

# The Galilean Crisis

## *Section 3 - The Sermon*

### *John 6:22-65*

The task that lies before us now is to study the unforgettable address on the *Bread of Life* that Jesus delivered in the synagogue in Capernaum. At the time, it offended many people. And ever since, it has been a stumbling block, the subject of controversy, and a cause of division in the church. From all outward appearances, it will continue to be so until the end of the world. The meaning of this discourse raises troubling questions. Some people are afraid of entering into a discussion about its meaning. But the very confusion that surfaces here points to our responsibility to disregard the turmoil brought about by conflicting interpretations and to humbly pray that God would teach us. We ought to search for and set forth Christ's own mind.

No matter how strange it may sound, the sermon on the *Bread of Life* was appropriate - both in its subject matter and manner in which it was given, and in the circumstances in which it was delivered. It was natural and timely that Jesus spoke to the people about the food that endures to everlasting life. He had just miraculously provided perishable food to satisfy their physical needs. It was natural and timely that He spoke on this significant topic in such a startling, apparently coarse, harsh style. The way He was thinking suited the situation. The Passover was approaching when the paschal lamb would be slain and eaten. Jesus wanted to say, "I am the true Paschal Lamb." What better way could He have said it than this: "...the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh" (John 6:51). The style He used was also adapted to the feelings He had at that moment. Jesus was in a sad, sober mood when He preached this sermon. The foolish enthusiasm of the crowd had saddened Him. Their desire to put a crown on His head by force made Him think of His cross. For He knew that the idolatrous devotion they had to a political Messiah meant death sooner or later for Him since He refused such carnal worship. Therefore, He spoke in the synagogue of Capernaum with Calvary in sight. He presented Himself as the life of the world in terms which were applicable to a sacrificial victim: Blood is shed and the flesh is eaten by those who present the offering. He did not mince His words. Everything was said in the strongest and most intense manner possible.

The theme of this memorable message was introduced in a natural way. Jesus had just finished speaking with the people who came from the other side of the Sea of Galilee. They were hoping

to find Him in Capernaum, the place where He usually stayed (John 6:24). They warmly asked Him how He had gotten there. He responded with a chilling observation about the true motive for their zeal and an exhortation to set their hearts on a higher food than the kind which perishes (John 6:26-27). The people who heard Him understood the exhortation as counsel to cultivate godliness. So they asked Him what they should do so they might work the works of God (i.e., please God; John 6:28). Jesus replied by declaring that the great test at this time was to receive Him as the One whom God had sent (John 6:29). This led them to demand evidence in support of this high claim to be the Messiah on a divine mission. The miracle He had just performed on the other side of the sea was great, but not great enough to justify such high-minded claims. At least, this is the way they thought. In ancient times, a whole nation had been fed for many years with bread that was brought down from heaven by Moses. What was the recent miracle compared to that? He must show a sign on a far grander scale if He wanted them to believe that One greater than Moses was here (John 6:30-31). Jesus accepted the challenge. He boldly declared that the manna - wonderful as it was - was not the true heavenly bread. There was another bread. The manna was only a type (or, prefiguring) of this bread. It was like it in that both of them came down from heaven (John 6:33). But it was unlike the manna in this respect: It did not only give life to a nation, but to the whole world; and it gave life, not just for a few short years, but for all eternity. This announcement was similar to the one He gave to the woman of Samaria concerning the wonderful water of life. It stirred up desire in the hearts of those who heard. They exclaimed, "Lord, evermore give us this bread" (John 6:34). Then Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

In these words, Jesus briefly spelled out the doctrine of the true bread. He went into greater detail as He brought the teaching into His unforgettable message in Capernaum. The doctrine, as stated, sets forth what the true bread is, what it does, and how it is appropriated.

