

We Are Fed by Jesus

John 6:41-51

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Dear people taught by God,

Let yourselves today be just that: taught, by God. What that means is that we will listen to what God says, we will hear his words with trust, that what he says is true, with faith that even if it seems contradictory to our reasoning it is in fact higher than our reasoning—being devised by the mind and reasoning of almighty God.

We've been tracing Jesus' discussion with some Jews about the Bread of Life. Last week we heard his bold statement: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). He went on to explain the blessed promises given to those who believed in him, "that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (6:40). But rather than see the grace of God, these Jews refused to be taught by God, and instead latched onto the absurd statement of Jesus that he was bread that came down from heaven! Ridiculous!

They did not hear Jesus' words with trust and faith, but immediately became skeptical: "They said, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?'" Human minds cannot fully grasp the things of God. That comes under the faculty of faith. Only by faith may we see that Jesus is who he says he is; only by faith may we be fed by Jesus, for he is indeed that bread come down from heaven, to give us eternal life.

I. Who Came from Heaven

The religion of Secular Humanism teaches that we trust what we observe, what we quantify, what we reason out. If a thing cannot be scientifically or mathematically proven, then it cannot exist. This religion champions man's ability to rise into dominance over the cosmos. For this reason, Secular Humanism refuses to acknowledge faith in anything outside man's own powers of observation and reason.

The Jews to whom Jesus was speaking were not Secular Humanists, but they were plagued by the same mistrust of God's Word, the same source of all the lack of faith in the world, in fact the very reason for all the world's troubles. It started not too long after creation was complete and one voice spoke up: "Did God actually say...?" (Gen. 3:1). That voice hasn't stopped speaking to people. And we tend to agree. "Yeah! Did God really mean that? That doesn't make sense."

This voice creates doubt in everything that God says, but never all at once. No, it takes parts and says, "Sure God said that, but did he really say this?" Undermining just a few pieces of God's Word at a time, this voice creates a spreading mold in our faith, which eats away at bit after bit after bit until the whole thing is corrupted and our faith is totally destroyed. This voice is patient.

God is also patient, but he is desperate to save. Because of this desperation, he avoids too much argument to reason — people can't be reasoned to faith. To be saved, we must receive God's powerful Word. So rather than argue from rational points explaining his incarnation, proving his eternal generation, that he is true God and true Man in one person, that he and the Father and the Holy Spirit are the three Persons of

the One God, Jesus instead applies the power that saves: the Word of God. Yes, our powers of reason are involved, for without them we wouldn't be able to make sense out of the sounds that come out of people's mouths, or the curving, jumping lines that people draw on paper or type on a screen. But our reason always only serves our faith. Jesus knew that if the intellect were satisfied, that wouldn't necessarily mean that the soul was satisfied. People argue against the Gospel all the time. And maybe we can argue in response and prove them wrong and the Gospel right. But this does not satisfy the soul. Instead, if the soul is satisfied, then the intellect will be satisfied. So our ultimate plan of attack in spreading the Gospel is to do just that: preach God's Word, and allow the proofs to come later.

See how Jesus did this: "It is written in the Prophets," he said, directing their attention to the Word of God, specifically to the inspired writings of the prophet Isaiah, "'And they will all be taught by God.'" In this passage Jesus quotes, "Isa[iah] describes the blessed condition of Jerusalem's children after accepting the sacrificed and glorified Messiah (Isa. 53) in repentance and faith" (Lenski 476). The prophet predicted that, when the Messiah came, the people would be taught by God himself, and that specifically they would *learn* after this Messiah had been sacrificed, glorified, and received in faith. Look how this has been fulfilled! Faith in Jesus was hardly complete until he had accomplished his work: he died to pay for the sins of the world; he rose to bring new life to that world; he ascended into heaven to rule as victorious king, and to send his Holy Spirit to enlighten hearts so that we may actually receive faith. And look: these people were actually right then being taught by God in the most intimate of

settings, as God stood as close as the human being before them, teaching them God's Word.

