

A Difficult Passage

J.C. Ryle:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you 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. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven--not as your father ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever." (John 6:53-58)

Few passages of Scripture have been so painfully distorted and perverted as that which we have now read. The Jews are not the only people who have striven about its meaning. A sense has been put upon it which it was never intended to bear. Fallen man, in interpreting the Bible, has an unhappy aptitude for turning food into poison. The things that were written for his benefit, he often makes an occasion for falling.

Let us first consider carefully what these verses do not mean. The "eating and drinking" of which Christ speaks do not mean any literal eating and drinking. Above all, the words were not spoken with any reference to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We may eat the Lord's Supper, and yet not eat and drink Christ's body and blood. We may eat and drink Christ's body and blood, and yet not eat the Lord's Supper. Let this never be forgotten.

The opinion here expressed may startle some who have not looked closely into the subject. But it is an opinion which is supported by three weighty reasons. For one thing, a literal "eating and drinking" of Christ's body and blood would have been an idea utterly revolting to all Jews, and one flatly contradictory to an often repeated precept of their law.

For another thing, to take a literal view of "eating and drinking" is to interpose a bodily act between the soul of man and salvation. For this there is no precedent in Scripture. It cuts off from eternal life all who do not receive the communion: all who die in infancy and childhood, all who die of full age without coming to the communion, and also the penitent thief. It was to avoid this painful conclusion that many early Christians in Cyprian's time held the doctrine of infant communion.

To take a literal view of "eating and drinking" opens wide a door to formalism and superstition. It would admit to heaven thousands of ignorant, godless communicants in the present day who would wish nothing better than to hear, "He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood (that is, eats the sacramental bread and drinks the sacramental wine) has eternal life." Here is precisely what the heart of natural man likes! He likes to go to heaven by formally using ordinances. He literally eats and drinks, no doubt! But he has no eternal life and will not be raised to glory at the last day.

The plain truth is that there is a morbid anxiety in fallen man to put a carnal sense on Scriptural expressions wherever he possibly can. He struggles hard to make religion a matter of forms and ceremonies--of doing and performing, of sacraments and ordinances, of sense and of sight. He secretly dislikes that system of Christianity which makes the state of the heart the principal thing, and labors to keep sacraments and ordinances in the second place. Happy is that Christian who remembers these things and stands on his guard! Baptism and the Lord's supper, no doubt, are holy sacraments and mighty blessings, when rightly used. But it is worse than useless to drag them in everywhere, and to see them everywhere in God's Word.

Let us next consider carefully what these verses do mean. The expressions they contain are very remarkable. Let us try to get some clear notion of their meaning. The "flesh and blood of the Son of man" means that sacrifice of His own body which Christ offered up on the cross when He died for sinners. The atonement made by His death, the satisfaction made by his sufferings as our Substitute, the redemption effected by His enduring the penalty of our sins in His own body on the tree--this seems to be the true idea that we should set before our minds. The "eating and drinking," without which there is no life in us, means that reception of Christ's sacrifice, which takes place when a man believes on Christ crucified for salvation. It is an inward and spiritual act of the heart and has nothing to do with the body. Whenever a man, feeling his own guilt and sinfulness, lays hold on Christ and trusts in the atonement made for him by Christ's death, at once he "eats the flesh of the Son of man, and drinks His blood." His soul feeds on Christ's sacrifice by faith, just as his body would feed on bread. Believing, he is said to "eat." Believing, he is said to "drink." And the special thing that he eats and drinks and gets benefit from is the atonement made for his sins by Christ's death for him on Calvary.

The practical lessons which may be gathered are weighty and important. The point being once settled that "the

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flesh and blood" in these verses means Christ's atonement, and the "eating and drinking" means faith, we may find in these verses great principles of truth which lie at the very root of Christianity. We may learn that faith in Christ's atonement is a thing of absolute necessity to salvation. Just as there was no safety for the Israelite in Egypt who did not eat the passover lamb in the night when the first-born were slain, so there is no life for the sinner who does not eat the flesh of Christ and drink His blood.

We may learn that faith in Christ's atonement unites us by the closest possible bonds to our Savior, and entitles us to the highest privileges. Our souls shall find full satisfaction for all their needs--"His flesh is food indeed, and His blood is drink indeed." All things that we can need for time and eternity are secured to us. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Last, but not least, we may learn that faith in Christ's atonement is a personal act, a daily act, and an act that can be felt. No one can eat and drink for us, and no one, in like manner, can believe for us. We need food every day, and not once a week or once a month. In like manner, we need to employ faith every day. We feel benefit when we have eaten and drunk; we feel strengthened, nourished, and refreshed. In like manner, if we believe truly, we shall feel the better for it by sensible hope and peace in our inward man.

Let us take heed that we use these truths, as well as know them. The food of this world, for which so many take thought, will perish in the using and not feed our souls. He only that eats of "the bread that came down from heaven" shall live forever.