

John 6:59-71

Introduction

John chapter six began with Jesus multiplying five barley cakes and two fish and feeding five thousand men plus women and children. When the people saw this sign they intended to take Jesus by force to make Him king (6:14-15). To the extent that they had some “say” in the matter—some measure of “control”—they were more than happy to receive Jesus as their king. Even the twelve were caught up in the zeal of the crowd and so after compelling them to get into a boat and go to the “other side,” Jesus withdrew by Himself to the mountain (6:15). It’s in this context of the disciples caught up in the misguided zeal of the crowd that we can understand Jesus coming to them *walking on the sea* and saying, “*It is I [I am He]*” (6:16-21). In this *act* of walking on the sea and in these *words* of divine self-disclosure, the terrified disciples are confronted with the absoluteness of Jesus’ lordship. He is not one to be “taken” and “made” king by any crowd because He *is already* the sovereign Lord of all creation. And so it’s only in absolute submission and surrender—unreserved and unqualified *believing*—that they can know the joy and the comfort of Jesus’ next words: “It is I [I am He]; *do not be afraid.*”

As the disciples are confronted with the absoluteness of Jesus’ lordship, they’re also being prepared to hear what Jesus says next in what we call today the Bread of Life discourse. There are at least three different “groups” of people listening to this discourse. One of these groups John calls “the Jews.”

- John 6:41 — **The Jews** grumbled about [Jesus], because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”
- John 6:52 — **The Jews**... disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

In John the designation, “the Jews,” is used most often to refer to the leaders and the “spokesmen” for the Jewish people who were antagonistic and hostile to Jesus (cf. Jn. 1:19; 5:16, 18; 7:1; 9:22; 10:31; 18:12, 14, 36; 19:7, 12, 38; 20:19).^{*} It’s “the Jews” who have been the vocal ones throughout this discourse. They’re the ones who’ve been questioning and challenging Jesus and insisting that if they come to Him this must be an **independent decision** that *they* make. They want that ultimate and sovereign power of “choice” so that *if* they should *choose* to “believe,” they might still be—by definition—the ones in “control.” But Jesus is calling them to simply submit unreservedly to His word in a wholehearted response of faith.

- John 6:29 — “This is the *work of God*, that *you believe* in him whom he has sent.”

The Jews respond by asking what work Jesus performs that’s greater than the feeding of the five thousand and greater than the “bread from heaven” in the days of Moses so that they might *see* [and *decide*] and “believe” (6:30-31). Jesus answers that the only greater work there is, is to give not the bread that perishes, but the true bread that endures to eternal life.

^{*} When “the Jews” is used not absolutely but qualified in some way, then the sense is not negative, but neutral or even positive (cf. 2:13; 3:1; 4:22; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 8:31; 10:19-29; 11:19, 31, 33, 36, 45, 55; 12:9, 11; 18:33, 39; 19:3, 19-21; 19:40).

- John 6:35 — 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.”

And then Jesus strips them—and us—of all control in the most “breathtaking” way possible – even as He continues inviting us and calling us to believe.

- John 6:36–39 — But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. **All** that the Father gives me **will** come to me, and he who comes to me I will never cast out [I will forever keep him in **because** he has been given to Me by my Father]. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”

That *I* come to Jesus is not ultimately due to my choice (though I do make a genuine and real choice), but to God’s prior sovereign choice of me – to the fact that the Father chose me to give to His Son who now keeps and guards me and guarantees that I will never fall away, but persevere in faith to the end. If this strips me of all “control,” then so be it – because here is the only unshakable foundation of true peace and security.

- John 6:41–42 — [But] the Jews grumbled about [Jesus], because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”

Though they weren’t able to fully understand what Jesus *did* mean when He spoke of “coming down from heaven,” they knew very well what He *didn’t* mean (they knew He wasn’t saying that He descended from out of heaven as a pre-existent man and they knew He wasn’t denying that He was born of a woman named Mary or that He had an earthly “father” named Joseph), and yet they pretend *not* to know this in order that they might be the ones in control – in order that they might have that ultimate power of independently judging (deciding) for themselves the legitimacy of Jesus’ word. So does Jesus “soften” His tone? If possible, He only says the same thing more explicitly and uncompromisingly than before.

