# Hard sayings 1: Eat my body, drink my blood

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John 6:22-59

We have a longish Scripture today. This event in the gospel of John takes place soon after Jesus has miraculously fed 5,000 people and crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. In fact, as we will see, the people seem to be stalking him. A couple of notes as we read: remember that everyone in this story, including Jesus, is Jewish, so when John (himself a Jew) says “Jews” he either means the Jewish authorities (most of whom did not become disciples) or the people who have already decided that Jesus is not their messiah. Let’s avoid the mistake of thinking Jews bear some special blame here. Notice that even some of the people called “disciples” here end up turning away.

Also, I want to remind you that you are more than welcome to add your comments either during the teaching or afterwards.

**22**On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. **23**Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. **24** So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

**25**When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" **26**Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. **27** Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." **28**Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" **29**Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." **30**So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? **31** Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" **32**Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. **33**For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." **34**They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

**35**Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. **36**But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. **37** All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. **38**For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. **39**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. **40**For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

**41**So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." **42**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'?" **43**Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. **44**No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. **45**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— **46** not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. **47**Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. **48** I am the bread of life. **49** Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. **50** This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. **51**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."

**52**The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" **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. **54**Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. **55**For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. **56**Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. **57**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. **58** This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread[[c](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%206&version=ESV#fen-ESV-26304c)] the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." **59**Jesus[[d](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%206&version=ESV#fen-ESV-26305d)] said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.  **60** When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" **61**But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? **62**Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? **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. **64**But 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.) **65**And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

**66** After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. **67**So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" **68**Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, **69**and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." **70**Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." **71**He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.

I was pawing through some old books in our attic library, and I came across a paperback book, published by InterVarsity Press in 1983, by F.F. Bruce, entitled *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. I am glad to say, when I looked it up online, that it is still in print. But it was like a little letter to me from my younger self saying, remember how important this book is to me? I think you might want to look at it again. In this book, Bruce, who died in 1990 after a good career as an academic Biblical critic and exegete, examines seventy “hard sayings” by Jesus.

It would be foolish to pretend that some of Jesus’s sayings are not hard for us. Some are hard for us because of the vast cultural differences between 21st century America and first century Palestine. Some are hard for us because the concepts and life patterns Jesus is talking about are hard to understand. Some are hard for us, not because we don’t understand them—no, we understand them all right, but they are hard for us to try to put into practice. But if Jesus is our Lord and Teacher, it will do us good to spend time thinking and praying and working hard to understand and do what he talks about. And so, I propose that we spend some time looking at some of these hard sayings, especially with FF Bruce as our guide, but using our own intelligence and spiritual sense, humbly attempting to be guided by the Spirit of Jesus to understand these words. It’s important to say we are not looking at some of these hard sayings to satisfy an intellectual curiosity, but to satisfy a spiritual urge of obedience. We may go through some deep waters, but I hope we’ll safely make it to the other side. I don’t know how many of these hard sayings we’ll look at—probably not 70 of them! But if you have suggestions, or wish to be on the teaching rotation, please let me know.

Our passage from John is the original “hard saying.” Simply put, Jesus said, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you are lost; you are dead.” And many of the people around him found this hard to hear. In fact, the next paragraph tells us that many of the people who had started following him stopped at this point. This might even be the point at which Judas decided to betray him; at least, the text plainly states that this is a time when Jesus was very aware that Judas was going to be one who turned away.

The thing they found hardest is the implied cannibalism. And not just the cannibalism, but eating the blood. Do you have some foods that utterly disgust you? For me, it’s red beets. I just can’t stand them. I literally want to vomit when they get too close to me—ask my family. You might have similar things that disgust you—snails? Oysters? Dog meat? I do not recommend that you do a web search for “disgusting foods.”

For Jews in Jesus’s time, this same sense of disgust would exhibit itself about blood. “The life is in the blood,” says the scriptures, and much of their scriptures are taken up with what can be eaten, and what can’t, and what can be eaten with what. It’s as if I said, “here, eat this bloody raw steak.” You probably would cringe. Doubly so if you’re a vegetarian.

And how much more that this is human flesh that Jesus is referring to! And his own, to boot! This would imply what—blood eating, cannibalism, suicide or perhaps murder. No wonder they found it a hard saying, and no wonder many of them went away. And, maybe, no wonder Judas started on his path to his final betrayal that would leave to Jesus’s murder.

Let’s listen to what Bruce says:

[I]t is John’s practice when recording Jesus’s discourses or conversations to quote words which have a spiritual meaning and then make the hearers show by their response that they have failed to grasp that meaning; Jesus is thus given an opportunity to repeat his words more fully[[1]](#footnote-1).

When Jesus sees that some of the disciples are turning away, he turns them all and warns them not to take offence. What, he says, if you were to see the Son of Man—meaning, I believe, himself—what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to heaven? In other words, someday you will see proof positive of the truth of his words; it’s better to believe it now.

In the 21st century, I think we can understand what the stalking crowds wanted: a celebrity; someone famous that they could feel a personal connection to, someone who entertained them, someone who was pretty and powerful and *theirs*. Jesus, they thought, could provide bread and circuses. They want Jesus Christ Superstar. But Jesus wants them to take him very seriously indeed, and so he administers the shock of the statement, “my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.” It’s like he is administering smelling salts to a sleep-walking person; they need to wake up and hear his spiritual message.

And then he begins to “repeat his words more fully,” as Bruce says. Jesus says, “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.” Jesus wants them to see through fame and entertainment. These are deadly foods, spoiled meat, rancid flesh. This is what should disgust them. What they really need is something else, what he calls “spirit and life,” which require true food and true drink which lead to true life. And what is this true food and drink? Jesus tells us, directly: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

Think about that.

“The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

I find myself so often spending time, energy and money on things that are not very satisfying. John starts his gospel by telling us why Jesus came to us: “In him was life, and his life was the life of humanity.” And again: “the Word became flesh.” And again, “we have received grace upon grace out of his abundance.” Jesus became flesh for us, he bled for us that we might have true spiritual life.

We will be celebrating communion today. Jesus is not making a direct reference to communion in this passage, but he might as well have been. In the bread, we remember the death and life of Jesus. In the cup, we remember the blood and life of Jesus. Let all here who desire to say to Jesus, along with Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,” use this feast of remembrance to rededicate our lives to a fuller expression of our life in Christ and our life together as sisters and brothers of Christ.

1. Bruce, F.F. *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. Intervarsity Press, 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)