

# Eating Christ's Flesh and Drinking His Blood

*Text: John 6:41-71; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 28*

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John 6 is rightly esteemed as one of the most choice chapters in all of Scripture. Within it, the Lord Jesus performs three miracles: He feeds the five thousand with five barley loaves and two small fishes, walks on water, and miraculously moves the boat so that it immediately arrives at the shore. But the Lord's chief purpose in this chapter is not the signs themselves, but their meaning. He directs attention to a bread that perishes not—a bread far greater than the loaves just consumed or even the manna that sustained Israel for forty years. This is the bread of life: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). That bread must be eaten so that others may live forever through Him.

This powerful sermon took place in the synagogue at Capernaum—certainly the most remarkable sermon ever preached there. As the chapter progresses, those following Jesus are winnowed and reduced. This is no accident, but Jesus' intention. We read John 6 alongside *Heidelberg Catechism* Lord's Day 28, which begins the section on the Lord's Supper. Question 76 is especially relevant: "What is it then to eat the crucified body and drink the shed blood of Christ? It is not only to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and death of Christ, and thereby to obtain the pardon of sin and life eternal; but also, besides that, to become more and more united to His sacred body by the Holy Ghost, who dwells both in Christ and in us: so that we, though Christ is in heaven and we on earth, are notwithstanding *flesh of His flesh, and bone of His bone*; and that we live and are governed forever by one Spirit, as members of the same body are by one soul." The church's testimony throughout history affirms that this passage and this doctrine remain central to the believer's walk with Christ.

## The Meaning of It

Many claim John 6 primarily refers to the *Lord's Supper*—Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, High Church Anglicanism, and even many early church writers. They argue that since John does not recount the Upper Room institution of the Supper, chapter 6 must be where he treats it. The language supports this reading: "Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life" (v. 54). Moreover, they observe that references to bread and drinking appear repeatedly.

But that interpretation fails for several reasons. First, the Supper had not yet been instituted. This event takes place around a *Passover*—at least a year or possibly two years before the Thursday evening when Jesus instituted the Supper with His disciples in the Upper Room. Second, the Supper is for believers, but here the crowd is overwhelmingly unbelieving. Jesus speaks evangelistically: “Every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life” (v. 40). Seeing, eating, and drinking all signify believing. There is no mention of wine, nor of a cup—elements central to the Supper. And rather than broken body, Jesus speaks of *flesh*. Thus, John 6 is not primarily about the Supper. Rather, the Supper is a *sign and seal* of what John 6 proclaims: the crucified Christ given for us, whom we eat and drink by faith.

Jesus employs varied metaphors for feeding on Him. He describes it as *coming* to Him: “He that cometh to me shall never hunger” (v. 35)—not a physical coming, but spiritual. He speaks of *seeing* Him: “Every one which seeth the Son” (v. 40). Many saw Him in the flesh, yet did not believe. But the believer sees Him with the eyes of faith. He speaks of *hearing* and *learning*: “They shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me” (v. 45). And He finally speaks plainly: “He that believeth on me hath everlasting life” (v. 47).

The metaphor of eating and drinking conveys more than the term ‘believe.’ It expresses *personal appropriation*. No one can eat or drink for another. It must be done *personally*. Likewise, we must each receive Christ for ourselves. Eating and drinking communicate *assimilation*—Christ becomes part of us, by the Spirit. These metaphors also speak of *nourishment*. The believer is weary and dry, and only Christ can refresh: “Without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Eating and drinking Christ also emphasize *experience*. Just as one knows when he has eaten, the believer knows he has received Christ. There is the inner awareness of strength, the peace of pardon, the presence of Christ. But what do we eat and drink? Not merely the incarnate Christ, but the crucified Christ. “The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (v. 51). The “world” here refers to the *universal church*—not every individual head for head, but Christ’s church among all nations. Jesus was pierced; His blood was shed. “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (I John 1:7). We partake of Christ as the One who satisfied divine justice. The cross is central to this image of eating.

