

“Whoever Feeds on This Bread Will Live Forever”

Feeling Defrauded

You know the sinking feeling when you’ve been taken. Something you thought was genuine turns out to be fake. The stone in your ring is not a real diamond. The phone you bought on eBay was stolen and locked and completely worthless. The person you contacted through an on-line dating service lied about important personal characteristics. When you meet, you feel duped. The promise you believed turned out to be empty words. We hate to be defrauded. Some victims online discover that promises of money, security, and friendship end up in sex slavery. The price of fraud can range from inconvenience to devastation.

What if life itself is fake? What if what we call life is not life at all? What if life is death? If you take Jesus seriously, this thought is not a “what if” but a reality. According to Jesus, life as we know it is not life in the true sense of the word. Life disconnected from God is death. Hear Jesus speak for himself. Turn in the Bible to John 6, beginning at v. 47. You’ll find this section of Jesus’ teaching beginning on p. 892 of the church Bible. In vv. 47-71 Jesus expounds on a subject he knows intimately. He created everything. He is the source and sustainer of all life. As I read these verses out loud, listen for the words “life, live, and living” or “die and death.”

John 6:47–71 (ESV) 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.” 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 the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. ⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” ⁶¹ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) ⁶⁵ And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” ⁶⁶ After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” ⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” ⁷¹ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

Fourteen times here Jesus speaks about life and living. Clearly, he's referring to more than biological life. Twenty-four sermons ago, at the start of this series in John, we referred to this kind of life as true life. Let's bring back that term to describe the kind of life that Jesus is describing here. This morning, let's consider why we need true life and what it is. Next week we will return to this passage to learn how we enjoy true life.

True Life: Why We Need It — Only Alternative is Death

We need true life because the only alternative to it is death. Jesus is not offering a kind of life that is simply better than other kinds of life. He is describing a life that makes every alternative death. He does not offer life that is 100% satisfying while other kinds of life are only 70% satisfying. He claims that, ultimately, there is no other life, only death. One path leads to life. All others lead to death. Jesus points to our need for this true life in two ways. First, he draws a contrast with wilderness manna.

Contrast with Wilderness Manna

Note John 6:49–50

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.

Jesus underscores the same contrast in v. 58 and reminds us what manna was.

⁵⁸ 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.”

Jesus is not saying that manna caused people to die, as if it were bad bread. The people of Israel survived forty years without planting crops because God sent them this manna. The manna was physically good for them. Yet most who ate it for forty years never escaped the wilderness. They never reached the promised land. They never enjoyed life beyond the wilderness because they failed to believe God. Without manna from God, they would have died in a few days. With the manna, they made it forty years. But, in the end, it didn't matter. They were dead to God. Even though they were hanging out with God's people, experiencing God's miraculous power and provision, they failed to find true life. God's physical blessing provided life from God but not life with God. They were not united to him by faith. Their hearts were hard toward him.

Their experience is a picture of our condition. This fallen world is a barren wilderness. It is a place of death. Each of us belongs to this world because we are all sinners. Unless God acts for us, unless he sends us living bread, we will perish in this wilderness. We will wander forever, lost and alone in hell, banished from the presence of God and the enjoyment of any blessing. Blessings from God in this life are not the sign that we have true life. It is tempting to think that, if God has healed me or prospered me, I must be a Christian. Do not be taken in by that deception. The second way that Jesus reveals our need for true life is to present himself as New Manna.

Christ the New Manna

Jesus is the better manna, the ultimate manna, the bread that does not bring death but always provides true life. Look again at v. 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.”

As the new manna, Jesus is the only living bread. In v. 53, he explains:

... “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.

There are no alternatives. It was possible to eat the old manna without faith. With Jesus, the new manna, eating is faith. As we will describe next week, eating and drinking Jesus is a metaphor for believing in him. It refers to a special union with Christ. It means trusting his words because they are life. Look at the last half of v. 63 and the first half of v. 64.

The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe.”

Hearing Christ’s words is not sufficient. You must receive them as the only words that can give life. Peter grasped this. In v. 68 he confesses that there is no alternative to Jesus as a source for the words of eternal life. Let me press this home with those of you here who are not Christians. You may be seeking life through alcohol, or hard work, or relationships. Any attempt to find life apart from Christ leads ultimately to death. In this wilderness of sin, you chase what looks to be a pool of refreshing water. But, it proves to be merely a mirage. You can scavenge for wilderness plants. But, no matter how good they taste, they contain deadly poison. Every path out of the wilderness, except for one, is a dead end. Refuse Christ and you reject life. We are not saying that this present life is not real or important. It is. The fact that we have life, yet long for true life, is evidence that this life is not all there is. We wonder. Yet we wander.

