

## "The Choice to Follow Jesus"

Are you familiar with the phrase "the penny dropped" or "the penny finally dropped"? It is used when someone finally realizes the true significance of something that they have been informed of or aware of for a long time. It dates back to the Victorian era when penny slot arcades were very popular, but the penny would often get stuck halfway down the slot, and the user would have to wait or thump the machine before the "penny finally dropped." One way to think about **John 6** is to see that it's a pivotal moment in Jesus' life where it becomes clear that for many people, who were in some way attracted to him, the penny never really dropped all the way down. There was some attraction to Jesus, but they didn't get what he was really all about. The coin, the penny, the truth, hadn't dropped all the way down. In the end, they turn and go off to look for what they want somewhere else.

**John 6** asks us, "Has the penny dropped for you?" As we already said, This Sunday marks the first Sunday in Advent for 2020. Twice in **John 6**, Jesus refers to his advent. He says, *I have come down from heaven*. As he talks about his advent, his coming, he says I have come as the bread of life to give life to the world. For the penny to drop you have to understand that! ***Do you understand that Jesus is the bread of life who comes down from heaven to give life to the world?***

*Do we understand that...*

### **I. TO CHOOSE TO FOLLOW JESUS IS TO CHOOSE TO FIND OUR LIFE IN HIM.**

Jesus talks about life in two ways. They are both connected, and they are both critical.

**A. Jesus says he is the source of both everlasting life in heaven and he is also the source of a special quality of life here and now.**

Sometimes Jesus says this simply and sometimes symbolically.

In **John 6:47**, Jesus speaks simply: *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.*

In **John 6:48-50**, He speaks symbolically. He says, <sup>48</sup> *I am the bread of life.* <sup>49</sup> *Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.* <sup>50</sup> *This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.* <sup>51</sup> *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

The important thing to understand is that the simple statement and the symbolic statement are not saying two different things but the same thing in two ways to make it clearer, more memorable, and moving. To get the penny to drop down deep into your soul.

Don't be confused by the symbolic language. There are four things.

- 1.) The Bread is Jesus as the source of life.
- 2.) The Eating (and sometimes drinking) is Believing in Jesus.
- 3.) The Result is Life.
- 4.) The Nature of that life. The life is both Everlasting life with God and a new Fullness of life here and now.

Look at **verse 53**: *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* This is present tense. Jesus is saying right now, in this present time and space, you've got to find your life in him, or you don't have real-life at all. True spiritual life, the life God intends for us – for you - is only – only found in him.

He continues in **verses 54-56** he is speaking symbolically, and he talks about the two dimensions of life. **Verse 54** *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* This is a life that lasts forever. Now, look at what follows. **Verse 55-56**, *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.* <sup>56</sup> *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* This is not only life forever but also a spiritual fullness in life now. There is a mystical, spiritual union between you and him. *You abide in him and he in you!*

## **B. There are two ways to look at life in relationship to following Jesus.**

**1. The first is that you follow Jesus so that He will help you have the things that make for a good life.** There are a lot of people in church who think Jesus is part of a good life and he helps with the good life, but he can't really be the center and source of life.

**2. The second way to look at life is that you follow Jesus because He himself is your life.** He is the bread of life. All the other stuff, even when good and important, is not most important or essential. He is, and he is enough. He is what we most need and most deeply hunger for.

I heard an interesting story once about a professor at the University of Tennessee named John Herman. He had two earned PhDs and was a highly respected professor. He was also an admirer of the brilliant and famous, sometimes notorious criminal lawyer Clarence Darrow. He had wanted to meet Darrow for a long time, and finally, late in both of their lives, he had the opportunity. So they met, and at one point sitting in the attorney's living room, Herman asked Darrow, an important question. Listen, he said, *"Now that you've come this far in life and you're not doing much lecturing or teaching or writing anymore, how would you sum up your life?"*

Darrow got up and walked over to a coffee table, and picked up a Bible. This took Herman by surprise since Darrow was a professed atheist who was widely known for ridiculing Scripture. Darrow turned to the fifth chapter of the gospel of Luke and changed the "we" in the text to "I." Then he read, "I have toiled all the night and taken nothing." If you don't know, that is what the disciples said to Jesus when he met them after they had spent a fruitless night fishing on the sea of Galilee.