### ***What the True Bread Is***

The true bread is the One who speaks about it in this text - Jesus Christ. "I am the bread." This assertion implies that the speaker is claiming He descended from heaven. This kind of descent is one of the characteristics by which the true bread is defined (John 6:33). Therefore, we find Jesus, in the sequel to His discourse, clearly asserting that He had come down from heaven (John 6:38,51,58,62). The people understood this statement in a supernatural sense but was the first thing in His message with which they disagreed. "The Jews therefore were grumbling about Him, because He said, 'I am the bread that came down out of heaven.' And they were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven?'" (John 6:41-42). It would have been natural for them to murmur if they did not know or believe that there was anything out of line with the way Jesus came

into the world. For the language that He uses here could not be used without blasphemy by a mere man who had been born like other men. It is the proper language to use - but only in the mouth of a Divine Being who assumed human nature for a purpose.

In presenting Himself as the bread who came down from heaven, Jesus virtually taught the doctrine of the incarnation. The solemn claim, "I am the bread of life," is just as significant as the one made by the apostle John about the One who spoke these words: "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

However, it is not only in His incarnation that the Son of God is the bread of eternal life. Bread must be broken in order for it to be eaten. The Incarnate One must die as a sacrificial victim so that people may truly feed upon Him. The Word which became flesh and was crucified in the flesh is the life of the world. Jesus went on to declare this special truth after He had stated the general truth that the heavenly bread could only be found in Himself. He said, "...the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh" (John 6:51). The language used here is modified to suit the new twist in thinking. "I am" becomes "I will give," and "bread" is transformed into "flesh."

It is evident that Jesus is referring to His death, but those who heard Him speak did not understand this. However, there is no doubt about what He meant. The verb "give," which suggests a sacrificial act, and the future tense both point to His death. The words were dark and mysterious before He died - clear as day after. In them, Jesus declares the great truth that His death is to be the life of people. His broken body and shed blood are to be like food and drink to a perishing world. They bestow the gift of immortality on all who partake of them. He does not explain, at this time, how He is to die nor why His death possesses such virtue. The Capernaum message does not mention a cross. It does not contain a theory of the atonement. The time has not come for these details. It simply asserts in broad, strong terms that the flesh and blood of the incarnate Son of God, severed in death, are the source of eternal life.

When Jesus mentioned that His flesh was the bread from heaven, those who heard Him grumbled once again. "The Jews therefore began to argue with one another, saying, 'How can this man give us His flesh to eat?'" (John 6:52). Jesus had not yet told them that His flesh must be eaten, but they took it for granted that this is what He meant. They were right. In response, He went on to say with the greatest seriousness and emphasis, that they must even eat His flesh and drink His blood. Unless they did that, they would have no life inside them. If they did, they would have life in all of its fullness - eternal life both in body and in soul. For His flesh was the true food, and His blood was the true drink. Those who received these would share in His own life. He would live in them, incorporated with their very being. And they would dwell in Him

as the foundation of their being. Because of Him, they would live securely in the face of death, just as He lived from everlasting to everlasting by the hand of the Father. Jesus concluded His message with the proposition with which He began: "This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate, and died; he who eats this bread shall live forever" (John 6:58).

The people made a third disapproving remark which led Jesus to finish His teaching on the high doctrine of the bread of life. He made a concluding comment that, at the time, must have been the most mysterious and unintelligible of all the ones He had ever said. It was this: The bread which descended from heaven must ascend there again, in order to be - to the full extent - the bread of everlasting life. Does this offend you? He asked His hearers. Does what I have been saying to you about your eating my flesh and drinking My blood offend you? What will you say "if you should behold the Son of Man ascending where He was before?" (John 6:62). The question, in effect, was an affirmation. It was also a prophetic hint: Only after He had left the world would He become a source of life to people on an extensive scale. It would be apparent to all. For then the manna of grace would not just begin to descend on the wilderness of Israel. It would descend on all the barren places of the earth. And the truth in Him - the doctrine of His life, death, and resurrection - would become the true food and drink for a multitude of people, not for murmuring hearers, but for devout, enlightened, thankful believers. No one would need to ask for a sign any longer when he could find in the Christian church - continuing steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in breaking bread, and in prayers - the best evidence that Jesus had spoken truth when He said, "I am the bread of life."