True Life: What It Is (Not)

This passage in John 6 highlights what true life is “not.” Let’s look at it from that perspective.

Not merely physical

True life is not merely physical. It is spiritual. It seems to offer a way to avoid physical death. In v. 50 eating the bread of true life means that you will not die. In vv. 51 & 58, this bread means that you will live forever. V. 54 adds that with this bread comes eternal life. Is this the secret of immortality? These verses do not teach that Christians will not die physically. Rather, Christ offers a quality of life that endures physical death and continues to live beyond it. True Life approaches the one-way door separating this life from the next with hope. Christians cannot avoid death. Fear will attack us when we face it. Christians feel sorrow when death divides us from loved ones. The Bible says that Christians grieve death and loss. But we grieve with hope not despair (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

One of the great benefits to Christian fellowship is that we help each other die well. One of my chief responsibilities as a pastor is to help you die well. We gather for worship to sing songs so that the promises of the gospel are burned into our memory as we approach death’s threshold. We preach God’s word so that it will be echoing through our hearts as we approach the banks of the river to cross into the promise land. We take seriously what Jesus says that we do not live bread alone but by every word proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). We remind each other that physical death is not the end but a beginning, a new phase of life that cannot end. Those who know how to die well know how to live well. The evangelist, Dwight Moody commented,

“Some day you will read in the papers, 'D. L. Moody of East Northfield is dead.' Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.... I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the Spirit in 1856. That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit will live forever.

Christians recognize death for what it is: a defeated enemy. It still inflicts damage. But it cannot destroy true life. Christians can sing the words of songwriter Andrew Peterson:

We are not alone
We are more than flesh and bone
What is seen will pass away
What is not is going home ...
You can lay me anywhere
But just remember this
When you lay me down to die
You lay me down to live

If you are a younger Christian here, let me encourage you to value the fellowship of older saints among us. Unless you suffer an untimely death, they are closer to death than you are. They know more about the traps that threaten us in this world. Their ears are better tuned to the songs from the other side.

Hark, I hear the harps eternal
Ringing on the farther shore,
As I near those swollen waters
With their deep and solemn roar.

Souls have crossed before me, saintly,
To that land of perfect rest;
And I hear them singing faintly
In the mansions of the blest.

In our youth we are sure that life must be nearly within our grasp. “Just let me grow up. Just let me get my education. Just let me get married. Just let me have children. Just let me have grandchildren. Just let me make enough money and retire. Just let me make a little more money. Then I will truly be living.” Older saints know better. It is a great mercy that the Lord keeps them with us. And we are poorer if we write them off because we have so much to do. Take time to visit with them. God will use them for your good.

True life is not merely physical. It transcends physical life. But let’s be careful not to think that eternal life is less than physical. Jesus teaches that true life points to resurrection.

John 6:54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

The Bible teaches that, when a Christian dies, he is away from the body (2 Corinthians 5:8). Peter refers to his immanent death, writing, “the putting off of my body will be soon” (2 Peter 1:14). At death, the body remains here and returns to dust. But, Paul adds in 2 Corinthians that, in spirit, a Christian is at home with the Lord after death. True life continues when this present life ends. But there is a last day coming. There is a resurrection ahead. Our bodies and spirits will be reunited. We will enter eternal life in a perfect union of glorified body and spirit which will never know pain or death. Those who hope in Christ join Paul in saying,

Philippians 3:20–21 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Our destiny in Christ is not to hover on a cloud as ghostlike spirits in formless space. No, heaven will come down to us and establish a whole new order in which we will enjoy life as we have never experienced before.

We will eat and drink and hug and sing in ways we have not yet enjoyed. We celebrated this last week when we answered the question: What hope does everlasting life hold for us? We gave this biblical answer:

It reminds us that this present fallen world is not all there is; soon we will live with and enjoy God forever in the new city, in the new heaven and the new earth, where we will be fully and forever freed from all sin and will inhabit renewed, resurrection bodies in a renewed, restored creation.

