

John 6:51-59

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Imagine if I were the proud owner of the Philosopher's Stone. Now, the Philosopher's Stone in legend was a substance, was, is a substance capable of turning base metals into gold, and in some strands of the legend also believed to be an elixir of immortality, and so able to provide for those who own, consume the Philosopher's Stone. Immortality.

Now, imagine if it weren't just a legend, but that it were true, and that I possessed that. Now, if that were the case, I think I would have two challenges. In the event that I was of a mind to share my possession, there would be two challenges. The first one would be to convince people that it was indeed true. That would be probably maybe an insurmountable challenge, because most people would just think I completely lost the place if I was making such claims. So, that would be the first challenge, to convince people that what I own and what I could provide would be able to grant them immortality. But imagine that I were able to convince people that that were so. I think the second challenge would be to know what to do with all the money, because the value of such a resource is immeasurable. Well, with those thoughts in mind, we turn to the passage that we've read and to the claim that Jesus makes within this passage. Jesus claims that there is something that you can eat that will grant you immortality. He makes this claim in a number of ways and in a number of occasions within even the passage that we've read. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. There in verse 51, if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.

Now, I want us this morning to consider this matter, exploring a number of statements that Jesus makes in the passage that will help us to understand what He means by this astonishing statement or promise, if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And we're going to do this, we're going to consider these statements of Jesus, or some of these statements, under five headings.

And each of them will help us, I hope, to progressively understand what Jesus is saying. And the five headings that will guide us as we would progressively have a greater understanding of what it is Jesus is saying are the following. First of all, we're going to notice that Jesus presents an intriguing claim, an intriguing claim, but He then follows it up with an astonishing promise, the one we've begun the sermon with, this astonishing promise, if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. There's an intriguing claim, there's then an astonishing promise, that then follows a revealing explanation, where Jesus goes on to explain a little or some of what He means by what He has said. But that is followed by what we're calling a repulsive demand. And I don't think the language is too strong, and when we come to that, I think you'll concur that that's fair language to use. There is, in the passage, a repulsive demand, and then followed, finally, by a wonderful outcome. So, these are the headings that will guide us and give some structure to what we want to say this morning. We begin with an intriguing claim. In verse 48 of John chapter 6, we find Jesus for the second time in this conversation, in this dialogue with the Jews who He is speaking with, we find these words of Jesus, I am the bread of life. I am the bread of life. Now, this claim of Jesus is, by any measure, an intriguing claim. And I say intriguing because, by itself, it raises more questions than it provides answers. For Jesus to make this claim, I am the bread of life. It provokes, it raises any number of questions. The first question, the most obvious one that we can then develop further is, well, what does this mean? What does it mean? What does it mean for Jesus to say, I am the bread of life? Even if we accept, as we surely must, that Jesus is speaking figuratively, the question remains, in what sense is Jesus bread?

Bread has any number of characteristics. Which of them is Jesus referring to when He describes Himself, when He makes this claim for Himself, I am the bread of life? Bread has a sell-by date. Is Jesus saying that I have a sell-by date beyond which I am of no use? Well, evidently that's not the case.

[5 : 39] But what is He saying? What aspect, what characteristic of bread is He using or employing to communicate truth? With the bare claim that He makes, it would actually be very difficult to establish.

It is an intriguing claim. What does it mean? What does He mean by describing Himself in this way? Even if we were to understand what Jesus means by describing Himself as bread, the question also emerges, well, what are we to do with this bread? We have the language also in this claim, I am the bread of life. The bread of life. What does that mean? Or He states it somewhat differently, but essentially the same, when in the same passage He speaks of Himself as the living bread, the bread of life, the living bread.

What does that actually mean? The claim that He makes is intriguing. It raises many questions, and what is important to realize is that that is precisely the intention of Jesus. It's not a bad thing that the claim raises lots of questions. That is precisely what Jesus intends. The reason He uses this intriguing language is deliberately and consciously with the intention that it would cause intrigue in His hearers, that it would raise questions that they would want to find answers to. Indeed, when Jesus goes on, as we'll notice in a few moments, to use repulsive language and shocking language, that also is deliberate, that He would provoke a reaction, that He would generate and capture interest in what He has to say, and in the truths that He's seeking to communicate concerning Himself and His mission. So, these words of Jesus, this claim of Jesus is indeed an intriguing claim.

