

"What is Faith?"

John 6:25-40

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Text Comment

In v. 59 of this chapter, we learn that this great discourse, widely known as "The Bread of Life Discourse" was delivered in the synagogue at Capernaum. John does not tell us when the transition to the synagogue took place. Perhaps between vv. 27 and 28.

The Bread of Life Discourse is taken by many to be Jesus' teaching and John's teaching about the Lord's Supper. Especially, it is thought, verses 53-58 suggest a sacramental meaning to the Lord's teaching. Others point out problems. The Lord is here teaching Jews in Capernaum that know nothing of any Lord's Supper. Presumably he meant to teach them something that was meaningful to them. Further, there are significant differences. For example, Jesus speaks of eating his "flesh" here in John 6, not his "body", which is the term used in the institution of the Lord's Supper. And, what is more important still, what is promised to those who eat the flesh of the Lord and drink his blood is eternal life, which all through John is what is promised to those who believe in or receive Jesus Christ. Surely, Christian readers when John wrote his gospel would have thought of the Lord's Supper, when reading this discourse, but that does not mean that John or Jesus before him had the Lord's Supper primarily in view when this discourse was first spoken or first written in the Gospel. John is speaking, by means of powerful metaphors, of faith in Jesus Christ and the salvation that comes from it. That is also the meaning of the Lord's Supper, after all.

v.27 The Lord ignores their question and moves immediately to the important point and emphasizes it with the opening formula, "I tell you the truth..." The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 was a "sign", that is, it pointed to the meaning of Jesus and his role as the Savior of the world. The people loved being fed a miraculous meal, but they completely missed the meaning of the sign. They did not see Jesus as sent from the Father to save his people from their sins.

v.28 There are rabbinical passages in which heavenly food is taken to refer to the Law of Moses. The Jews may be thinking of what particular obedience to the law Jesus means when he speaks of doing the works of God.

v.29 The Lord sets them straight. There is one work that God requires (notice the singular; they had asked about works): faith in his Son.

v.30 Paul says, "The Jews demand a sign..." and here they are demanding one, even though they just witnessed a most stupendous sign.

v.31 Why the reference to manna? Was there thought that the manna kept coming for years in the wilderness and that Jesus, if he is a greater prophet than Moses, should do more than feed the crowd one time? The Messiah's works should be greater than Moses'. Jesus would only prove his messianic credentials by surpassing the miracle of Moses' day.

v.33 The bread they ought to be thinking of is not manna, which provides only earthly sustenance, but Jesus himself, the bread of God, that gives everlasting life.

v.34 Very reminiscent of the woman at the well who also did not understand the metaphor Jesus was using (4:15): "Sir give me this water so that I won't get thirsty..."

v.35 As in the case with the woman at the well, the Lord removes the misconception. He is the bread of life. The one who believes in him eats that bread and will live forever. That bread is not like the manna that had to be given again and again. The one who eats this bread will never go hungry again. The metaphor of thirst is added in anticipation of v. 53 and to emphasize the completeness of this provision of eternal life.

This is the first of seven similar "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John. There are clearly "overtones of divinity" [Morris] in these sayings, harking back to the Lord's identification of himself to Moses (Ex. 3:14) as "I am who I am."

v.36 He had already charged the Jews in Jerusalem with unbelief, and now he makes the same charge against the Galilean Jews. They saw what the Lord had done but did not understand what they were seeing, what the Lord's miracles meant, and how his teaching applied to them.

v.40 The unbelief of the Jews does not mean, however, that his mission is a failure. The Lord will bring his will to pass.

We have before us only the first part of the "Bread of Life Discourse" but enough of it to consider its great theme. And that theme is faith, faith in Jesus Christ and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. You have it in the thesis statement in v. 29: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." You have it again in v. 35, "he who believes in me..." and again in v. 40, "everyone who believes in him shall have eternal life."

We have, of course, had the subject of faith, or believing in Jesus introduced before this in the Gospel. Think, for example, of John 3:16: "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It is introduced still earlier as the theme of the Gospel in 1:12 ("as many as believed in him became the children of God") and the Gospel concludes with a summary of the same point ("these things were written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."). The Gospel of John is a book about believing in Jesus Christ - why you should and what you will receive if you do!