If you worry that eternity will be boring, look again at the Christian's destiny. True life is not merely physical, but it is not less than physical. In this passage there is another hint of what true life is not. It is:

Not provided by this world

Jesus emphasizes that the bread of true life must come down from heaven. It is not provided by this world. Survey the passage again. In v. 50, he states it in the present tense, "This is the bread that comes down from heaven." In the next verse, v. 51, he states the same truth in the past tense. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." In v. 57 he insists that his origins are with the Living Father who sent him from heaven. Even though his opponents thought that he was the son of Joseph (v. 42), Jesus claims to come from beyond this world. In v. 58 Jesus reiterates that he is "the bread that came down from heaven." He is the new manna. In v. 61, Jesus alludes to this fact that, when he completes his work in this world, he will ascend back to the Father where he was before. In v. 69, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Holy One of God or from God. He is not from this world so the true life that he offers is not provided by this world. Just as the manna in the wilderness was something other worldly, so the new manna is not something we can find in this creation.

This is an important reminder that Jesus does not come to make your life in this world better. He comes to offer you a completely different kind of life. Jesus is not a tool so that we can construct the life we want. He scraps our plans and constructs for us a completely new life. He gives us a new heart. He directs us toward a different purpose. He establishes new values for us. He transforms our affections. We hate what we once loved and love what we once hated. He gives us a life that is in no way dependent on this world so that we can engage the world to offer life, not try to find it here. In a third description of what true life is not, Jesus puts forward a paradox. True life is:

Not possible except through a death

Listen to Jesus speak in v. 51

John 6:51 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."

The verb "give" in this context carries more weight than we might first understand. He is not giving literal bread but he is giving his flesh. And how will he give it? He will be sacrificed. He will offer his flesh as a sacrificial lamb. Remember that John introduced Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). He will die so that we might have true life. That Jesus here refers to his death partly explains why his disciples were offended by his words (v. 61). They could not accept a suffering Messiah. They could not imagine that their Lord would have to die to give them what they need. They did not grasp that the sin which kept them from life had to be paid for.

Two implications are in order. First, here is the measure of Christ's love. Jesus not only experienced physical death on the cross. He experienced spiritual death. As a sacrifice, he took God's wrath against sin so that anyone who, by faith, will identify with his self-offering will enjoy life instead of death. The very author of life forfeits life, so that we who have chosen death might experience life as we have never known it before. We

spurn God's gifts in this life. He offered himself as a gift so that we could have new life. Does this kind of love move you? Can you walk away from this kind of love? Can you do anything except give yourself completely to this kind of love?

The second implication is that to have this life we must each drink Christ. We mentioned this a few weeks ago. This metaphor suggests that we admit that we are the ones who put Jesus to death. We chewed him up. We consumed him. Our sin means that we tore his flesh. We spilled his blood. You cannot enjoy true life unless you own the fact that your sin sent Jesus to the cross. Jesus' death becomes not merely a fact of history but a personal necessity. The Christian joyfully laments, "It was my sin that held him there / until it was accomplished / His dying breath has brought me life. / I know that it is finished." When we own his death, he offers us true life. And we understand a fourth description of what this life is not. It is:

Not produced in ourselves

All that we have said so far leads to this conclusion. True life is a gift. Do not miss the importance of v. 63.

John 6:63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

Jesus gives himself. The Spirit gives life in Christ. The flesh, that is our strength, is of no help at all when it comes to producing this life. The Holy Spirit gives this life. It is a gift. As we will see next week, we receive this life through faith. And this faith is itself God's gift through the Holy Spirit. If true life were about this physical life, we could work for it. But it would not be a gift. If it were in this world, we could discover it. But it would not be a gift. If we could pay for it with something other than the blood of Christ it would not be a gift. But it is. Receive it for what it is. Next week we will explain further what the Bible means by receiving true life. But do not miss the nature of this life. We do not produce it in ourselves. We do not discover it in this world. We cannot offer our own lives in exchange for it. We do not enter it by improving on our physical lives here and now. We receive true life as a gift that means for us a life that we have never known before. Christian, you who possess this life, your response must begin with humble gratitude. Let your heart overflow with thankfulness. Refuse to let anyone or anything that promises life take hold of your heart. Live from now on to please the One who died to give you life.

You who have not tasted this gift of life that only Christ can offer, consider the counterfeits you call life. Map the dead end of the path you now walk to find life. You can continue to eat your manna and you will die, forever. Or you can receive the New Manna, God's living bread, Jesus Christ and you will never die. Hear the cry of God's prophet.

Isaiah 55:1–3 "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! ... ²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live...."