I am the bread of life. Well, we don't need to say anything further about that other than simply recognize that it is indeed intriguing. But it's followed on in Jesus' conversation by what we're calling an astonishing promise. We've already noticed what that promise is. If anyone eats of this bread, He will live forever. This promise is repeated by Jesus in a relatively brief conversation. Certainly, that which is recorded for us is relatively brief. But even in a relatively brief dialogue, He repeats this promise on a number of occasions with slight variations of language or of vocabulary, and each version of the promise developing or exploring the theme of immortality in its own way.

We can maybe just notice the different ways in which He presents what is essentially the same promise. The one we've already noticed is in verse 51. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.

[8 : 48] In the previous verse, He had expressed it in this way. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven which a man may eat and not die. Live forever, not die. In verse 54, expressed slightly differently. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. And then in verse 58, once again, this idea of eating the bread and living forever. Not dying, living forever, having, enjoying eternal life. This is the astonishing promise that Jesus makes. And this promise begins the process of developing or explaining what Jesus means by His intriguing claim. I am the bread of life. Saying, I am the bread of life, and what follows from this is that I am able to grant to you eternal life, if you would eat of this bread. So, there's a development of the theme. There's a, he's beginning to explain what are the implications of his claim that raises questions and that is intriguing. I am the bread of life. But he is saying with this promise is that the fact that He is the bread of life means that He can grant to men and women eternal life, and that this involves eating this bread, whatever that means, which is as yet not altogether clear. So, this promise sheds some light on the matter, but many questions remain unanswered. Some that immediately spring to mind, obviously, would be, He promises that if you eat of this bread, you'll never die, that you'll live forever. But is it not manifestly the case that men do not live forever? Is it not self-evident that we all, in fact, do die? So, it's grand language, very bold language, but the evidence points very clearly in another direction. And anybody could reasonably ask the question, well, he's making these bold claims, he's making these great promises about never dying, about living forever, but that's simply not the case. That's not what happens. We don't live forever, and we do all die.

Another big question that remains unanswered by Jesus simply saying that if you eat of this bread, you will have eternal life is, well, what is that? What is eternal life? What does that look like?

Now, we're not going to answer these questions at this point. There are answers that Jesus provides, and we'll notice the answers, at least some of them, that revolve around, really, our understanding of what Jesus means by eternal life when we consider the final heading this morning, the wonderful outcome. So, bear with me. At this point, we won't answer the questions that spring from this astonishing promise. For the moment, we remain with the Jews in the original audience that Jesus was speaking to, intrigued by, astonished by what Jesus is saying. We need answers, we need an explanation, and this is what Jesus provides, or now goes on to provide under what we're calling a revealing explanation. And here my concern is to focus in on one statement that Jesus makes that we find in verse 51. Now, before we turn to that statement in verse 51, it is the case that Jesus is providing answers and an explanation of His claim to be the bread of life, of His promise that we would live forever and never die, never die, enjoy eternal life. He's providing answers and explanation throughout the dialogue. But we're going to focus on one verse, indeed one statement that Jesus makes that it seems to me is particularly revealing as He explains what He means by the language He is using. And as I've just indicated, that's in verse 51. You see, at the beginning of verse 51, Jesus both states what we're calling his intriguing claim, I am the living bread, and He also goes on to make this astonishing promise.

If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. But then what He does is that He goes on, in the final part of the verse, to take a step jump in the matter of explaining what He means.

Some explanation has already been available or forthcoming, but at the end of this verse, we have this movement forward in terms of Jesus explaining what He means by calling Himself the bread of life, how it is that He is able to make this astonishing offer of eternal life.

[13 : 58] And it is this phrase at the end of the verse that I want to just spend some time considering. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. In this phrase or in this statement, Jesus does three things. He explains what the bread is. For those who are saying, well, what is this bread?

He gives an answer. He explains what He will do with this bread. And He also tells us why He will do what He is going to do with the bread. That sounds a little bit of a riddle, but hopefully in due course, it will become clear. Three things that He explains with these words. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. First of all, He answers the question, what is the bread?

And the answer He gives is this, this bread is my flesh. This bread is my flesh. And with this statement, Jesus is speaking of His own body, where the word He uses, quite rightly and vividly translated flesh, stresses the material aspect of His physical body. He's saying, you're wondering what this bread is?

Well, it's my flesh. It's my body. It's true that this flesh or body, the flesh of Jesus, the body of Jesus represents His whole person, but the particular stress is on this physical body.

So, Jesus is repeating that He is the bread. He's already said that. But with this additional element of identifying His flesh or body specifically as the bread. Now, why is this significant? Well, its significance becomes clear in what He goes on to say, which answers our second question.