- John 6:43–45 — Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. No one is able to come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.”

Stop your grumbling and listen! Stop trying to be the ones “in control” and *understand this*: No one is able to come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. And indeed, **all** whom the Father draws **will** come to me and I will raise them up on the last day. **THEREFORE** it follows from this that no one can come to Jesus unless He comes to Him not as the one making his own independent decision about Jesus, but rather in a wholehearted humble submission to, and an unqualified, childlike belief in Jesus and in His word. Jesus isn’t calling us to comprehend this mystery, but rather to be moved by this mystery to a true and genuine saving faith. So He goes on to say in verse forty-seven:

- John 6:47, 51 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who **believes** has eternal life... 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.**”

Looking back, we can see that when Jesus speaks of giving His flesh as bread for the life of the world, He’s speaking of giving *Himself* in *death* so that through that death the life that He has in Himself (cf. 1:4; 5:26) might be given to us who **believe** in Him – who **eat** His flesh; who **feed** daily on the crucified and risen Savior and on all the saving benefits of His sacrificial death in our place. Looking back, we see this clearly, but none of the Jews listening to Jesus could see this – not even the twelve disciples. So what will the Jews do? Will they believe in Jesus and submit themselves to His word, desiring to grow in understanding? Or, will they demand understanding *first*, as those who want to be “in control” – as those who want to make their own independent decisions about Jesus?

- John 6:52 — The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Jesus knows that the Jews don’t really think He’s talking about cannibalism. So rather than “soften” His words with explanation, Jesus only makes them “harder.” He does this not because He desires to turn them away, but because He would confront them yet again with the absolute necessity of *believing* – of an unqualified, unreserved submission and surrender to Jesus and to His word as the one whom God has sent.

- John 6:53–58 — 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. He who feeds on 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. He who feeds on 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 whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. He who feeds on this bread will live forever.”

With these words “the Jews” now exit the scene and we’re introduced to a second group of people who’ve been among those listening to Jesus’ words:

I. John 6:59–60a — Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it...

If “the Jews” were antagonistic and hostile toward Jesus, these (Jewish) “disciples” were—in the beginning—entirely favorable toward Jesus. They were more than just curiosity seekers. They were more than just the crowd that wanted to take Jesus by force and make Him king. They identified themselves *with* Jesus as those who were learning from Him and following His teachings. They were, at least in some sense of the word, *disciples* of Jesus who John says were “walking with Jesus” (v. 66). If “the Jews” were grumbling and disputing among themselves, how will these “disciples” respond to what their Teacher has said?

II. John 6:60 — When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who is able to listen to it?”

The problem here is not that these disciples can’t comprehend Jesus meaning; the problem is that in some sense they’ve comprehended it only too well. The word for “hard” (*skleros*) appears only sixteen times in the New Testament. Eleven of those times it refers to a calloused, stubborn, obstinate, and “hard” heart (cf. Mat. 19:8; Acts 7:51; 19:9; Rom. 2:5). To speak of someone’s “hard” heart is to speak of his/her heart in a negative and accusatory way. When the Lord says to Saul on the road to Damascus, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is *hard* for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14), His meaning is that it’s *futile* and ultimately *impossible* to resist God. Once again, the meaning of “hard” is negative: fruitless, futile, impossible. Jude speaks of “all the *hard* [harsh and offensive] things that ungodly sinners have spoken against [the Lord]” (Jude 15). In Jesus’ parable of the talents, the servant who had been entrusted with the one talent said to his master:

➤ Matthew 25:24–25 — “Master, I knew you to be a *hard* man [a harsh, unreasonable, and grasping man], reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed.”

It’s because the disciples have thoroughly comprehended the meaning of Jesus’ words that now they render their judgment: “*This is a hard saying.*” This is an *offensive* saying. It’s *unreasonable*; it demands too much – even what is impossible. “Who,” then, “is able to listen to it?” What these disciples are suggesting is that if they don’t listen now—if they can’t accept *this* saying of Jesus—they’re not to blame because there isn’t anyone anywhere who can reasonably be expected to accept this teaching.

