The Gospel of John: *The Bread of Life*
John 6:41-59

41 So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42 They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” 43 Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—46 not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 49 I am the bread of life. 50 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” 52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53 So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread[a] the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” 59 Jesus[b] said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

My message is entitled *The Bread of Life*, and it will fall under four subheadings: 1) The New Exodus; 2) The Bread of Life; 3) Taking Him In; and 4) The Validation of Hope and Eternal Life.

I. The New Exodus

To best understand the significance of what is happening here in John 6, and how it applies to our lives on this Resurrection Sunday, we must begin by making two very important observations: 1) The Jews were waiting for “the Prophet like Moses” promised in Deut. 18:18, and here in John 6, the Jews who were fed on the mount near Bethsaida now suspect that Jesus is the long-awaited Prophet as we read in John 6:14 when the people exclaimed, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

2) The second observation is that John 6 parallels the OT account of the exodus story in many ways, which serves as a comparison between the Moses of the OT and the “New Moses,” Jesus. Let me point out a few of these parallels: a) Moses led masses of people and meets God on the mountain; Jesus leads the masses of people near Bethsaida and then He meets God up on the mountain; b) Moses called upon God to feed the hungry Israelites, and God sent manna from heaven. Jesus calls upon the Father to feed the 5000 with only a handful of fish and bread, and God supernaturally multiplies the food to feed the people; c) Moses raised his staff and God parted the waters of the Red Sea; Jesus walks upon the sea; and d) through Moses the Israelites received manna from heaven; through Jesus, according to John 6:33, the world has been provided the “true bread from heaven.”

These parallels help us to understand that everything that God was doing in the OT was preparing the world to meet and understand His Son who was coming into the world at the exact moment of God’s choosing in human history. When Jesus steps into human history, He is
constantly fulfilling every promise, every prophecy, and all the foreshadowing that we find throughout the OT. You must keep these parallels in mind as we now return to the text because immediately we find yet another parallel beginning in vs. 41: “So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’” They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”

Just as the Israelites grumbled against God’s servant Moses in the wilderness, so now the Jews grumble against the New Moses in Capernaum. You see that, right? And what is their complaint? They don’t see how Jesus could have “come down from heaven” when they know he hails from Nazareth just up the road! Church, let’s be sympathetic here…we would have had a hard time accepting that the New Moses and long-awaited Messiah was a local guy raised in Blue Springs, right? Familiarity breeds contempt. However, let us not forget that these Jews in Capernaum, not unlike the Israelites in the OT, had SEEN God at work through His Servant. They had seen Jesus feed the 5000; they had seen Jesus heal the sick; so, like the Israelites in the OT, this group of Jews here in Capernaum seem to have a remarkably short memory!

Let us consider how Jesus, the New Moses leading the new exodus, responds to these grumblers in vss. 43-51:

43 Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— 46 not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

First of all, Jesus rebukes the Jews for grumbling. Grumbling reveals faithlessness. If you are a chronic grumbler, say what you will about your religion; the truth is that you don’t trust God! Even as we enter into another week of home-confinement, let us not be those who grumble, amen? The opposite of grumbling is faithfulness. Let us be full of faith in our Great God who provides all that we NEED, even when we don’t have all that we want!

OK, the next thing Jesus says in vs.44 is loaded with meaning: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” As we unpack this statement, let me remind you that Jesus is talking to grumblers. He is talking to a group of people who think they can serve as the judge and jury in relationship to Jesus…as though they are somehow qualified to discern whether the claims of Jesus can be trusted or not. It seems to me that Jesus is saying to them: “You are not qualified to judge me. You would not even have the wherewithal to come to me if not for the work of the Father who sent me. Seeing me for who I am and believing all that I have said is not even in your natural capacities…it is only that which the Father will accomplish in you.”

At the minimum, Jesus is speaking to two realities in vs. 44. First, He is acknowledging the total depravity of a human soul. No one can simply decide to “come to Jesus” apart from first being drawn by the Father. Secondly, Jesus is pointing to the sovereignty of the Father over everything, including the human’s capacity to grasp who Jesus is and to come to Him.
Now, I know this statement by Jesus opens a whole can of worms for many people. Many of us are familiar with the classic debate regarding predestination vs. freewill. Simply put: does God choose us or do we choose God? If no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him, then do human beings have the freewill to accept or reject Jesus? Is Jesus saying that all who the Father draws WILL come to Jesus (“Irresistible Grace”)? Or, is He only saying that those who the Father draws have an opportunity to come to Jesus…even though some may then choose not to? If people do not have the freewill to come to Jesus, do they truly have any freewill at all? If there is no freewill, how then does God hold people morally accountable who had no freewill to begin with? Why does Jesus rebuke the crowd for not believing in John 6:36 if they are those whom the Father has not drawn? And if they are those who the Father has drawn, then why don’t they believe in Him?

