



Believe

JOHN

MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: John 6:48-58

Eat & Live

48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. **50** This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that anyone 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. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” **52** At that, the Jews argued among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” **53** So Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. **54** **Whoever** eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, **55** because my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. **56** **Whoever** eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. **57** Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so **whoever** feeds on me will live because of me. **58** This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the manna your ancestors ate—and they died. **Whoever** eats this bread will live forever.” (John 6:48-58)

1. Jesus is the Bread of Life (Jn. 6:48-51, 35)
 - a. Jesus is the Bread that gives Life (Jn. 6:48, 51)
 - b. Jesus gives life ‘to’ the world by giving his life ‘for’ the world (Jn. 6:51c)
 - **“The ‘bread’ Jesus gives is his flesh (a reference to Jesus’ death on the cross). Jesus’ statement intermingles physical & spiritual truth. Jesus is not talking about literal ‘bread,’ but he is the true ‘living bread’ in the sense that those who believe in him have their spiritual hunger satisfied. He becomes this spiritually satisfying ‘bread’ by sacrificing his own physical body in his death on the cross, and in that sense he can say that this spiritual bread is my flesh.”** (ESV Study Bible)
 - c. Eat & Live (Jn. 6:51, 53, 54, 57b, 58b)

2. Misunderstanding Jesus' Words (Jn. 6:52; 2:19-20; 3:3-4; 4:10-11)

- *"Here we have another example in John's Gospel of the people **misunderstanding a spiritual truth by taking it literally.**"* (Warren Wiersbe, Bible Commentary, p. 251)

a. Cannibalism (6:52; Gen. 9:3-4; Lev. 17:10-16; 19:26; Deut. 28:53-57)

- *"The Gospel language, 'Eats my Flesh & drinks my Blood,' poses a **problem for friendly non-believers & even provides ammunition for hostile ones.** Non-belief ranges from the extremes of **scandal ('cannibalism')** to denial ('He didn't really say that'). But for those who believe, an abundance of Christian teaching and tradition can guide us to interpret, live by and rejoice in these words." [Mary H. Kuhlman, "Reflection," Creighton University, 13 May, 2014]*
- *"Many non-Christian Romans later misinterpreted Christian language about... 'eating the body & blood of their Lord' **sounded like cannibalism to outsiders** & thus aroused more persecution against the church." (Craig S. Keener, IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, p. 268)*
- *"The graphic language in John 6:51-58 raises the **uncomfortable possibility** that the Johannine Jesus is inviting his listeners to engage in cannibalism. This is an interpretation [usually] dismissed... as mere metaphor..." [Esther Kobel, Dining with John pp. 312-3]*
- *"The rumor of...banquets & unbridled orgies...were attempts at labeling Christians a threat to society. In all fairness...there have been some bases for such accusations. Certainly, it is not difficult to imagine how **someone on the outside could move from statements like John 6:52-59 to a charge of cannibalism.**" (Gregory E. Sterling, "Customs that are Not Lawful," in Marius Nel (ed.) NT in the Graeco-Roman World, 80)*
- *"**Cannibalism...was one of the accusations leveled against the early Christians, primarily in the context of the ritual of the Eucharist.** From early Christian times, the Jews rejected the idea of the transformation of sacramental bread & wine into human &/or divine flesh & blood as reflected in John 5:52-59." (Marc Bregman, "From Midrash to Mashal," in M. Poorthuis (ed.) Parables in Changing Contexts, 64)*
- *"Although modern readers are conditioned to hear Jesus' words about those 'who eat my flesh and drink my blood' (John 6:56) as a reference to the Lord's Supper, **the disciples at the time would have no experience of the Eucharist.** They reject Jesus' teaching because **they think that he is referring to cannibalism.**" (Susan Hulen, Commentary on John 6:56-69, p.)*

b. Sacramentalism (6:53-58)

- **6:53** So Jesus said to them, *"Truly I tell you, **unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves.**"*
- Eucharist – referred to by Catholics as Mass and it involves spiritually feeding participants with the body and blood of Christ.
- Sacrament – a religious ceremony or ritual (e.g. Communion)

a. Some see Holy Communion in these verses

- Udo Schnelle sees in Jn. 6:53 "an emphasis on the **Eucharist as an indispensable condition for salvation.**" [Udo Schnelle, *Anti-docetic Christology in...John*, p.]
- *"Taking Jn. 6:51-58 to be a Eucharistic reference [implies] **neglecting to eat & drink the Eucharistic elements means one 'has no life in oneself'** (6:53) [*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man & drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves*] ; this is like saying **'Take the Eucharist or be damned.'**" [Paul N. Anderson, *Riddles of the 4th Gospel*, 229]*

