

YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE

John 6:41-71

Key Verse: 6:68

“Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”

In the first part of chapter 6 Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. Jesus revealed his compassion and power as God. Jesus wanted them to accept him as the Messiah. But they did not get the main point. Instead, they wanted Jesus to promise them free bread for the rest of their lives. They were like many modern people who want to retire at age 35 and enjoy a life of ease and pleasure. Jesus did not give them more bread. Instead, Jesus told them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus wanted to give them himself and thus, eternal life.

In today’s passage the crowd rejects Jesus’ word. In response, Jesus teaches them all over again in more detail, with fuller explanation. Jesus is more than gracious. Still, most of them reject his word. Even many disciples rejected Jesus’ word. But Jesus did not compromise with them. Finally, one person, Peter, accepted Jesus’ word of eternal life. Let’s accept Jesus’ words of eternal life, like Peter did.

First, listen to the Father, learn from him, and come to Jesus (41-46).

Look at verses 41-42. “At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, ‘I came down from heaven.’ They said, ‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, “I came down from heaven?”’” How their opinion of Jesus has changed! When Jesus gave them bread and fish free of charge, they were ready to declare Jesus king (15). It was because they hoped Jesus would feed them continually, as they thought Moses had fed their forefathers in the desert. They seemed willing to do anything for Jesus. However, when Jesus clearly refused their demand, saying, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven,” they changed their attitude. They began to disparage Jesus as nothing more than an ordinary human being. When they could not get what they wanted they became unbelieving. They spoke of the Son of God with no respect and no spiritual sense at all. Jesus is the best Bible teacher. In fact, Jesus is God. Yet even Jesus had to endure such humiliation when demanding people did not get what they wanted. The same thing happens in our time. There have been so many who wanted to obtain a marriage partner in UBF. At the time, they seemed most cooperative and spiritual. But when they did not get what they wanted, they suddenly changed their attitude and became like enemies. When we think of such people, we do not want to see them again. How did Jesus handle this?

Jesus first rebuked their grumbling spirit: “Stop grumbling among yourselves” (43). It was to open their hearts to his teaching. Then he explained God’s work in more detail and repeated his main point all over again. Look at verse 44. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.” Jesus deeply acknowledged God’s sovereignty in drawing people to him. Of course, Jesus did his best to teach the word of God to anyone and everyone who came to him. But the fruit of a deep and lasting commitment to Jesus required more than Jesus’ teaching; it required the Father’s work to draw people. We experience this every time there is a conference or Christmas worship service. We invite many people. We do our best to make sure they have rides and the way is prepared. But in the end, God sends whom he wants to send. God is sovereign in bringing people to salvation. Then, is it God’s fault if someone is not drawn to Jesus? Should we just sit down and say, “Well, I can’t come to Jesus unless God draws me.” No. God draws people through his word. And each person is responsible for their own response to God’s word. Look at verse 45. “It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.” God speaks to each of us personally through his word. Anyone who studies the Bible sincerely, with a learning mind, will come to Jesus. They will accept Jesus as the Messiah.

There is a Jewish man named Zvi who endured the Holocaust of World War II in Nazi-occupied Poland. He suffered unbearably as a young boy, being separated from his family members and having to overcome miserable conditions and the brutality of war. After it was over, he joined the Jewish resettlement of Israel. Someone gave him a Bible and he read the Old Testament, then the New Testament, not knowing that Jews do not believe the New Testament. Afterward, he simply accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah. Later someone said, “Did you become a Christian?”

He answered, “No, I am not a Christian. I am a Jew who has found the Messiah.” When he studied the Bible with a desire to learn from God he found Jesus as the Messiah.

Here we must think about what kind of attitude we have toward the word of God. Jesus assures us that everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him will come to Jesus and have salvation. No one can blame God for not working in them. Rather, it is up to each of us to approach the word of God with reverence and to listen to and learn from the word of God. They say that Dr. Billy Graham has had a great learning mind toward the word of God. Once he was asked, “Dr. Graham, do you really believe that story in the Bible that a great fish swallowed Jonah?” Dr. Graham replied, “Yes, I do. In fact, I would believe it if the Bible said that Jonah swallowed the great fish. The Bible is the word of God.” Do we honor the Bible as God’s word speaking to us? Do we study the Bible with a desire to learn from God? As we begin 2005, may God help each of us to make new decisions to study the word of God with a learning mind. God’s word leads us to Jesus.

Second, Jesus says again, “I am the bread of life” (47-51a).

Then what does Jesus do for those who come to him? Look at verses 47-48. “I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life.” Jesus gives everlasting life to those who believe in him. Some people think of everlasting life as a vague concept. Some think it is like having fire insurance—it does not seem useful during ordinary times, only when there is a fire. They think, “I will need eternal life in the future to avoid the fire of hell.” However, everlasting life is much more than that. It is God’s life in us. It satisfies the deepest longing of our souls and meets our deepest need. Frankly, life is short. Last week, I visited my hometown for the first time in 21 years. It had changed so much that I could not recognize it. One of my best friends in high school now has so many gray hairs that he looks like a great grandfather. I had to admit that time is passing by quickly and in one direction only. If we face the brevity of life without Christ, we become nervous and anxious. Many become selfish and evil. But when we have everlasting life, we are free from anxiety. We can have God’s peace. We can have true joy in our souls. Even in the midst of human tragedy we can have an anchor for the soul that gives us assurance and calmness. We can thank God. We can be a blessing to others. Everlasting life is the best gift that Jesus could give.

