

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 13

The Lord's Supper and the Gospels, Part 2

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Today's episode continues the problem of John 6, the "bread of life" passage. We explore the rest of the passage, drawing attention to two items: that the second half of the passage needs to be interpreted in light of the first half, and that John 6 is not an account of the Last Supper, which the epistles are clear was the context for the Lord's Supper or Communion.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast. In the last podcast episode, we began to look at John 6:22-65 as we continued our discussion of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. We only got as far as verse 40, but we were able to see clearly from the text that while Jesus created an analogy between himself and the bread and the wine, that analogy was clearly to be understood metaphorically. By virtue of Jesus' own comments, we learn that he taught about a hunger and thirst that isn't solved by literally eating and drinking anything. Rather, the hunger and thirst he described was satisfied by coming to him and believing. Literal hunger and thirst aren't taken away by coming and believing. So we know that when Jesus tells us as much, he's using the bread and wine analogously, not literally. These were clear statements that allowed us to understand the meaning of the Lord's supper from the biblical text, not from a creed or a denominational tradition. That's what we do on the Naked Bible.

In this podcast episode, we want to finish looking at John 6—the first of three key passages for understanding the Lord's Supper—or at least talking about and discussing the debate over the Lord's Supper. We'll pick up now with John 6:41-59. Verse 41:

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 the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

Now this section is where the confusion really starts. But it's not hard to parse what Jesus is saying here if we interpret this section of John 6 by the preceding material in John 6. The key interpretive issue is whether you're going to isolate these verses that describe eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Jesus from its preceding context. I would suggest interpreting any passage by its preceding context is a good idea! Unfortunately, that isn't what happens all—or even most—of the time when it comes to the Bible. If we ignore the preceding context in this case, then it's easy to see how some traditions actually teach that the bread and water are transformed into the literal flesh and blood of Jesus. But if that's the case, then you have to entertain all sorts of silly but understandable questions that have actually been brought up by theologians, such as: Does Jesus (or a part of Jesus) really spend time in our stomachs and intestines? Will we expel Jesus when we go to the bathroom? Why would grace need to travel through our stomachs and intestines, anyway? And lastly, what if a few crumbs fall on the floor and a mouse eats it? Is the mouse sanctified? All of these questions (and the nonsense they introduce into doctrinal discussion) can be avoided by considering John 6:41-59 in the context of John 6:22-40. What do I mean? Well, in verses 22-40, we saw clearly in the last podcast episode that the way to eternal life was by coming to Jesus and believing, not by eating or drinking anything. Eating and drinking were metaphors for coming and believing. Even in this section, amid the confusion expressed by those listening to Jesus, those same clear ideas are included. Verses 47-48 clearly define what Jesus is saying

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about eating and drinking as believing. Let me read them again for you. Jesus said:

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.

So belief in Jesus is how we receive eternal life, not by eating a wafer or drinking wine. It is in this context that Jesus' statement, "and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" must be understood. Why theologians would think that the giving of Jesus' body refers to communion here and not to Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross—the very act that provided payment for our sins—is, frankly, lost on me. If we understand John 6 to be about faith in Jesus, it makes perfect sense. We believe in what Jesus said: that he would give his life for the sins of the world. He did that on the cross. It's not talking about taking communion. It's about believing the good news about what was accomplished on the cross.

Now the following context of the passage supports what I'm saying here. After throwing his listeners into confusion about literally eating his flesh and drinking his blood, we read this as we go on in verses 60-65:

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."

Notice what Jesus says and doesn't say. It is not the bread and wine that give life in these verses. It's the Spirit. He doesn't say that there were some among his listeners who hadn't eaten. He says, "There are some of you who do not believe." His concern is that people will believe on him (verse 40), not that they won't believe the bread would turn into his flesh when they ate it. That Jesus' focus would be on their belief in him, not on what they ate or drank, is entirely consistent with what Jesus said earlier in John 6 (that I'm trying to get you to discern).

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This is a good time to remind listeners of something I noted in the last podcast—something that isn't obvious, but which would be clear if we looked at John with a

wide-angle lens. Jesus never hands out any bread after he makes his bread and wine comments. That's because this episode in John 6 is not the Last Supper event. In the three Synoptic Gospels and their description of the Last Supper, there are several elements present:

1. Jesus makes some comment that connects his broken body (the bread) and his blood (the wine) to the New Covenant.
2. After making that connection, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples and then tells them one among them will betray him.

John 6 doesn't have either of these details. In fact, the scene of the Last Supper with these details and the announcement of the betrayal occurs much later in the Gospel of John—in John 13. The chronology of John's gospel, therefore, does not allow John 6 to be connected with the Last Supper, so I would argue it shouldn't be the chapter that informs our doctrine of communion. We know from Paul that it is the night of the Last Supper that is supposed to inform our doctrine of communion, since Paul explicitly starts his discussion with the words, "The same night in which he was betrayed, he took bread..." That is nowhere in view in John 6.

In our next podcast on the Lord's Supper, we'll move away from John 6 to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. *That* is where we'll find the most detailed help for what the Lord's Supper really means.