This teaching discourse of Jesus cycles around the idea that first, he has come down from heaven: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven"; "not that anyone has seen the Father [who is in heaven] except he who is from God; he has seen the Father." Jesus came down from heaven. He wants his hearers to understand this. But this itself is really only a step towards what Jesus really wants them to know: ultimately he wants them to understand that he came down from heaven in order to bring those who believe in him back up to heaven. This is the work of the Gospel (and not of reasoning): it creates faith, it strengthens faith, and it resurrects the faithful to eternal life: Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me [down from heaven] draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day."

II. To Give Eternal Life

Look at the purpose for which God himself teaches the people: "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me," Jesus said. Jesus, being the only one who has ever seen the Father, brings the Father's message to the people; and the message is: Believe in Jesus. He emphasizes the importance of this purpose by introducing the statement of it with, "Amen, amen," translated, "Truly, truly": "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life."

Remember how these Jews were coming after Jesus because they'd seen the miracle he performed of providing bread for 5,000 men. They were looking for further miracles, but the miracles they sought were not ones that would save them. Just look at

the example they held highest: “Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat,’” they said (John 6:31). Jesus proves to them how unimportant that miracle was: “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.” They looked for a miracle that would not save them; we all, in fact, look for miracles that will not save us: we look for good harvest, healthy family, good friends, peace in our nation, shelter, food, clothing, employment, happiness – all good things, but none of which will save us. So Jesus, despite what we *want*, provided one miracle that *has* saved *everyone*: “This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.... If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.”

Jesus was trying to teach so that this eternal life might be obtained. But the people weren’t understanding. Good and effective hearing was required, in order to receive the things taught, in order to actually learn; this actual learning is identical with coming to Jesus, which means having faith and believing, and having faith means eternal life is obtained. But, as we saw, we couldn’t learn or even hear without God coming to us; this he did in the person of his Son: the incarnate Son of God *came* in order to teach us, to *bring* us back to eternal life.

This he describes through the metaphor of bread. The Jews were going on and on about eating, wanting more miraculous bread, bread like what their forefathers were miraculously given in the wilderness: they were gluttons for food to fill their bellies and for a thrilling sideshow to keep them entertained. It’s as though Jesus were saying: “Fine, you’re so obsessed with bread? I’ll tell you what the truest bread is.”

“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.” Jesus had been talking about being the bread of heaven, the bread of life, and now he extends that image. Bread must be eaten. So eating this bread means gaining its nourishment. Jesus is the bread; eating that bread is believing in Jesus. But this bread isn’t hidden in some secret place, locked up in the pope’s refrigerator, or stashed away in some secret corner of the Bible: it’s offered freely to everyone. It’s available to all. Jesus says, “If *anyone* eats of this bread,” proving that no matter the person, no matter the place, no matter the time, to live forever one must only eat this bread, which Jesus offers in his Word. Of course, some will refuse to eat this bread, as many of these Jews, because it was a stumbling block to them, and it is foolishness to many others. But there are still countless souls who are moved by the Holy Spirit to eat this bread in faith, and therefore receive eternal life.

“And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Jesus was speaking in the future tense here, because he hadn’t yet given the bread. No, he’s not talking about the Lord’s Supper, although there we do indeed receive the gifts of the bread of life. The way that Jesus gave his flesh to the world as the means of giving life was by his sacrificial death on the cross. There he gave up his flesh, his body, his well-being, his life, to give life to the world.

Jesus describes this bread in two ways: “the bread of life” (John 6:35), and “the living bread.” In one way, these mean the same thing. “Bread of life” could mean “bread which has life as a quality within it, or bread which is alive.” But knowing that

this bread is Jesus and his flesh, we can extend this even farther and see that the most emphatic, the only important quality of this bread is its life, which it is full of, which means that it is alive, which it gives and imparts to those who eat of it.

Jesus is this bread. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus is what we're talking about, because Jesus is the center of God's plan of salvation. We are saved if we are made one with him; and those who are made one with him by faith are made full partakers of his life: sharers in his life — his life is not just something he has in his possession, but something he actually *is*; Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life.

We can see this whole plan in the microcosm of Jesus death and resurrection: he was killed and went down into the grave so that he could come to life again and rise out of the grave. In the same way Jesus came to the earth, became flesh, in order to return to heaven with those who shared in his flesh by faith. Jesus had to become man so that he could teach us, so that he could die, so that he could feed us, so that we could be nourished by his life to eternal life.

Amen.