However, it is hard for people to realize this when they are fixated on material things. The people Jesus confronted were convinced that bread would solve their problem. So Jesus told them in verse 49, “Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died.” No matter how much bread a person eats, he will still die. No one ever gained eternal life from bread. Nor can we buy eternal life with money. Even so, many people in our time think that money will solve all of their problems. There is a new movie about Howard Hughes. He was once the richest man in the world. Many envied him. But money did not make him happy. Great wealth did not comfort his soul before the power of death. In fact, he was so fearful of invisible germs that it drove him mad. In the end, he died all alone and most miserably. We must admit that our fundamental problem is the death problem. Only Jesus can save us from death by giving us everlasting life.

In verses 50-51a, Jesus repeats the teaching that he is the source of everlasting life. If Jesus’ message had subtitles, it might be, “Part I: ‘I am the bread of life.’ Part II: ‘I am the bread of life.’” Why does Jesus repeat this again and again? It is because materialism is deeply rooted in people’s hearts. Overcoming materialism by faith requires tremendous struggle for each human being. Even those who have followed Jesus for a long time must continually struggle to live by faith, overcoming materialism. May God help us to accept Jesus’ word, “I am the bread of life.”

Third, Jesus said, “this bread is my flesh” (51b-60).

In verse 51b Jesus explains more in detail how he is the bread of life. Jesus says, “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” When Jesus said this, he was referring to his suffering and death on the cross. Jesus gave his body as a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus shed his holy blood to cleanse us from sin. Jesus’ words were to be taken spiritually. But those whose minds were stuck on material things only understood literally. They assumed Jesus was advocating cannibalism. So they began to argue about it.

Look at verse 53. “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’” Jesus emphasizes the absolute necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Jesus’ death is the only solution for our sin problem. Without solving the sin problem we have no life in us. Sin

separates man from God. Sin cuts man off from the life of God. Sin makes man dead spiritually even though he may be very much alive physically. But Jesus solves our sin problem. John the Baptist understood this very well and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). Look at verse 54. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

To eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood is to accept his suffering and death for our sins by faith. This faith can be expressed through participating in the Lord's Supper. All the synoptic gospels include Jesus' invitation to his disciples and to us to celebrate the Lord's Supper. For example, Mark 14:22-24 says, "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take it; this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,' he said to them." However in John's gospel Jesus does not celebrate the Lord's Supper with his disciples. The perspective of John's gospel is a little different. John seems to emphasize purely believing Jesus' word more than celebrating the ceremony of the Lord's Supper.

The people Jesus spoke to could not understand what he was talking about. It was because their minds were unspiritual, fixated on the material world. Even many of his disciples began to grumble, saying, "This is a hard teaching." To those who believe, faith is very simple. But to those who do not believe, the teaching to have faith alone is very hard indeed. The great John Wesley once struggled to have real faith in the gospel. He had spent two years in America as a missionary but was unfruitful. He had a sense of failure. He knew something was wrong, but didn't quite know what it was. He happened to return to England on a ship with Moravian missionaries. They were nameless people, but they had real faith in Jesus. They were not afraid of anything. They were joyful simply because they had Jesus in their hearts. Wesley realized that his problem was a faith problem. He realized he had been preaching the gospel without having real faith in Jesus. He wondered if he should continue to do this. The Moravians advised him, "Preach faith until you have it. Then because you have it, you will preach faith." Shortly after this, he had his own personal conversion experience in which he felt his heart strangely warmed by the love of God who sent Jesus into the world. It was the beginning of a great revival through him in the nation of England. Jesus suffered and died for our sins. When we simply accept this by faith, God forgives our sins. Jesus dwells in our hearts. Jesus gives us eternal life in the kingdom of God.

Fourth, "the Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing" (61-70).

Jesus knew the problem of his disciples. Because they did not simply believe his words by faith, they were full of human reason and complaints. So they began to grumble among themselves. Those who have no word of God in their hearts are all candidates to be grumbling people. Jesus wanted to help them somehow accept his words. So he taught them who he really is. Jesus is God who came from heaven to live among us for a while. After his time on earth was over, he would ascend into heaven once again to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Jesus is the only one who has come from heaven and the only one who has seen the Father. The disciples needed to simply accept his words as the words of God.

Then Jesus said, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." Jesus contrasts life by the Spirit and life by the flesh. Life by the flesh is eating and drinking, marrying, buying and selling, planting and building, without any relationship with God. From God's point of view such a life is a waste of time and it is nothing. Those who set their minds on the flesh are ruled by the power of sin and death. They are hostile to God and rebellious without any reason. They are evil in God's sight even if they seem to keep their own kind of moral standard. During Noah's time those who lived by the flesh all perished in the flood. This kind of destiny awaits everyone who lives by the flesh. However, when we accept one word of Jesus, the Spirit of God comes into our hearts. We can understand the mind of God. We can see the world from God's point of view. We can find God's purpose and holy mission for us. We can live a meaningful life for the glory of God. We can have the assurance of eternal life and true peace in our souls. Here we learn that we must make every effort to deny the desires of our flesh and to accept the word of Jesus.

At Jesus' clear teaching about life by the Spirit, many disciples turned away and no longer followed him. Then Jesus asked the Twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Simon Peter answered him in verses 68-69, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Here we learn that Simon Peter had accepted Jesus' teaching. He honored Jesus' word in his heart. He had the word

of eternal life in his heart. To him, Jesus was the only way. He committed his life to Jesus without calculation or reservation. We also must accept the word of Jesus and have a life commitment to Jesus.

As we begin this new year of 2005, there are many things to do and to plan. But most importantly, we must accept Jesus' words by faith. When we accept Jesus' death on the cross for our sins he solves our sin problem and gives us everlasting life. When we accept Jesus' words in our heart, we can live a most meaningful and joyful life by the Spirit. May God help each of us confess like Peter, "Lord Jesus, you have the words of eternal life."