But not until now, not until the Bread of Life Discourse, does John attempt an elaboration of what it means to believe in Jesus. "Faith" and "Believing" are key words in the Gospel and in the Bible. It is vitally important that we know precisely what they mean! This discourse is a study in the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ. Here we have as close to a definition of faith as we will be given in the Gospel and it comes in a series of series of synonyms for "faith" and "believing" that gives us a picture of what is meant by believing in Jesus. To believe in Jesus, we read in vv. 35 and 37 is "to come to" him. In v. 40, "to look to" Jesus is equivalent to believing in him.

And, then, of course, having identified himself as the Bread of Life, Jesus is obviously, by implication, likening faith in him to eating this bread and, in v. 35, to drinking either Christ as living water or Christ's blood. What is implied in this way will be made explicit in vv. 53ff.

All of these are different metaphors for the same thing: faith in Jesus Christ. And such metaphors are one of the Bible's characteristic methods of elaborating the nature and meaning of faith.

Bishop Ryle wrote once of faith as "the hand" by which we lay hold of Christ (Heb. 6:18); "the eye" by which we look to him (John 3:14-15; Heb. 12:2); "the mouth" by which we feed on him (John 6); and "the foot" by which we run to him (Prov. 18:10). So faith is the hand, the eye, the mouth, the foot of the soul. It is the means, therefore, by which the soul commits itself to Jesus and betakes itself of Jesus. Elsewhere faith is said to be receiving Jesus, holding fast to Jesus, trusting in Jesus, and looking to Jesus.

In all of these representations faith is taught to be our understanding of and agreement with God's way of salvation through Jesus Christ and our taking him and his salvation for ourselves. The author of Hebrews defines faith as being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see, namely, that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (11:1, 6). That means that faith in Jesus Christ is to believe that Jesus is God the Son, that we believe he was sent by the Father into the world to save his people from their sins, that we believe by coming to him, counting on him, loving him, following him, and doing what he says, we shall have his salvation and live forever. We cannot see any of this with our physical eyes, but we know it to be true and we act upon that knowledge! Faith is taking God and Christ at their word and living in the confidence of that truth.

As Alexander Whyte put it: "Faith in its most elementary sense, faith in its first and foundation sense, simply means the reliance placed by one man on the truthfulness and power of another. You make a statement of fact to me or give me a promise and offer an assurance and faith is that state of mind in me to you, that state of mind in me which accepts your statement and relies on your promise." [Sermons 1881-1882, 68]

And what makes faith [in] Christ such a revolution in one's life, why faith so transforms one's loves and hatreds, one's attitudes, one's deepest convictions, and, therefore, one's behavior root and branch, is that the one in whom we are placing this trust is none other than God the Son. The promise he has made to us is none other than eternal life, the work that he has performed for us and in which we trust for our salvation is nothing less than his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, and the origin of all of that is his and his Father's great love for us and determination to save us from the doom we brought down upon ourselves by our sin. What we are embracing when we put faith in Jesus Christ are the most stupendous things in the world, the greatest things that have ever occupied the mind or stirred the heart of a human being.

See how dramatic, how evocative of complete commitment and consecration all these metaphors are that John uses: coming to Christ, looking to Christ, eating and drinking Christ. Faith amounts to uniting our hearts and lives with his, our purpose with his, our love with his, our hopes and dreams with his. We become by faith, his brethren, his servants, his soldiers, his subjects, and the children of his Father in heaven. This faith is obviously no merely peripheral interest of one's life. If you

have it, it controls you! Our entire lives, therefore, are redefined, redirected, indeed, recreated, because we believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he came into the world to save sinners, and that those who trust in him will live forever.

That is what people usually don't realize about faith - how comprehensive a commitment it entails. This was the Jews' difficulty. It is this that kept them from believing in Jesus even though they had themselves witnessed his breathtaking miracles. It was precisely the life-transforming implications of such a belief, such a trust, such a coming to Christ that proved the insurmountable obstacle. To confess Jesus as the Son of God and Creator of heaven and earth must mean that one stands ready to obey him and serve him. To confess Jesus as the only Savior of sinful men and women must mean that one is ready to forsake all others - including oneself - to cleave only to Christ. To confess Jesus as the one sent from heaven must mean that we owe him an incalculable debt of love for which we have nothing to make in payment except our very lives. The Jews were unwilling to embrace these conclusions and so refused to put their faith in Jesus Christ. The soul is a most rigorous logician when it comes to working out the implications of faith in Jesus Christ.