b. The sacramentalist argument

- *"**The argument goes like this:** whereas one could still understand 'my flesh' in v. 51c to refer to Jesus' self-offering in death, the addition 'his (my) blood' in vv. 53 & 54 **makes it undeniably clear that the reference is to the Lord's Supper...** Thus, **if Jesus' words** in v. 53 are to have a favorable meaning, they must refer to the Eucharist." (Herman Ridderbos, *A Theological Commentary: The Gospel of John*, p. 179)*

c. Transubstantiation

- *"Transubstantiation affirms that **the communion elements are literally transformed from bread and wine into Jesus' flesh and blood** during the mass. John's point is much more profound than metaphysical theories regarding the Lord's Supper: for him, Jesus' work reveals who Jesus essentially is, in the present case, the source & giver of all true spiritual life." (Andreas Kostenberger, *Encountering Jesus: John*, 87)*

d. Eating & drinking: Jesus uses figurative language

- *“The Bread of Life discourse (Jn. 6:22-59)...makes use of the imagery of eating & drinking but **does not refer to a specific meal practice of early Christians...**These strong metaphors...**do not...point directly to specific practices of believers** [e.g. Eucharist/ Communion/Lord’s Table].” [Jan Heilmann, “A Meal in the Background of John 6:51–58?” JBL Vol. 137, #2 (2018) p. 481]*
- *“It is important to note that **the figurative language about Jesus as the bread of life** has become somewhat more specific in these verses. Now ‘eating’ is included. That which **has been expressed without imagery in the words ‘believe’ and ‘come to me’** (vss. 35, 47) is now, in connection with Jesus’ self-identification as ‘the bread,’ metaphorically called ‘eating this bread’ or (vs. 57) even more directly ‘eating me.’ Hence it is clear that ‘eating’ is a metaphor that flows directly from the semantics of the preceding and does not suddenly emerge from another (sacramental) semantic context.” (Herman Ridderbos, *A Theological Commentary: The Gospel of John*, p. 176)*

e. Rebuttal to Sacramentalism

a. Holy Communion is not the way to receive eternal life

- *“If we take the view that Jn. 6:51c-58 required participation in the Eucharist [communion] for salvation to be obtained, 6:53-54 clearly seem to be at odds with the Evangelist’s [Christ-centered salvation]. **If one has no life & is thus damned apart from participating in [the liturgical elements], such a requirement is...at diametric odds with the Evangelist’s seeing Christ as the way, the truth, & the life (14:6)...**” [Paul N. Anderson, “Foreword,” to Peder Borgen, *Bread From Heaven*, xviii]*
- *James Dunn notes “the absence of an account of the institution of the Eucharist in John 13, [while] emphasizing Jn. 6:63, he holds that ‘John is concerned lest too much attention be given to the ritual act [i.e., communion] & lest eternal life be thought somehow dependent on...the physical elements’ (Dunn)” [Richard Bauckham, “Sacraments & the Gospel of John,” M. Levering (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, 84]*
- *“The transition in 6:51c is not from faith to Eucharist as the means of eternal life, but from believing in Jesus as the incarnate one to believing in Jesus as the one who died a violent death for the life of the world...The Jesus whom people are invited to come and...believe [into] is now the crucified one.” [Richard Bauckham, “Sacraments...[in] John,” in M. Levering (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, 91]*
- *“At issue specifically is **the absolute salvific significance accorded in these verses to “eating the flesh” and “drinking the blood” of the Son of man. This absolute and exclusive meaning cannot have been intended for the — still to be instituted — sacrament and participation in it, but only for Jesus’ self-offering in death as the food and drink of eternal life given by Jesus for the life of the world and taken with the mouth of faith. At no point in this Gospel or any part of the New Testament is such an absolute value accorded to the sacrament ...and nowhere is there such an unbreakable and exclusive link between the eating and drinking of the eucharist and participation in eternal life,** as there would have to be in vs. 54 in the sacramental interpretation, as though only those who received the eucharist had the guarantee of eternal life. It is therefore correct to say...that John does not describe Jesus as the founder of a sacrament but as the one who feeds his church with life by means of his body offered up in death. Or in the words of Strathmann: “He [the Evangelist] linked the acquisition of life, which occupies him throughout his entire Gospel, not to a...ritual act but to the act of coming to Jesus, the crucified Son of God, and believing in him.” (Herman Ridderbos, *A Theological Commentary: The Gospel of John*, p. 179)*

b. ‘Flesh & blood’ points to the cross

- *“A key...lies in 6:51c...Here Jesus alludes for the first time in Jn. 6...to his coming sacrificial death...6:51 is the first...text that says Jesus’ death will be ‘for’ people. Thus...6:51c makes the transition from the Incarnation (Jesus as the bread that came down from heaven) to the cross (Jesus as the bread that he’ll give for the life of the world)... The latter theme is developed in the following verses, where ‘flesh’ is expanded to ‘flesh’ & ‘blood’ ...the real & vulnerable humanity of Jesus (1:14), vulnerable to violence & death...From the context (6:57 ‘eat me’) it’s clear that the flesh & blood are Jesus himself, considered as crucified as well as incarnate. **The transition in 6:51c is not from faith to Eucharist as the means of eternal life, but from believing in Jesus as the incarnate one to believing in Jesus as the one who died a violent death for the life of the world...**The Jesus whom people are invited to come &...believe [into] is now the crucified one.” [Richard Bauckham, “Sacraments...[in] John,” in M. Levering (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, 91]*