What is the “saying” that these disciples are referring to? Not just the saying about Jesus “coming down from heaven”; not just the saying about feeding on Jesus’ flesh and drinking His blood; but the teaching that’s underlying and running throughout the entire preceding discourse! What these disciples are saying is “hard” is the teaching that no one can come to Jesus unless He comes not as the one making his own independent decision about Jesus, but rather in a wholehearted, unreserved submission to, and an unqualified, childlike belief in Jesus and in His word as the one sent from God. This teaching, the disciples say, demands too much from us; can there be anyone, anywhere, able or willing to accept it?”

So how do we respond to this? Do we say rather glibly, “*I’ve* listened *because* I personally don’t find it to be ‘hard’”? “*I’ve* received this teaching *because* I personally find it to be entirely reasonable”? Can you see that if this is our response, then we haven’t understood or comprehended Jesus’ words at all? Remember that at the beginning these disciples were entirely favorable toward Jesus. They had identified themselves with Jesus as those who were learning from Him and following His teachings. They were “walking with Jesus” (v. 66). But now that they’ve finally understood what Jesus’ teaching really is—now that they’ve finally understood how the claims of Jesus are so absolute as to strip them of all “control,” even of the right to make their own independent “decisions” about Him—they cannot accept it. Indeed, the real question is, “*Who can?*”

So how will Jesus respond? Will He try to show that His teaching is not actually as hard as it seems? We read in verse sixty-one:

III. John 6:61–62 — But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Does this offend you [Is this a stumbling block to you; Does this scandalize you (*skandalizo*)]? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”

Jesus leaves the question unfinished. But given the context before and after, I think the implied meaning is clear.

If you’re offended by what I say to you now as the one who has “come down (*katabaino*) from heaven” (vv. 33, 38, 41, 50-51, 57-58), “then what if you were to see [Me] ascending (*anabaino*) to where [I] was before”? Would you **believe then**? Would you *really*? Jesus is calling His disciples to honestly answer this question for themselves and in doing so to recognize their own hypocrisy and to **believe now**. If seeing Jesus ascend to where He was before would take away the “hardness” and the “offense” of Jesus’ words, then we *would* be able to make our own independent and autonomous decisions about Jesus! But in fact, the point Jesus is making is exactly the opposite. If you’re offended by what I say to you now as the one who has “come down (*katabaino*) from heaven” (vv. 33, 38, 41, 50-51, 57-58), then even “if you were to see [Me] ascending (*anabaino*) to where [I] was before”—even then you would not believe. Even then—*especially* then!—you would refuse to come to Me *as* those stripped of all control, unreservedly and wholeheartedly submitting to Me and to the Word that I have spoken. Even then—*especially* then!—you would “come to Me” only *as* those making your own independent decisions about Me. This is why it was never given to any of these disciples to see Jesus ascending to where He was before. And this is why Jesus goes on to say in verse sixty-three:

IV. John 6:63 — “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.”

Would you be any less offended if you saw the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? Would you *believe* if you saw the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? Even then you would not believe – not truly, with the believing that God requires. Why? Because “it is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all,” and already, “the words that I have spoken to you *are* spirit and life.”

If Jesus’ disciples think that His teaching is “hard,” then He will only emphasize all the more just how “hard” it is. If His disciples are “offended” and “scandalized” at His teaching, then He will only emphasize all the more that apart from this teaching that so offends and scandalizes them they can never have eternal life. The disciples thought that they should be able to come to Jesus “in the flesh.” But the flesh, Jesus says—in all of its thinking and all of its willing and all of its desiring—is of *no help at all*—it is of no help *whatsoever*—in coming to Jesus and believing in Him. The only way to truly come to Jesus is in the Spirit.

➤ John 3:6 — That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

It is the Spirit, Jesus says, who must supernaturally enable you to *come* to Me and *believe* in Me and *abide* in Me so that in Me you might have life. The true Christian life—the life of wholehearted, unreserved submission to, and unqualified, childlike belief in Jesus as the one sent from God—is life in the Spirit, even from its beginning in the very first motions of faith.

The words that I have spoken to you, Jesus says, are not of the flesh. They are powerful, life-giving words because I am telling you the truth that I heard from my Father (Jn. 3:32; 8:26, 40; 15:15)...

V. John 6:64–65 — But [nevertheless] there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one is able to come to me unless it is given him by the Father.”