We sometimes speak as if faith were an easy thing, as if the good news is the fact that instead of working our way to heaven we have only to believe! We think, perhaps, that Christ's gift to us was to lower the bar and to make entrance into heaven much easier by making it a matter only of faith and not of works. Some theologians of the Arminian school have actually taught that! They have taught that Christ died on the cross in order to remove the need for us to obey all God's commandments for salvation, leaving but one we must obey if we are to be saved: the command to believe in Christ. But that is no help! The fact is, faith is the most difficult thing in all the world. In that view Christ would have robbed us of the easier way to heaven and left us with the most difficult way! Indeed, no human being is capable of this true faith in Jesus Christ without the powerful working of God within him or her. That point is going to be made with emphasis as the discourse continues. More about that next time.

Hear me, even well-intentioned Christians sometimes can allow themselves to think of faith as the means of our salvation in Christ precisely because it is so much easier than works would be. But faith is not easier than works. Both are impossible to us. Both are entirely beyond our powers apart from the grace and working of God for us and in us.

Indeed, if Christians think about it just a little they will realize how high, how impossibly high the demand of faith really is and how little even as Christians they meet that demand. How much and how well do, even you Christians of many years and much experience, really believe in Jesus Christ? How much faith do you put in Jesus in a day? For example, how present to your mind is the knowledge of what he has told you? How convinced are you of what he said? How much credit do you place in what he has promised you? Do you live moment by moment conscious of his presence, of his love? He told you that he would never leave you or forsake you. Is it obvious from your life that you are absolutely convinced of that? Do you live every day in the light of the fact that he has told you that you must appear before him at the end of days to give an account of the deeds done in your body, whether good or evil? Is there a spring in your step and joy in your heart day after day because of the unsearchable riches of Christ's grace to you? Is it obvious, so obvious we could all observe it, that you know full well that with Christ you can do anything? Or that his strength is made perfect in your weakness? Or that he ever lives to intercede for you? Or that he is coming

soon to judge the living and the dead? How decidedly, how wonderfully different our lives would be if we just had more faith -- if we lived in the conviction that Christ was with us as he promised to be, that God loves us as he has told us he does, that he will reward obedience, punish disobedience, that we can do all things through him and soon. But we have little faith most of the time. And we are Christians! Nay, you and I would scarcely recognized ourselves if we really lived by faith every day!

You see, faith is not an easy thing, nor a simple thing. It is the most difficult and demanding thing there is - to live in the absolute confidence of the presence, the word, and the promise of an unseen God! This is why relatively few people have such faith in our world. Samuel Rutherford wrote to one of his correspondents, "I find true religion [-- he might as well have said "faith" --] to be a hard task; I find heaven hard to be won." Chesterton put it more tartly. "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." But where is the difficulty? It is faith itself. Keeping the commandments of God is not the hard part of Christianity. Let there be sufficient faith and the obedience will come apace. The hard work of Christianity, the real obstacle is just the difficulty it is for us to offer to Christ a genuine, strong, sturdy, and steady faith! It is at the beginning of the Christian life, it is so at the very end.

John Bunyan, in a magnificent passage in his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* [paragr. 215] tells us of the struggle he had to believe early on in his Christian life, the struggle to be sure of Christ's love for him. It had to do, he says, with a verse we read this morning, John 6:37: "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

"This Scripture did also most sweetly visit my soul, 'And him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.' ...But Satan would greatly labor to pull this promise from me, telling of me that Christ did not mean me... If ever Satan and I did strive for any word of God in all my life, it was for this good word of Christ; he at one end and I at the other. Of, what work did we make! ... he pulled and I pulled; but, God be praised, I got the better of him..."

Really to believe that Christ has accepted you, knowing what you know about yourself... How difficult that is for some people! Really to believe that your faith is of no worth or consequence if you do not live faithfully before the Lord... How difficult that is for some people! The Devil has two great lies and they are so much easier to believe than the truth of God. The first lie, the lie he told to Adam and Eve in the garden is "You surely shall not die!" Your sins are not that serious, you have nothing to fear from them, there is no need to take God and his word so seriously!