Yes…John 6:44 raises a lot of questions. Entire systems of doctrine have been developed to try and articulate what this verse and others like it seem to say about salvation, election, predestination, irresistible grace, preservation of the saints, and so on.

Now…no matter what I say next, people will find reasons to grumble! This is historically dangerous ground, but it’s Resurrection Sunday, so NO GRUMBLING! Let me simply say this, and then we shall move on: Jesus said what He said, and He meant what He said. Jesus didn’t use the words of election or predestination or irresistible grace or free will or regeneration or any of the wonderful theological terms we are so quick to employ. Here’s what He said to a bunch of grumblers in Capernaum: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Let’s move on and see how vs. 44 fits into the rest of what our Lord says here in John 6, and if we have time, I will field some of your questions about this subject of predestination vs. freewill in the Q&A following the service.

Jesus goes on in the second part of vs. 44: “And I will raise him up on the last day.” Who is Jesus talking about? He is referring to the one His Father draws…the one who comes to Jesus; he/she is the one whom Jesus will raise up on the last day. Notice: the “old exodus” was a journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. The “new exodus” is a journey from death to life! Salvation in Jesus means a great many things, but note the emphasis: repeatedly Jesus will refer to raising up His own on the last day. The new “Promised Land” is eternal life; and only those who follow the “New Moses” will enter it.

Jesus continues in vs. 45: It is written in the Prophets, “And they will all be taught by God.” Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father.

Jesus recalls that the 54th chapter of Isaiah, which is a futuristic vision of the restoration of Israel. In vs. 13 Isaiah beholds a time when “All your children shall be taught by the Lord.” Here is what Jesus is saying: the True Israelites…those who have heard and learned from the Father…will come to Jesus, just as the prophet foretold. Those who have not heard or learned from the Father will not come to Jesus…they will not cross over to eternal life in the New Exodus. Like the grumbling, unfaithful Israelites who cursed God and Moses and were left to wander in the wilderness, so shall it be for those who grumble against God and fail to come to Jesus…they will not cross over from death to life.
Now notice the last bit that Jesus says about seeing the Father in vs. 46. Moses was a great leader, called and appointed by God; but Moses never SAW the Father. Moses could never look upon the face of God and live. There is only One who has seen the Father, says Jesus…the sent One, who is even now speaking to these grumbling Jews. Make no mistake: Jesus is setting Himself above Moses in this statement. No mere mortal could look upon the face of God and live; but Jesus has seen the Father, and that makes Jesus more than a new Moses. He is the Son…and He is the New Exodus from death to life! As Jesus proclaims in vs. 47: “Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.” Eternal life is the destination for the New Exodus; and Jesus, the New Moses, has come to lead the New Exodus. Let us now consider the new kind of Bread for the New Exodus. That leads me to my second subheading…

II. The Bread of Life

We touched on this famous “I am” statement last week when Jesus first proclaimed Himself as the bread of life in John 6:36. Now, for the second time, Jesus once again states in vs. 48: I am the bread of life.

Remember that these Jews have come to Capernaum seeking more of the bread Jesus miraculously provided the night before when Jesus fed the 5000; but Jesus has not come down from heaven to provide manna that satisfies the stomach. Jesus has come to provide a new kind of bread. Listen to how he compares the “old exodus bread” to the “new exodus bread” beginning with vs. 49: Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever.

Whereas the old exodus bread satisfied only for a time, and then the people died, the new exodus bread, when eaten, conquers death. If ANYONE, Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor…if ANYONE eats this bread, he will live forever! This is why Jesus is the Bread of LIFE. Life eternal is available for those who take Him in. Now, if that wasn’t mind-blowing enough, listen to the last thing Jesus says to the grumblers at the end of vs. 51: “And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Friends, nothing could have caught these Jews more off-guard than vs. 51. It’s one thing for a Rabbi to point to His teaching as that which brings life; it is quite another for that Rabbi to point to his flesh. The Greek word here is sarx. It is a graphic, earthy, immediate term with no metaphorical value. Jesus isn’t speaking figuratively…He is saying very clearly: I will give you my flesh to eat as the bread that gives life to the world.

