by God, and of God being our Father, if we do not come to Christ for salvation.

Bishop Hooper remarks: "Many men understand the words 'except the Father draws him' in a wrong sense--as though God did require in a reasonable man no more than in a dead post--and do not mark the words that follow, 'every man who has heard Christ' God draws with His Word and the Holy Ghost. Man's duty is to hear and learn; this is to say, receive the grace offered, consent unto the promises, and not refuse the God that calls." *Hooper on Ten Commandments.*

46.--[*Not that any man has seen the Father.*] This sentence seems put in by way of parenthesis, to prevent mistakes in the minds of our Lord's hearers both as to the kind of teaching He meant and the person He intended when He spoke of the Father. The Father was the eternal God whom no man had seen nor could see. The teaching was that inward teaching of the heart which the Father gave by His Spirit.

[*He who is of God, he has seen the Father.*] Our Lord plainly means Himself in this verse. It is like John i.18: "No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him."

I cannot but think that one object our Lord has in view, both here and in ch. v.37, is to impress on the Jews' minds that all the appearances of God which are recorded in the Old Testament were appearances not of the First Person in the Trinity but of the Second. His object in both places, I suspect, was to prepare their minds for the great truth which as yet they were unable to receive--that, however unbelieving they now were, Christ who was now with them was that very Person who had appeared to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.

47.--[*Verily...believes on Me...life.*] In this verse our Lord returns to the main thread of His discourse, which had been interrupted at the 40th verse. He now speaks out much more clearly and plainly about Himself, dropping all reserve, and revealing Himself as the object of faith openly and without figure. It is one of those great, broad, simple declarations of the Gospel way of salvation which we can never know too well.

He who would have his sins pardoned and his soul saved must go to Christ for it. It is to "Me," says Christ, that he must apply. What are the terms held out? He must simply trust, lean back, rest on Christ, and commit his soul to His hand. In a word, he must "believe." What shall

such a man get by believing? He "has everlasting life." The very moment he believes, life and peace with God are his own. Faith, the great object of faith, and the present privileges to which faith admits a man, are three subjects which, however often repeated in the Gospel, ought never to weary a Christian's ear.

The frequent repetition of this doctrine of "believing" is a strong proof of its great necessity and importance, and of man's infinite backwardness to see, understand, and receive it. "We must believe, we must believe," says Rollock, "is a truth that needs constant repetition."

48.--[*I am that bread of life.*] Here our Lord distinctly proclaims to the Jews that He Himself is that "bread of life," that soul-satisfying food, the true bread, the bread of God, of which He had spoken generally in the earlier part of His discourse. He had awakened their curiosity by speaking of that bread as a real thing, and a thing worth their attention. He now unveils the whole truth to them and tells them plainly, "I am that bread." "If you ask what it is, and where it is, you have only to look at Me."

49.--[*Your fathers ate...dead.*] In this verse our Lord points out the inferiority of the manna which the Jews ate in the wilderness to the bread which He Himself offered. The manna not only could do nothing for the soul, but was unable to preserve from death those who ate it.

Here, as before, we should observe how our Lord speaks of the miraculous feeding of Israel in the wilderness as an undoubted historical fact.

Piscator remarks that our Lord here says emphatically "your fathers" and not "our fathers." He thinks it was intentionally done to remind the Jews how little lasting good their fathers got from the manna, and how unbelieving they were even while they ate of it, for they all died in the wilderness. It was a tacit caution to beware of doing like them.

50.--[*This is the bread...and not die.*] The object of this verse is to show the superiority of the "true bread from heaven" to the manna. It is as though our Lord said, "This bread that comes down from heaven is bread of such a nature that he who eats of it shall never die. His soul shall not be hurt by the second death, and his body shall have a glorious resurrection."

I am not without doubt whether our Lord did not point to Himself in speaking the words of this verse: "This person who now stands before you is that bread which came down from heaven, that anyone eating of it should not die." But I throw out the conjecture with much diffidence. Lampe seems to favor the idea, saying, "the pronoun 'this' is here demonstrative and pointed to Himself." Trapp and Beza also take this view.

51.--[*I am the living bread...heaven.*] This sentence is a repetition of the idea that has been already given out in the 50th and 49th verses. The thought is repeated in order to impress it on the minds of the Jews and make it impossible for them to misunderstand our Lord's meaning.

We must never be ashamed of repetition in religions teaching.

[*If any man eats...live forever.*] The thought here is only an expansion of the one contained in the 35th verse. There it is said, "He that comes to Christ shall never hunger." Here it is, "The eater of the bread of life shall live forever." The meaning is that the soul of the man who feeds on Christ by faith shall never die and be cast away in hell. There is no condemnation for him. His sins are put away. He shall not be hurt by the second death.

[*The bread that I will give is my flesh.*] In these words our Lord goes even further than He has gone yet in explaining the great theme of His discourse. When He speaks of "my flesh," I believe He means, "my body offered up in sacrifice on the cross as an atonement for man's sins." It is our Lord's death that is specially meant. It is not merely His human nature, His incarnation, that feeds souls. It is His death as our substitute, bearing our sins and carrying our transgressions.

[*Which I will give for the life of the world.*] These words appear to me to make it certain that our Lord meant "His body offered in sacrifice as an atonement for sin," when he said "my flesh is the bread." For He does not say "I have given," or "I do give," but "I will give." That use of the future tense seems to me a conclusive proof that "my flesh" cannot mean only "my incarnation." The "giving" was about to take place, but had not taken place yet. It could only be His death.

When our Lord says, "I will give my flesh," it appears to me that He can only mean "I will give it to die, to suffer, to be offered up on the cross as a sacrifice for sin."

When our Lord says, "I will give my flesh *for the life* of the world," I believe He means, "I will give my body to death on account of, for the sake of, to procure, purchase, and obtain the life of the world. I will give my death to procure the world's life. My death shall be the ransom, the payment, and the redemption money by which eternal life shall be purchased for a world of sinners."

I hold strongly that the idea of substitution is contained in these words of our Lord, and that the great doctrine of His vicarious death, which is so directly stated elsewhere (Rom. v.6-8), is indirectly implied in this sentence.

When our Lord says, "I will give my flesh for the life of the world," I can only see one meaning in the word "world." It means all mankind. And the idea contained, I believe, is the same as we have elsewhere: viz., that Christ died for all mankind; not for the elect only, but for all mankind. (See John i.29 and iii.16 and my notes on each text.) That all the world is not saved is perfectly certain. That many die in unbelief and get no benefit from Christ's death is certain. But that Christ's death was enough for all mankind, and that when He died He made sufficient atonement for all the world, are truths which, both in this text and others like it, appear to my mind incontrovertible.

Let us note, in this verse, what a full and broad offer Christ holds out to sinners. He says, "If *any man*," no matter who or what he may have been.

"If any man eat of this bread he shall live forever." Happy would it be for many, whose whole hearts are set on eating and drinking and feasting their poor perishable bodies, if they would only look at these words! It is only those who eat this bread who shall live forever.

Let us remember how impossible it is for anyone to explain the end of this verse who denies the sacrificial character of Christ's death. Once grant that Christ is only a great teacher and example and that His death is only a great pattern of self-denial, and what sense or meaning can be got out of the end of this verse?--"I will give my flesh for the life of the world"! I unhesitatingly say that the words are unintelligible nonsense if we receive the teaching of many modern divines about Christ's death, and that nothing can make them intelligible and instructive but the doctrine of Christ's vicarious death and satisfaction on the cross as our Substitute.