But, if he is unable finally to convince a person of that, and finds a person still looking to Christ for salvation, he uses his second big lie: that, while Christ might save some people, he certainly will not save you; not a person as bad, as ungrateful, as unable to surmount your sins, as unworthy of his love and favor as you. It is this second lie that got him his infamous nickname: "The Accuser of the Brethren."

Many of you will have heard the celebrated name of Joseph Butler, the famous Bishop Butler who wrote the *Analogy of Religion*, the 18th century's greatest defense of Christianity, especially against deism, Christianity's greatest contemporary challenge in those days. Butler was the C.S.

Lewis or Francis Schaeffer of his day, though not so good a theologian! For years he was a bishop in the Church of England and once declined an offer to be archbishop. So here we have a defender of Christianity, a bishop and great man of the church, and man who had spent his entire life in the service of the Lord Jesus. But, at the end of his life, the doubts came. There is a famous record of a deathbed conversation between Butler and his chaplain. Only in the Church of England would a bishop have his own chaplain!

At any rate, Butler said to his chaplain, "Though I have endeavored to avoid sin, and to please God to the utmost of my power, yet, from the consciousness of perpetual infirmities [he means his continuing sinfulness], I am still afraid to die. 'My Lord,' said the chaplain, 'you have forgotten that Jesus Christ is a Saviour.' 'True,' replied Bishop Butler, 'but how shall I know He is a Saviour for me?' 'My Lord, it is written, "Him that cometh unto me, I will in nowise cast out.'" 'True,' said Butler, 'and I am surprised that though I have read that Scripture a thousand times over, I never felt its virtue till this moment. And now I die happy.'"

There is the difficulty of faith. Even an experienced churchman has a hard time really believing the truth of something Jesus said. And there is the power of faith. It makes a person ready to die. I found another illustration to the same point.

James Durham, the covenanter minister and author of some of the most celebrated works of 17th century Scottish theology. On his deathbed, under a great cloud of uncertainty, he said to his friend, the covenanter minister, John Carstares, "Brother, for all that I have preached and written, there is but one promise to which I can now dare to grip; tell me if I am safe to lay the whole weight of my salvation upon that promise. The only Scripture promise I can remember, or can get a good hold of, is this: 'Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.' 'Sir,' Carstares replied, 'you may depend upon that promise, though you had a thousand salvations to hazard.'" [Whyte, Bunyan Characters, iv, 182-183]

There again, the difficulty and the power of faith, and its nature: "one promise to which I can now dare to grip." "Grip" is the idea; laying hold for oneself; holding on to for dear life; refusing to let go. Let a person believe in Christ that way and he will find faith, even faith as a grain of mustard seed, lifting him up from this benighted world all the way to the heavenly country. "Do you believe the promises of God?" Isaac Watts was asked on his deathbed. "I believe them enough to venture an eternity on them." [Toplady, Works, 487]

Oh, no. Don't make the mistake of thinking that faith is a small thing, an easy thing, a lighter thing than works. Faith is the weightiest thing in the world. I'll let my hero, Alexander Whyte, have the last word.

"Give me a passionate man, a hot-headed man, and one that is headstrong and unmanageable; and with faith as a grain of mustard seed, I will, by degrees, make that man as quiet as a lamb. Then give me a covetous man, and avaricious man, a miserly man; and with a little faith working like leaven in his heart, I will yet make him a perfect spendthrift for the church of Christ and for the poor. Then give me one who is mortally afraid of pain; and one who all his days is in bondage through fear of death; and let the spirit of faith once enter and take its seat in his heart and in his imagination, and he shall in a short time, despise all your crosses and flames.... Then show me a

man with an unclean heart and I will undertake, by his faith in Christ, to make him whiter than snow, till he will not know himself to be the same man." [Bunyan Characters, iv, 109-11]

And why is that? Because faith is the rope that ties us to Jesus Christ, the chain that binds us to him, the current through which his power and grace are transferred to our hearts and lives, the hand by which we walk hand in hand with him through this world.