[16 : 00] What will He do with this bread? What does the passage say? This bread is my flesh. What does Jesus say? This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. What is He going to do with this bread? What is He going to do with this bread that He identifies as His flesh, as His body? Well, He says very clearly what He's going to do. He says He's going to give it. He's going to give it. Now, notice that Jesus already has made the claim that He is, as a present reality, the bread of life.

I am the bread of life. Now, it's a present reality. He also states in the passage that this bread came down from heaven, something that happened in the past. So, He speaks of a past reality, a past event, when the bread came down from heaven, clearly a reference to His incarnation. He speaks of a present reality. I am the bread of life. But here He speaks of a future event. He says, I will give for the life of the world. This bread that I'm identifying, that I'm explaining to you as my flesh, my body, there's something that's going to happen in the future. I'm going to do something. I'm going to give this bread. Now, what is He talking about? Well, in the light of the future events that we have recorded for us in the Gospels, we can come to one conclusion, and one conclusion alone, that Jesus here is speaking of His death, a death that Jesus always spoke of as a voluntary and deliberate giving or handing over of Himself. And, of course, recognizing that Jesus here, when He speaks of giving His flesh over, recognizing that this is a reference to His death, ties in, of course, with the language that Jesus uses of His bread being, or the bread being His flesh.

And the subsequent reference in verse 53, when He adds to the idea of eating the flesh of the Son of Man with the idea of drinking His blood, all of this language very much ties in with this conclusion that Jesus is speaking of His subsequent death, where He will give His life over to death. The death of Jesus involved His blood being shed. So, Jesus then is explaining that to understand His claim to be the bread of life, that as a standalone claim is intriguing, raises more questions than answers, to understand what He means by that must involve understanding that the bread is His flesh, and that He must give His flesh, give His body, give His life over to death.

Now, that leads us to our third question. We're thinking about this revealing explanation that we have in the words at the end of verse 51. We've noticed how in these brief words, Jesus answers the question, what is the bread? He says, it's my flesh. He answers the question, what He's going to do with it. He's going to give it over to death. But He also answers the question, why is He to give over His body to death?

Why will He do that? Okay, He's stating that's what's going to happen. I'm going to give it over, but why? Why would He do that? Well, in these words, we also have an answer to that question, if not an exhaustive answer, certainly a significant answer. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. He gives the reason. He's going to do this. He's going to hand over His life to death for this reason, for the life of the world. And in these words, we can identify at least two very significant truths concerning the death of Jesus. The first thing that we can say is that the death of Jesus is sacrificial and tied in with calling it sacrificial. It is substitutionary. He will give His life for, I will give for the life of the world, for being used in the sense of, in the place of. The language is the language of sacrifice, and we know that in the Old Testament, the sacrifices that were offered in the temple were offered for the people in the sense of, in the place of. In the place of the people dying for their sins, the animal would be offered as a sacrifice in their place. And so it would be with the death of Jesus.

[21 : 07] Now, it's certainly true that this preposition, I will give, this bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. This preposition for, that we're kind of drawing this truth from. It's certainly the case that in English and in Greek, indeed, no doubt in any language, it's a preposition that can be used with a variety of related meanings. But its use on this occasion, and indeed across the board really, or on several occasions within John's gospel, is very clearly with that sense of, in the place of. It very clearly has this idea of substitution. If we can just give one example within John's gospel, there are many of them. But if we limit ourselves to one, just turning a couple of pages to chapter 10 and verse 11, where we have another of the I am statements of Jesus. What do we read there in chapter 10, verse 11? I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And there, much more clearly than in our own text, that the requirement really of substitution is clear. Jesus is saying, instead of the sheep dying, I'm going to die. They're in danger, but I'm going to die in their place. And so, it is the case on so many occasions in this gospel that the preposition is used with that sense. Jesus' death is sacrificial. It is a death that He dies in the place of others. That's one thing we can draw from what He says, but we can also say that His death is universal in its benefits or intent. He gives His life, to use His own words, for the life of the world. Now, we might think that it would have been clearer had Jesus expressed Himself slightly differently. If Jesus had said, this bread is My life which I will give for the life of sinners, or which I will give for My people, or which I will give to follow a theme that He Himself has introduced, that I will give for those My Father has given Me. And of course, all of these things are true.