So says the *Catechism*: “It is... to embrace... all the sufferings and death of Christ, and thereby to obtain pardon of sin.” Those who truly do this may come to the Supper. Those who do not, must not. The Supper is a *sign and seal* of this

covenantal grace, which believers enjoy even on their worst days, when assurance is faint and the heart is heavy.

### **The Results of It**

John 6 names three blessings that follow from feeding on Christ. First is *eternal life*. Nine times this phrase occurs. It is not a myth or a future dream. “He that believeth on me hath everlasting life” (v. 47). Not merely endless duration, but everlasting *blessedness*. We already possess the life of Christ within, even if only a beginning. As Romans 6 teaches, the believer is alive unto God and dead unto sin. This eternal life is more certain than any earthly possession. It is the pledge of communion with God forever, and a foretaste of the glory to come.

Second is *resurrection*. “I will raise him up at the last day” (v. 54). That promise deepens the believer’s assurance through the Word and the Supper. Eternal life will be completed in glorified bodies, incorruptible. Just as Christ rose bodily from the grave, so His people shall be raised. Their bodies shall be transformed and glorified, made like unto His glorious body, fit for heaven.

Third is *union with Christ*. “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him” (v. 56). This is the first reciprocal expression of *union* in John’s gospel. The believer is in Christ, and Christ in the believer. From this union flow the other blessings. Because Christ lives, we live. Because He rose, we shall rise. Feeding on Christ draws us closer to Him and assures us of our union. Like food assimilated into the body, Christ becomes one with us. And this union is spiritual, vital, everlasting.

The *Catechism* again: “... to become more and more united to His sacred body by the Holy Ghost, who dwells both in Christ and in us: so that we, though Christ is in heaven and we on earth, are notwithstanding flesh of His flesh, and bone of His bone; and that we live and are governed forever by one Spirit, as members of the same body are by one soul.” This spiritual union is the heart of Christian life and comfort.

### **The Responses to It**

John 6 shows three types of responses. First, the Jews (vv. 41, 52). They demand more signs—though they had seen many. They murmur at Christ’s words, arguing among themselves. They quarrel over His claims. Though familiar with Scripture, they were carnal and unbelieving. Their fathers had murmured in the wilderness, and they followed that same pattern of unbelief.

Second, the disciples (vv. 60, 66) – not the Twelve, but a broader group who had followed Jesus with interest. When they heard His teaching, they said, “This is an hard saying; who can hear it?” (v. 60). They walked away and did not return (v. 66). They desired signs, food and political redemption. But Jesus spoke of *sovereign election*: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me” (v. 37). He presented Himself as greater than Moses, as the sole Giver of life, and they stumbled. They were offended by the talk of eating flesh and drinking blood, failing to grasp the metaphor. They would not endure the claims of Jesus or the teaching of the cross. The Spirit was not in them. They were once near, but fell away.

Third, the Twelve. “Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?” (v. 67). He pressed them. Will you leave as well? Are you ashamed? But Peter gives the answer of faith: “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (vv. 68-69). That is the confession of the true believer. That is the one who comes to the Supper. It is not perfection that brings us to the table, but union with the perfect Christ.

Yet even among the Twelve was Judas. Still present, still appearing faithful. But unregenerate, inwardly unmoved, outwardly compliant. Appointed as traitor, he would yet remain for another year or more. The Spirit was not in him. But his presence gave the appearance of faithfulness. His heart was cold though his actions imitated the others. He did not truly feed on Christ.

“Will ye also go away?” That question still presses upon us. Those who are Christ’s confess the truth taught in the church, resolve to live a new life, and submit to church discipline. These remain. Others, though outwardly following, eventually depart. Some, like Judas, stay for a time but betray Christ in the end. Their true condition is revealed in due time.

But the true believer says with Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” Christ alone has the words of eternal life. The believer knows: I am united to Jesus Christ by faith. I trust in Him, and I come to His Supper to be assured and strengthened in Him alone. I partake of His flesh and blood spiritually, and I receive life through Him.

*Our Father in heaven, weak, sinful, doubting as we are, we pray that Thou would strengthen us by Thy Word and sacrament. Forgive our sins, Lord God – they remain in us against our will. Bless us, we pray. For Jesus sake. Amen*