The disciples asked, “Who is *able* [*dynamai*] to listen to this?” Who is *able* to accept these absolute claims and come to Jesus on these terms? And Jesus answers: “No one is able [*dynamai*] to come to me unless it is given him by the Father.”

Look a little closer at what Jesus says: “There are some of you who do not believe... ***This is why*** I told you that no one is able to come to me unless it is given him by the Father.” Can you see the “logic,” here? The fact that there’s even a single person in the world who doesn’t immediately *believe* when he’s confronted with the testimony of Jesus—with His words that are spirit and life—is proof positive of the absolute necessity of the sovereign initiative of the Father in effectually *drawing* to the Son (cf. v. 44) all those whom He has *given* to the Son (cf. v. 37).

But even now, Jesus isn’t saying this in order to promote some kind of fatalism or because He would cut anyone off from the hope of eternal life (even though He “knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him”). It’s the opposite that’s true. It’s because He desires the salvation of those who are listening to Him—and *particularly* of all those whom the Father has given to Him—that He would strip from them all their illusions of being “in control” – that He would call them to abandon any thought of making their own independent decisions about Him and to come to Him instead humbly, submissively, and unreservedly *believing*.

And now we read in verse sixty-six:

VI. John 6:66 — After this many of his disciples went away and no longer walked with him.

It’s one thing to talk about “the Jews” and their rejection of Jesus, but how can it be that even Jesus’ “disciples” who were walking with Him should turn away and leave Him? The answer is that “it is the Spirit who gives life,” and “the flesh is no help at all.” The answer is that because of the depravity of the human heart no one is *willing* to *truly* come to Jesus unless it is given him by the Father. The disciples who went away and no longer walked with Jesus had not truly *believed*. They had come to Jesus in the flesh as those “choosing” Him and not as those surrendering wholeheartedly to Him in childlike faith – and so coming to know in the process that they were the ones who had been chosen by God.

VII. John 6:67 — So Jesus said to *the twelve*, “You do not also want to go away?”

First there were “the Jews”; then there were “His disciples”; and now there are “the twelve.” Jesus doesn’t ask this question because He’s discouraged or because He doesn’t know the answer. He asks so that *in answering* “the twelve” might rejoice in the faith that they have and grow and be strengthened in that faith and give God all the glory. He asks not for His own sake, but for their sake – and even, today, for our sake. “So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘You do not also want to go away?’”

VIII. John 6:68–69 — Simon Peter answered him [and may he be answering this morning for all of us], “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

The *twelve* don’t understand everything Jesus has just said any more than “the *Jews*” or those who had previously been “His *disciples*.” And yet Peter, speaking so far as he knows for the rest of the twelve, has *believed* and has come to *know* by faith in the testimony of Jesus that Jesus is the Holy One of God and that He has the words of eternal life. In Peter’s confession of true saving *faith* is revealed to us the wonderful mystery of God’s sovereign, saving *grace*.[†] And it’s because Jesus would emphasize this truth one final time that we read in verses 70-71:

IX. John 6:70–71 (cf. 17:12; 18:8-9) — Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

It’s one thing to talk about “the Jews” and their rejection of Jesus, or even about the larger group of the “disciples” and their “going away” and “no longer walking” with Jesus, but how can it be that even one of those whom Jesus had chosen to be among “the twelve” should not just “go away” and no longer walk with Jesus but even do the devil’s work in betraying Jesus? The answer is that “it is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.” The answer is that because of the depravity of the human heart no one is willing to truly come to Jesus unless it is given him by the Father – unless the Father draws him.

Conclusion

Why do we believe in Jesus? Not *because* we were able and willing to receive His teaching. Not *because* we found His teaching to be “reasonable.” Not *because* we chose Him, but *because* the Father chose us to *give* to His Son and *granted* that we should come to His Son and *drew* us to His Son.

To Jesus’ question, “You do not also want to go away?” we answer with Peter: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” In this confession of true *saving faith* is revealed to us every day the wonderful mystery of God’s sovereign *saving grace*.

[†] Peter’s confession of faith (“*you are* the Holy One of God”; *eimi*) is ultimately his response to Jesus’ self-revelation when He came to the disciples walking on the sea (“I am” / “It is I” / *eimi*, “do not be afraid”).