He could have said any of these things. But Jesus, on this occasion, has another intention. His intention in speaking of Him giving His life for the life of the world is precisely to stress the universal intent of His death, that it is for all the world. And here it's significant, the little debate that's going on as a kind of sub-theme within the conversation of contrasting Moses and manna with Jesus and the bread of life.

There is different ways in which Jesus is contrasting these things. The Jews themselves introduced the idea of the manna. And Jesus already made a very significant contrast. He said, the manna, your forefathers ate the manna, but they died.

But the bread that I give, when you eat it, you'll never die. This huge contrast where He says, my bread, this real bread, this bread from heaven, this is far greater than manna. But also, I think there is this implicit contrast when Jesus speaks about giving His life, handing over His life for the life of the world. There's a contrast with the manna. You see, the manna, who was the manna for? The manna was for the Israelites. It wasn't for the Egyptians. It wasn't for the Moabites or any other of the nations roundabout. It was for the Israelites. It was for them and them alone. And Jesus says, but this bread, this bread isn't just for you, the Jews. This bread is for the world. And so, He is identifying and declaring that the death that He will die, this giving over of Himself to death, is for the world. Why does Jesus give His life over to death? He does so for and in the place of others. He dies the death that we deserve to die. He takes the punishment that is due to us. But we can move on to our penultimate heading, and that is what we've described as a repulsive demand. And we find this repulsive demand of Jesus in verses 53 and 54. Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. In verse 51, when He speaks of, this bread is my flesh, He's already begun to use language that is somewhat repulsive, and His hearers were suitably repulsed. In verse 52, we can see their disgust at the language Jesus is using.

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, how can this man give us His flesh to eat? At this point, He hasn't actually said or expressed Himself in as repulsive a way as He is about to.

[26 : 28] But even at this point, His hearers are saying, well, that's disgusting. You know, how can He speak in this way? How can He speak about giving His flesh to eat? That is disgusting. Now, Jesus, far from backing off when He notices their revulsion at what He is saying, He goes on to use more explicit, more repulsive, more shocking language. I don't think it's in debate that the language He's using is indeed repulsive.

To speak about eating human flesh and drinking human blood is, I think, in anybody's book, pretty repulsive language. But I think we need to stress to get an idea of just how repulsive for His original audience. We need to stress that for His original Jewish audience, the language He uses is acutely and brutally repulsive. He is speaking to the people who have, in this very conversation, been glorying in their descent from Moses. The one who they boast was their giver of manna, but of whom they would boast even more stridently was their lawgiver. And in the law of Moses, the consuming of blood, of any blood, never mind human blood, is explicitly forbidden. And we could see the references, but we won't spend time doing that. So, can you just begin to imagine the sense of outrage and revulsion at the demand that Jesus is making? I tell you the truth, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. As with His original intriguing claim that has as its intent to provoke a response, to encourage His hearers to listen and to pay attention, it is also the case here that Jesus is deliberately using language that is intended to shock. And He's doing so with a purpose. And the purpose is that His hearers would ask the question, well, what can He mean? What can He mean by using such revolting language? What does He mean?

Well, what does He mean when He says to the Jews and He says to us, I tell you the truth, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Well, throughout the dialogue, answering the question, well, what does He mean? Throughout the dialogue, Jesus is making increasingly clear that He equates eating and drinking with believing. Now, that is made clear on a number of occasions, but we limit ourselves to one piece of evidence that involves contrasting verse 54, where He uses this shocking language with a previous verse, verse 40. Notice in verse 54, Jesus says, whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. Now, immediately, let's read verse 40. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. Jesus, in these two verses, declares the same outcome. He speaks of people having eternal life. He speaks of people being raised up at the last day, exactly the same outcome. But in the two verses, He describes what is involved in that outcome taking place in different ways. In one, He says, it involves eating my flesh and drinking my blood. In the other, He says, it involves believing in me. And so, I think that contrast makes it very clear that Jesus is indicating that these are one and the same thing.

They are different ways of speaking of the same thing. To eat is to believe. To believe is to eat. Augustine put it very succinctly, believe and you have eaten.

Believe and you have eaten. But what does it mean to believe in the Son? If we've established that this language that Jesus uses, this revolting language that's intended to shock, if what He actually means is that you have to believe and mean, what is that about? What does it mean to believe in the Son?

[30 : 45] Well, in the light of what we are discovering in this passage, we can say the following. We are to believe about Jesus and in Jesus. Now, when I say that we are to believe about Jesus is that we are simply stressing the truths concerning Jesus that we must hold to be true. In summary, and limiting ourselves to the passage, we can speak of His identity and His mission.