Darrow closed the Bible, sat down, and said this. *"Dr. Herman, I have lived a life without purpose, without meaning, without direction, I don't know where I came from. And I don't know what I'm doing here. And, worst of all, I don't know what's going to happen to me when I punch out of this life."*

The sadness of that is that it is so common. Some people come to the very end of their lives only to find they have missed the meaning of life and have no hope of eternal life. For people like that, Jesus doesn't just say, *let me help you a little bit.* You just keep chasing the same things, and I'll help you get them. That's not what he says. Let me put it this way: what Jesus is telling us is that even if he were to answer every prayer and give you all that you think you want and need, you would not have what you need unless you see that he is what you need. This is what true followers of Jesus Christ truly understand. The penny has dropped all the way down, and they understand this.

*What this means is that...*

## II. IF WE ARE NOT FOLLOWING JESUS AS OUR SOURCE OF LIFE, WE ARE NOT TRULY FOLLOWING HIM.

Look at **verse 60**: *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"* Now it's interesting, and it's important that the word "hard" there does not mean hard to understand or to comprehend. It's a word that could be translated as "harsh" or "demanding." People in Jesus' day were comfortable with figures of speech, and they knew exactly what Jesus meant. Their question in **verse 60** was not: *"who can understand this teaching?"* Their question was: *"who can listen to this teaching?"* What is this teaching that is so hard for people to *listen to or accept*? It's Jesus saying: *I've got to be your meat and drink.* This is what false followers of Jesus choke on. They can't accept it, so they cough it out and turn away.

### A. Ask yourself how you see Jesus in relationship to your life.

The same thing that happened in Jesus' day happens all over again. People come to Jesus, wanting him to enrich their lives with the things they want. When they find out he wants to enrich them with himself, they turn away. Let's be clear: *"Believing that Jesus is the bread of life doesn't mean that nothing matters except for him but it does mean that nothing matters as much as Him and nothing matters so much that the presence of that thing overshadows Him or the absence of that thing robs us of the peace, and joy, of his love and presence."*

*Ask yourself how you see Jesus in relationship to your life.  
Then understand...*

### B. The ultimate issue in following Christ is believing.

I know that sometimes it can be frustrating to be told that over and over again. And, it can seem so intangible and unclear. But listen to what is said. Look at **verses 63-64**. *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup> But there are some of you who do not believe.*" Jesus talks about the Spirit, and he talks about life, but the instrumental cause of your reception of life and of the Spirit is your believing. Notice the allusion to Judas in the second half of **verse 64** (*For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.*) I used to think the biggest problem Judas had was greed. Jesus says what was ultimately behind his betrayal was this: he did not believe.

After many in the crowd turned away. Look at what happens in **verses 67-69**, “So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” <sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, <sup>69</sup> and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” Believing is what is critical. It is essential. You have to believe. God has to enable you to come to Christ, but *you have to* do the believing. That's the mystery of divine sovereignty. We will not come to Christ and believe in Him unless God enables us. God has to open your heart, but you have to believe.

**1. It's through believing in Jesus that we receive eternal life.**

Do not for even a moment grasp at the lie that eternal life depends on your goodness or your good works. You aren't good enough and can not do enough. The prophet Isaiah said all our righteousness is like filthy rags. Our lives are full of sin, self-pity, and selfishness. We have not loved God and loved others like we should. All the problems we hate in the world and in others, we are part of it all and deeply so. We need a Savior. Look back in **verse 51**, Jesus said, “And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” He is speaking symbolically of his sacrifice on the cross. This is what makes the Lord's Supper such a powerful symbol of Christ. It's a symbol of Jesus' body being broken on the cross as He died to pay for our sins. Our eating of the bread is symbolic of our believing in Him and receiving eternal life from Him. *It's through faith that we receive the gift of eternal life.*

