Then the Jews who were hostile to Jesus began to argue with one another, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood resides in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who consumes me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the bread your ancestors ate, but then later died. The one who eats this bread will live forever." Jesus said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

Few passages of Scripture have been so painfully twisted 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 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. This is a thing for which there is no precedent in Scripture. The only things without which we cannot be saved are repentance and faith. Last, but not least, to take a literal view of "eating and drinking," would involve most blasphemous and profane consequences. It would shut out of heaven the penitent thief. He died long after these words were spoken, without any literal eating and drinking. Will any dare to say he had "no life" in Him? It would admit to heaven thousands of ignorant, godless communicants in the present day. They literally eat and drink, no doubt! But they have no eternal life, and will not be raised to glory at the last day. Let these reasons be carefully pondered.

The plain truth is, there is a melancholic 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, no doubt, very remarkable. Let us try to get some clear notion of their meaning.

The "flesh and blood of the Son of man" mean 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 from the whole passage are weighty and important. The point being once settled, that "the flesh and blood" in these verses means Christ's atonement, and the "eating and drinking" mean 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 are secured to us that we can need for time and eternity--"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--and, 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; and, 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.