In this very passage, Jesus points to His identity in stating that He came down from heaven. He points also to His mission as the one who gives Himself for the life of the world. These are things that we must believe. Do you believe that? Do you believe that Jesus came down from heaven? Do you believe that He was sent by the Father as the Savior of the world? Do you believe that He gave Himself, as He said He would, that He gave Himself for sinners, that He took our place to secure our forgiveness and reconciliation with God? Do you believe these things to be true? We must believe in that sense about Jesus, what He declares concerning Himself. But we must also believe in Jesus. And this is stressed by the very language of eating and drinking, of appropriating Jesus and His saving work for ourselves.

To use biblical language, we can speak of trusting in Jesus. It's not enough to examine the bread, not enough to smell the bread, not enough to touch the bread. You need to eat the bread. That's what Jesus is saying. You have to eat the bread of life. But we can also say in this matter of what is meant by believing in Jesus, that we are to believe now and we're to believe always. In verses 53 through to verse 58, Jesus makes a significant distinction in the tense that He uses when speaking of eating and feeding. There's actually two different verbs, effectively synonyms of eating and feeding. And we find that in the translation, the word eating and the word feeding. But the interesting thing is that when Jesus speaks of eating His flesh, He uses a tense that speaks of a once and for all action, where for the first time and in a significant way, one eats the bread that He is offering.

But then when He speaks of feeding on Himself, He uses a verb that has a more continuous sense of something that continues day after day and throughout life. And I think these two senses really capture something very important about what it is to believe in Jesus.

There is that sense in which we must, for the first time if we have never done so, believe in Jesus, put our trust in Jesus, come to Him in repentance and faith, embrace Him as our Savior.

[33 : 30] But then we must continue to feed on Him in our lives as believers. Which brings us finally and briefly to what we're describing as a wonderful outcome. In verses 54 to 56, we have that touched on. The question really that emerges is, what will happen if you eat the bread of life? What will be the outcome of believing in Jesus? What will be the result of eating what Jesus describes as real food and real drink? Well, the outcome of these things is that you will enjoy the reality of the astonishing promise that Jesus makes. You will know and experience eternal life.

And what is that? Well, in verse 56, we have the answer in a nutshell. Again, perhaps not exhaustive, but very much the heart of the matter. What does Jesus say?

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood, whoever believes in me, whoever trusts in me, remains in me, and I in him. And the language there of remaining in Jesus or abiding in Jesus and Jesus in us is the language of relationship. Eternal life is knowing God through Jesus. Indeed, that very definition we find in the same gospel, where in chapter 17 in verse 3 we read, now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. Eternal life involves entering into a relationship of friendship with God, secured by the death of Jesus on our behalf. It begins in the here and now. He who believes, he who eats, he who drinks, has eternal life, states Jesus. But it also looks forward to future greater and deeper communion with and enjoyment of God. I will raise him up at the last day. This is the wonderful outcome of taking Jesus at his word and eating of him. And this morning, Jesus continues to make this intriguing claim. He continues to offer and to present and to declare this astonishing promise, he who believes in me will never die. What will you do with this intriguing claim? What will you do with this promise that is given to you? Will you eat and be satisfied and know and enjoy the eternal life that he offers to all who do so? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this generous gift of your Son as bread from heaven, as bread that has been provided for us, that as we eat of it, so we would know eternal life, that we would know forgiveness of sins that opens up the door to friendship with yourself and communion with yourself. We thank you for the manner in which

Jesus helps us to understand what it is that he is saying and claiming and promising in these verses that we have been giving some thought to. We pray that by your Spirit you would enable us to understand, and as we understand, so to respond appropriately, that we would know what it is to embrace Jesus as our Savior, that we would know what it is to eat of Him and feed on Him. And these things we pray in His name. Amen. Well, let's close our service this morning by singing in Psalm 91. In the Scottish Psalter, we'll find that on page 351. Psalm 91, we'll sing verses 1 to 4, we'll sing to the tune Psalm 91.

Psalm 91. In the secret place of the most angry side, Under the shameful images, Almighty shall abide.

[38 : 18] For love the Lord, my God will save, He is my refuge still, He is my fortress and my God, And in Him trust I will.

But surely we shall be saved, And give deliverance from subtle flowers, Stayed and from the noisome bestsellers.

His sweater shall be like thy trust, Under His wings shall be, His faithfulness shall be achieved, And offer unto thee.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God, And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Be with us all now and always. Amen. Amen.

God bless you.