### ***What the True Bread Does***

This, then, is the heavenly bread: the God-man who was incarnate, crucified, and glorified. Let us now consider with greater attention the marvelous virtue of this bread. It is the bread *of life*. It is the function of all bread to sustain life, but this divine bread is unique in that it gives eternal life. "...he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). He called the bread about which He spoke the *living bread* because of its life-giving power. It was, in truth, real food. This led Jesus to declare that the one who ate it would not die, but would live forever (John 6:50-51,54).

When Jesus was recommending this miraculous bread to His hearers, He especially stressed its power to give eternal life, even to the body of man. Four times He used specific terms to declare that everyone who ate this bread of life would be raised again on the last day (John 6:39,40, 44,54). So Jesus gives a prominent place to the resurrection of the body. This is due, in part, to the fact that throughout His message He was contrasting the manna which fed the Israelites in the desert with the true bread. The manna was a type (foreshadowing) of the true bread. The contrast between the two was most striking at this point. The manna was only a substitute for

ordinary food. It had no power to ward off death. The generation that had been so miraculously fed passed away from the earth just like all the other generations of people. Therefore, Jesus argued, it could not be the true bread from heaven. For the true bread must be capable of destroying death and giving the recipients the power of an endless existence. Any person who eats of the true bread will not die (spiritually); or in dying (physically), he will rise again. "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die" (John 6:49-50).

The prominence which is given to the resurrection of the body is due primarily to its true importance. For if the dead do not rise, then our faith is vain, and the bread of life degenerates into a quack scheme which pretends to have virtues that it does not possess. True, it may still give spiritual life to those who eat it, but what is that without the hope of life for all eternity? Not much, according to Paul. He says, "If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied" (I Cor. 15:19). Many in our day do not agree with the Apostle's judgment. They think the doctrine of everlasting life can be left out of the creed without loss to the Christian faith. They would even go so far as to say it could be left out of the creed altogether. To them, the life of a Christian seems so much nobler when every thought about a future reward or punishment is dismissed from the mind. How noble - to travel through the wilderness of this world feeding on the manna supplied in the high, pure teaching of Jesus without caring whether there is a land of Canaan on the other side of the Jordan River! A very lofty idea! But why, in this situation, come into the wilderness at all? Why not remain in Egypt, feeding on more substantial and tasty foods? The children of Israel would not have left the house of bondage unless they had hoped to reach the promised land. An immortal hope is equally necessary for the Christian. He must believe in a world to come in order to live above the present evil world. If Christ cannot redeem the body from the power of the grave, then it is vain for Him to promise to redeem us from guilt and sin. The bread of life is unworthy of the name unless it has the power to deal with physical as well as with moral corruption.

This is why Jesus gives such prominence in this discourse to the resurrection of the body. He knew that this was where the crucial experiment by which the value and virtue of the bread He offered to His hearers must be tested. "You call this bread the bread of life, in contrast to the manna of ancient times. Do You mean to say that it will give those who eat it the gift of a blessed immortality, like the tree of life in the garden of Eden?" "Yes, I do," replied the Preacher (in response to this imaginary question). He continues: "This bread I offer you will not only take the soul to a higher, purer life, but will also revive your bodies, and make the corruptible put on incorruption, and the mortal put on immortality."

### *How the True Bread is Appropriated*

Then how is this wonderful bread to be appropriated so that one may experience its invigorating influences? Bread, of course, is eaten. But what does eating in this situation mean? It means, in one word, faith. “He who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Eating Christ’s flesh and drinking His blood, as well as drinking the water (see John 4:10 for Jesus’ comment to the woman at the well), all signify believing in Him as He is offered to people in the gospel. He is the Son of God who is manifested in the flesh, crucified, raised from the dead, ascended into glory. He is the Prophet, Priest, King, and Mediator between God and man. Throughout this discourse in Capernaum, eating and believing are used interchangeably. So, in one sentence we find Jesus saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life” (John 6:47-48). Shortly afterward, He remarked, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he shall live forever” (John 6:51). If additional arguments were needed to justify the truth that eating and believing are one and the same thing, it might be found in the instruction given by the Preacher to His hearers before He began to speak about the bread of life: “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29). That sentence furnishes the key to the interpretation of the whole subsequent message. “Believe,” Jesus said. This was His answer to the question posed to Him: “What shall we do that we might work the works of God?” Jesus responds, “Believe, and you have done God’s work.” “Believe,” we may understand Him to say as He responds to the question, “How shall we eat this bread of life?” “Believe, and you have eaten.”