The crowd in the synagogue there in Capernaum immediately begin to grumble about what Jesus just said. In vs. 52 we read, “The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’”

Have you noticed how literal the listeners are? They are asking a good question. Did Jesus suggest that he would provide his flesh to eat? At this point we might anticipate that Jesus would back down from this graphic illustration and soften His metaphor, but that’s not what Jesus does.
On the contrary, Jesus doubles down on this picture of His flesh as the “bread of life.” Look what He says next in vs. 53-57:

53 So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

Now, I know a lot of us in the Church will automatically shift to thinking of the Lord’s Supper when read about “feeding on my flesh and drinking my blood.” Please don’t…at least not yet. You should know that the Greek term used here for flesh, sarx is not the Greek word soma (meaning body) that we often see associated with the Lord’s Supper in the synoptic gospels or Paul’s letters. Almost every biblical scholar I read this week agreed that neither John nor Jesus is pointing to the Lord’s Supper in this passage. You may disagree, but for the moment, I would ask you to put aside any thoughts of the Lord’s Supper. Our job here is to understand what Jesus just said through the eyes and ears of this first century audience in Capernaum and the first century contemporaries of the Apostle John.

In his commentary on John, William Barclay summarizes how the ancient readers, particularly John the Apostle’s pagan neighbors in Ephesus, would have heard what Jesus just said. Barclay writes:

To most of us this is a very difficult passage. It speaks in language and moves in a world of ideas which are quite strange to us and which may seem even fantastic and grotesque. But for those who heard it first, it was moving among familiar ideas which went back to the very childhood of the race. These ideas would be quite normal to anyone brought up in ancient sacrifice. The animal was very seldom burned entirely. Usually only a token part was burned on the altar, although the whole animal was offered to the god. Part of the flesh was given to the priests; and part to the worshipper to make a feast for himself and his friends within the temple precincts. At that feast the god himself was held to be a guest. Once the flesh had been offered to the god, it was held that the god had entered into it; and therefore, when the worshipper ate it, he was literally eating the god. When people rose from such a feast they went out, as they believed, literally god-filled.

Barclay concludes:

We may think of it as idolatrous worship, we may think of it as a vast delusion; yet the fact remains these people went out quite certain that in them there was now the dynamic vitality of their god. To people used to that kind of experience a section like this presented no difficulties at all.

Can you see the picture? Jesus is using the language of sacrifice. He is appealing to the common practice of eating the flesh of a sacrifice that was devoted to a god. So, what is He saying when He tells the Jews in Capernaum to “eat his flesh?”

Jesus is saying, “I am the sacrifice. I will be sacrificed. I will be the Lamb that is slain to atone for the sins of the world. You will not eat the flesh of a goat, you will eat MY flesh and be God-filled! You shall eat my flesh and receive atonement for your sins.

And even more scandalous than telling people to “eat my flesh,” Jesus commands that people must “drink my blood.” The first century Jews would have been even more shocked by this statement on many levels. In the OT, God strictly forbade the drinking of an animal’s blood. Why? Because life is in the blood. The life-blood of a sacrificial lamb belonged to God. You
see, in the sacrificial system, the life-blood of an unblemished lamb was spilled on the ground as a substitutionary sacrifice for the life-blood of a sinful man who had sinned against God; that’s how substitutionary atonement works.

So, here’s what Jesus is saying: You will eat my flesh…the flesh of the sacrificed Lamb…for the forgiveness of your sins and to be God-filled. And you will drink my blood…so that you will have my life…my eternal life…in you!

Church, can you see that Jesus is pointing to the cross? Jesus is pointing to His sacrifice; the ultimate sacrifice of the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. This is the Bread of Life…the body and blood of the sacrificed Lamb…and those who take it in will have eternal life.

Let us now turn to my third subheading:

**III. Taking Him In**

If you are paying attention, you may have observed two different ways that Jesus says the same thing in this passage.

In vs. 47 Jesus says, “Whoever believes has eternal life.”

Then, in vs. 54, Jesus says, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”

I’m not a great math guy, but it seems to be that if a=b, and c=b, then a=c, right?