3. Understanding ‘Eating’ in the Context of John

a. Jesus is using metaphorical language

- *“**What is promised to the person who eats Jesus’ flesh & drinks his blood is eternal life...(6:54), and such things are elsewhere in [John] promised to those who believe in the Son...**It begins to sound as if **the language should be taken metaphorically, not sacramentally.**” (D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of John*, p. 217)*
- *“**These words are at the heart of the discourse on the Bread of Life, and have created great misunderstanding among interpreters.** Anyone who is inclined toward a sacramental viewpoint will almost certainly want to take these words as a reference to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist, because of the reference to eating and drinking. But this does not automatically follow: **By anyone’s definition there must be a symbolic element to the eating which Jesus speaks of in the discourse, and once this is admitted, it is better to understand it here,...to a personal receiving of... Christ and his work.**” (NET Bible)*

b. Everyone who believes has eternal life (Jn. 3:15-16, 36; 5:24, 40; 6:40; 20:31)

c. Eating & drinking Jesus' flesh & blood is believing (Jn. 6:53, 54, 57; **7:37-38**)

- **“Verses 54 & 40 are closely parallel:** ‘Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day’ (v. 54); ‘... everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day’ (v. 40). **The only substantial difference is that one speaks of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking Jesus’ blood, while the other...speaks of looking to the Son and believing in him.** The conclusion is obvious: the former [v. 54] is the metaphorical way of referring to the latter [v. 40]....Small wonder that **Augustine of Hippo wrote, ‘Believe, and you have eaten’.**” (D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of John*, p. 230)
- **“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood cannot be intended literally, for no one ever did that. As Jesus has done frequently in this Gospel, he is speaking in terms of physical items in this world to teach about spiritual realities. Here, to ‘eat’ Jesus’ flesh has the spiritual meaning of trusting or believing in him, especially in his death...Similarly, to ‘drink his blood’ means to trust in his atoning death, which is represented by the shedding of his blood.”** (ESV Study Bible)
- **“Eating and drinking Christ’s flesh and blood...appears to be a very graphic way of saying that people must take Christ into their innermost being.”** (Leon Morris, *NICNT: John*, p. 331)

4. An Open Invitation For All to Eat & Live

- **“John’s point is much more profound than metaphysical theories regarding the Lord’s Supper: for him, Jesus’ work reveals who Jesus essentially is, in the present case, the source & giver of all true spiritual life.”** (Andreas Kostenberger, *Encountering Jesus: John*, 87)

a. The Condition – ‘unless’ (Jn. 6:53) – the absolute and exclusive condition to receiving eternal life

- **“‘Unless’ makes clear that eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man is a condition for receiving the gift of life.”** (Gail O’Day, *NIBC: John*, p. 517)
- **“Both ‘eat’ and ‘drink’ are aorist [tense], denoting once-for-all action, not a repeated eating and drinking, such as would be appropriate to the sacrament. And this eating and drinking are absolutely necessary for eternal life. Those who do not eat and drink in the way Jesus says have no life.”** (Leon Morris, *NICNT: John*, p. 331)

b. Make believing (eating) your habit – How? Rom. 10:17 ESV **“Belief comes by hearing the Word of Christ.”**

- **“The participles in the Greek throughout this chapter. ‘He that believes on me’ 6:35; 6:40; 6:47; ‘He that eats’ 6:54; 6:56-58; ‘He that drinks’ 6:54; 6:56. In all [these] instances the present active participle is used to express a continuous action. Not a mere eating and drinking once for all, but a habit. Faith is an active, continuous habit...”** (Henry W. Soltau, *Tabernacle, The Priesthood, and The Offerings*,)
- **“While it has been argued that John emphasizes the will of the Father in the economy of salvation, that is, unless the Father draws them, they cannot come, the language of ingesting makes it clear that reception of Jesus is not passive. To the contrary, human acceptance and ‘ingestion’ of Jesus is necessary for life. To taste Jesus is to taste life.”** (Jane S. Webster, *Ingesting Jesus*, McMaster University (2001) 124)
- **“No spiritual discipline is more important than the intake of God’s Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of...Scripture.”** (Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, p. 28)

c. The Invitation – ‘whoever’ (Jn. 6:54, 56, 57, 58)