Believe, and you have eaten. This was the formula that Augustine used to express his view of Christ’s meaning in the Capernaum message. In our judgment, the saying is not only brief, but true. But it has not been accepted by all interpreters. Many hold that eating and faith are something distinct. They would express the relationship between them in this way: “Believe and you will eat.” Even Calvin objected to the Augustinian formula. He distinguishes his own views from those held by the followers of Zwingli by saying, “To them, to eat is simply to believe. I say that Christ’s flesh is eaten in believing because it is made ours by faith, and that eating is the fruit and effect of faith. Or more clearly: To them eating is faith; to me it seems rather to follow from faith.”

The distinction that Calvin makes between eating and believing seems to have been verbal rather than real. Other theologians feel differently about it. Those who hold to the magical doctrines of transubstantiation (literally: to change one substance into another; this view teaches that the bread and wine literally turn into the body and blood of Christ) and consubstantiation (the bread and wine exist after consecration, side by side with the substance of the body and blood of Christ but is not changed into them) fight for the literal interpretation of the Capernaum discourse even in its strongest statements. Eating Christ’s flesh and drinking His blood are, for

these people, acts of the mouth. Perhaps they are accompanied with acts of faith, but not only acts of faith. For the most part, it is assumed that the discourse which is recorded in John 6 has reference to the sacrament of the Supper. And only on the hypothesis of this kind of reference can one explain the unique phraseology of the discourse. Christ spoke then of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. We are told that the reason He did this was because He had in His mind the Lord's Table which would be instituted later. Here, the bread and wine would not only represent, but become, the elements of His crucified body.

While the sermon on the bread of life continues to be mixed up with sacramentarian controversies, agreement in its interpretation is almost hopeless. Meanwhile, till a better day dawns on a divided and distracted church, every person must try to be fully persuaded in his own mind. Three things are clear to us. First, it is incorrect to say that the sermon which was delivered in the Capernaum synagogue refers to the sacrament of the Supper. The truth is that both refer to a third thing, namely, the death of Christ. Both declare, in different ways, the same thing. The sermon says in symbolic words what the Supper says in a symbolic act: Christ crucified is the life of men, the world's hope of salvation. The sermon says more than this, because it speaks of Christ's ascension as well as of His death; but it says this for one thing.

A second point about which we are clear is that it is unnecessary to assume that Christ had the Holy Supper in mind when He gave the discourse in order to account for the uniqueness of His language. As we noted at the beginning, the whole discourse arose naturally out of the present situation. When the people mentioned the manna, it naturally led Jesus to speak on the bread of life. And from the bread, He went on to speak very naturally about the flesh and the blood. He could not fully be bread until He had become flesh and blood that had been torn apart (i.e., until He had endured death). All that we find in this passage could have been said if the sacrament of the Supper had never existed. The Supper is of use not so much for interpreting the sermon as for establishing its credibility as an authentic saying of Jesus. There is no reason to doubt that the One who instituted the symbolical feast could also have preached this symbolical sermon.

The third truth which shines as clear as a star to one's eye is this: Through faith alone we may attain all blessings of salvation. Sacraments are very useful, but they are not necessary. If it had pleased Christ not to institute them, we could have gotten to heaven anyway. Because He has instituted them, it is our duty to celebrate them, and we can expect benefits by celebrating the Supper. But the benefit we receive is simply an aid to faith and nothing which cannot be received by faith. Christians eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man at all times - not only at communion - simply by believing in Him. They eat His flesh and drink His blood at His table with the same meaning as at other times. Perhaps they do so with more enthusiasm, their hearts being stirred up to devotion by remembering His dying love. Their faith is aided by seeing, handling, and tasting the bread and the wine.