Sorry…stepped out of my lane there.

My point is that if believing leads to eternal life; and feeding on the flesh of Jesus and drinking His blood leads to eternal life, then believing=feeding on Jesus, right?

This is important, Church, please don’t miss this. Whenever we read John 3:16, “…that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life,” most of us assume that a western, intellectual kind of “consent to the facts” will suffice for us to enter into eternal life. But listen closely to what Jesus is saying here in John 6. Jesus is not asking for our intellectual consent…that is not the kind of “believing” that Jesus presents here. To believe in Jesus is to TAKE HIM IN! It is to depend on Jesus, the sacrificed Lamb of God, as our singular atonement for sins and our only source of life; and we are to depend on Him as one depends on bread from heaven in the middle of a desert! In the ancient world, bread was the staple of every meal. Bread was irreplaceable and basic to survival. Just as the manna in the wilderness kept the Israelites alive, so Jesus offers Himself as the unique and singular source for eternal life in this wasteland of perishing souls. Access to the eternal life requires that we take him in…that we feed on Him.

Jesus concludes His talk to the crowd in Capernaum with these words: As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.
This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.

To have faith in Jesus…to believe…is to take Him in. It is to feed our souls with the very presence of Christ in us.

Let me conclude now with my fourth and final subheading…

IV. The Validation of Hope and Eternal Life

Many of you know that Christy and I host a neighborhood group in our home. The group is comprised of believers and unbelievers, and over the last few years we have grown to truly love one another. We sincerely care for each other’s families, and my life has been deeply enriched through those relationships. Most, if not all, of our little group is watching this morning, so please know I’m not talking about them behind their backs!

I do want to acknowledge that being in community with those who are currently outside of Christianity has been a blessing in my life. It has forced me to hear the claims of Christianity through their filter. That said: preaching an Easter Sunday sermon that quotes Jesus as telling people to “eat my flesh and drink my blood”…well, I suspect I will be getting some interesting looks in the neighborhood this week!

I won’t deny it: Jesus said some things that are mind-blowing, potentially offensive, and difficult for people outside of Christianity to comprehend. To take this passage out of context makes Jesus sound like He is promoting cannibalism! So, just to be clear: Christianity does not promote eating people! Bad idea…please don’t eat any people.

The point of our text this morning is not eating people, it’s this: Jesus claimed to be the singular hope of the world. He claimed to be the only way by which mortal, sinful men and women could be forgiven and inherit eternal life with God. He said, “I am the Bread of Life.” In John 11 Jesus says, “I am the Resurrection and the Life…whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live; and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”

Nobody…no other human being on planet earth ever made the claims of this one, single solitary man. No one else ever had the audacity to claim that they alone had looked upon the face of God. No one but Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Jesus of Nazareth is the only person in history to say such things. Jesus of Nazareth is the only person said to have been the Lamb of God who died a sacrificial death on a criminal’s cross for the sins of the world. And Jesus of Nazareth is the only person in history said to have died a public death, and then raised back to life on the third day.

Everything that Jesus said hinges on the resurrection and the empty tomb. If Jesus be raised from the dead; He is the Son of God, the Bread of Life, the Resurrection, the Way, the Truth, and the Life! If the tomb is empty…if Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, then death has been defeated, and there is hope for all people!
Billions of people all over the earth will rise up this day and proclaim in one voice, “He is Risen!” And it’s not just because we read the Bible or grew up in a Christian home. The testimony of billions today and billions upon billions throughout the past 2000 years is this: “I took Him in, and He changed everything!” “I took Him in, and He cleansed my soul.” “I took Him in, and I was transformed from angry to peaceful…from greedy to generous…from depressed to joyful…from selfish to compassionate…from hopeless to hopeful!” Christ in us…that is our testimony! Christ in us is the source of our hope. Christ in us accounts for the generosity of His Church. Christ in us is the source of our courage, come what may!

The validation of hope…hope for the life eternal that begins now and lasts into eternity…the validation of everything Jesus said…is the empty tomb.

Church…what is your testimony? Have you taken Him in? Do you know that the life-blood of the Lamb now courses through your veins? Do you know that His flesh purchased your forgiveness? Does the spring of living water well up within you? Have you found the Bread of Life to be sufficient?

Then tell the world! Tell them what you know: He is Risen! He is risen indeed!

Let us pray.