**2. It is through continually believing in Christ that we are satisfied and made stronger by Christ, the bread of life.**

This is one of the challenging things about the Bible, and it can be frustrating. The bible continually calls people who are already believers in Jesus to keep on believing in Jesus and specifically to apply faith in Jesus to the problems of life, but if you ask, “*how do I do that or what does that mean?*” Scripture doesn't really give you any tips or action steps or much of an explanation. I used to think that was a problem. But it occurred to me that if Scripture is God's inspired Word, then the problem must lie in me. If the Bible simply tells me to believe, then maybe that is all I need to know. So I can drop my excuses and my endless questions and go about it. It seems that in the Bible, telling a believer in Jesus to believe is sort of like telling someone who is under stress to breathe; you don't have to give a lot of instruction; you just have to remind him or her. When you are tempted or tired or tested, the most important thing to do is not a skill you have to master. It is a simple response you need to remember. Believe and breathe.

***Believe that Jesus saves you in eternity and believe that he can feed you in this life.*** Believe that with an active, dynamic faith. He can be your life right now. Believe that. His love is huge and real for us in our sin and our sadness and our suffering. He cares for you and understands you, and, yes, as he himself said, in this world, you will have tribulation. He gets that. He wept in the garden over his own tribulations, but he bore them for us; he saved us through them. His cross is proof that things that look sad and ugly and hopeless can prove to be in the end powerful and beautiful and life-giving. His resurrection vindicates God and all the promises and gives hope to people who are hurting. Christmas marked the fulfillment of promises that still have a future that remains to be fulfilled. And they will be. We are more than conquerors through him who has loved us.

We are only fed by those truths we are believing. I remember being impressed years ago by a study done by scientific researchers that showed there were people who could list positive things in their lives they could be grateful for and enjoy but who weren't actually grateful and happy about those things. It was written up in a book, *The Psychology of Gratitude*. What the study concluded was that most people do not make any effort to actively fill their daily experiences with greater emotional quality. And... In the absence of conscious efforts to engage, build, and sustain positive perceptions and emotions, we all too automatically fall prey to feelings such as irritation, anxiety, worry, frustration, self-doubt, and blame.<sup>1</sup> You have in Christ a Savior who is more than enough, but you have to remember to believe in all that he is and can be for you.

***Believe that he is with you. Remember he said that you abide or remain in him and he in you. Practice the presence of Christ.***

Brother Lawrence was a wounded soldier who became a spiritual mentor. In his book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, he writes:

To know God, we must often think of Him...remembering Him, praising Him, asking for His grace, offering Him your troubles, or thanking Him for what He has given you will console you all the time ... lift up your heart ... little remembrances please Him...There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God; those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.

It's a little conscious lifting of the heart, stirring up of faith, listening for His leading, and trusting his presence. It grows easier with practice and makes all the difference. When you do these things, it both forces you and empowers you to let go of so many other things so that you can truly follow Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Look at how this story ends. **Verse 66-69** *From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 67 "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

Over and over in life, Jesus has to ask us this question. It's a question that doesn't allow us to just drift along. It requires a decision, a choice of faith, a definite answer from us. It's the question he is asking you: *Will you choose to truly follow him by making him the bread of life for you.*

**Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup>Rollin McCraty, "The Grateful Heart," *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert A. Emmons [New York: Oxford University Press 2004], 241, *emphasis added*.

### Prayer of Response

Gracious Father, We thank you that by your Spirit you open our hearts and draw us to Christ. He is the Holy One of God. He is our gracious and glorified Savior. We humbly and gladly receive and rest on him for our salvation. We ask that the same grace that first drew us to Jesus would so work in us now as to stir up a continually growing faith in him. Help us to truly know him as the bread of life who gives life for all who believe. Help us in our believing to clearly see the greatness of his love, the tender sympathy of his comfort and the strengthening power of his presence in us. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.