

The Living Bread Which Came Down from Heaven

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If we yearn to dwell in Christ and have Him dwell in us, then holiness is what we seek.

The day after Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000 in Galilee with only “five barley loaves, and two small fishes,”¹ He spoke to the people again in Capernaum. The Savior perceived that many were not so much interested in His teachings as they were in being fed again.² Accordingly, He tried to convince them of the immensely greater value of “that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you.”³ Jesus declared:

“I am that bread of life.

“Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.

“This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”⁴

The Savior’s intended meaning was totally lost on His hearers who understood His statement only literally. Recoiling at the thought, they wondered, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”⁵ Jesus pressed the point further:

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

“Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

“For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.”⁶

He then expressed the profound meaning of His metaphor:

“He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

“As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.”⁷

Still His hearers did not grasp what Jesus was saying, and “many ... , when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? ... [And] from that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.”⁸

To eat His flesh and drink His blood is a striking way of expressing how completely we must bring the Savior into our life—into our very being—that we may be one. How does this happen?

First, we understand that in sacrificing His flesh and blood, Jesus atoned for our sins and overcame death, both physical and spiritual.⁹ Clearly, then, we partake of His flesh and drink His blood when we receive from Him the power and blessings of His Atonement.

The doctrine of Christ expresses what we must do to receive atoning grace. It is to believe and have faith in Christ, to repent and be baptized, and to receive the Holy Ghost, “and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost.”¹⁰ This is the gate, our access to the Savior’s atoning grace and to the strait and narrow path leading to His kingdom.

“Wherefore, if ye shall press forward [on that path], feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life.

“... Behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end.”¹¹

The symbolism of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is beautiful to contemplate. The bread and water represent the flesh and blood of Him who is the Bread of Life and the Living Water,¹² poignantly reminding us of the price He paid to redeem us. As the bread is broken, we remember the Savior’s torn flesh. Elder Dallin H. Oaks once observed that “because it is broken and torn, each piece of bread is unique, just as the individuals who partake of it are unique. We all have different sins to repent of. We all have different needs to be strengthened through the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we remember in this ordinance.”¹³ As we drink the water, we think of the blood He shed in Gethsemane and on the cross and its sanctifying power.¹⁴ Knowing that “no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom,” we resolve to be among “those who have washed their garments in [the Savior’s] blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end.”¹⁵

I have spoken of receiving the Savior’s atoning grace to take away our sins and the stain of those sins in us. But figuratively eating His flesh and drinking His blood has a further meaning, and that is to internalize the qualities and character of Christ, putting off the natural man and becoming Saints “through the atonement of Christ the Lord.”¹⁶ As we partake of the sacramental bread and water each week, we would do well to consider how fully and completely we must incorporate His character and the pattern of His sinless life into our life and being. Jesus could not have atoned for the sins of others unless He Himself was sinless. Since justice had no claim on Him, He

could offer Himself in our place to satisfy justice and then extend mercy. As we remember and honor His atoning sacrifice, we should also contemplate His sinless life.

This suggests the need for a mighty striving on our part. We cannot be content to remain as we are but must be moving constantly toward “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”¹⁷ Like King Lamoni’s father in the Book of Mormon, we must be willing to give away all our sins¹⁸ and focus on what the Lord expects of us, individually and together.

Not long ago, a friend recounted to me an experience he had while serving as a mission president. He had undergone a surgery that required several weeks of recuperation. During his recovery, he devoted time to searching the scriptures. One afternoon as he pondered the Savior’s words in the 27th chapter of 3 Nephi, he drifted off to sleep. He subsequently related:

“I fell into a dream in which I was given a vivid, panoramic view of my life. I was shown my sins, poor choices, the times ... I had treated people with impatience, plus the omissions of good things I should have said or done. ... [A] comprehensive ... [review of] my life was shown to me in just a few minutes, but it seemed much longer. I awoke, startled, and ... instantly dropped to my knees beside the bed and began to pray, to plead for forgiveness, pouring out the feelings of my heart like I had never done previously.

“Prior to the dream, I didn’t know that I [had] such great need to repent. My faults and weaknesses suddenly became so plainly clear to me that the gap between the person I was and the holiness and goodness of God seemed [like] millions of miles. In my prayer that late afternoon, I expressed my deepest gratitude to Heavenly Father and to the Savior with my whole heart for what They had done for me and for the relationships I treasured with my wife and children. While on my knees I also felt God’s love and mercy that was so palpable, despite my feeling so unworthy. ...

“I can say I haven’t been the same since that day. ... My heart changed. ... What followed is that I developed more empathy toward others, with a greater capacity to love, coupled with a sense of urgency to preach the gospel. ... I could relate to the messages of faith, hope, and the gift of repentance found in the Book of Mormon [as] never before.”¹⁹

It is important to recognize that this good man’s vivid revelation of his sins and shortcomings did not discourage him or lead him to despair. Yes, he felt shock and remorse. He felt keenly his need to repent. He had been humbled, yet he felt gratitude, peace, and hope—real hope—because of Jesus Christ, “the living bread which came down from heaven.”²⁰

My friend spoke of the gap he perceived in his dream between his life and the holiness of God. *Holiness* is the right word. To eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ means to pursue holiness. God commands, “Be ye holy; for I am holy.”²¹

Enoch counseled us, “Teach it unto your children, that all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God, for no unclean thing can dwell there, or dwell in his presence; for, in the language of Adam, Man of Holiness is his name, and the name of his Only Begotten is the Son of Man, even Jesus Christ.”²² As a boy, I wondered why in the New Testament Jesus is often referred to (and even refers to Himself) as the Son of Man when He is really the Son of God, but Enoch’s statement makes it clear that these references are actually a recognition of His divinity and holiness—He is the Son of Man of Holiness, God the Father.

If we yearn to dwell in Christ and have Him dwell in us,²³ then holiness is what we seek, in both body and spirit.²⁴ We seek it in the temple, whereon is inscribed “Holiness to the Lord.” We seek it in our marriages, families, and homes. We seek it each week as we delight in the Lord’s holy day.²⁵ We seek it even in the details of daily living: our speech, our dress, our thoughts. As President Thomas S. Monson has stated, “We are the product of all we read, all we view, all we hear and all we think.”²⁶ We seek holiness as we take up our cross daily.²⁷

Sister Carol F. McConkie has observed: “We recognize the multitude of tests, temptations, and tribulations that could pull us away from all that is virtuous and praiseworthy before God. But our mortal experiences offer us the opportunity to choose holiness. Most often it is the sacrifices we make to keep our covenants that sanctify us and make us holy.”²⁸ And to “the sacrifices we make” I would add the service we give.

We know that “when [we] are in the service of [our] fellow beings [we] are only in the service of [our] God.”²⁹ And the Lord reminds us that such service is central to His life and character: “For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”³⁰ President Marion G. Romney wisely explained: “Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made.”³¹

Zechariah prophesied that in the day of the Lord’s millennial reign, even the bells of the horses would bear the inscription “Holiness unto the Lord.”³² In that spirit, the pioneer Saints in these valleys affixed that reminder, “Holiness to the Lord,” on seemingly common or mundane things as well as those more directly associated with religious practice. It was inscribed on sacrament cups and plates and printed on certificates of ordination of Seventies and on a Relief Society banner. “Holiness to the Lord” also appeared over the display windows of Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Institution, the ZCMI department store. It was found on the head of a hammer and on a drum. “Holiness to the Lord” was cast on the metal doorknobs of President Brigham Young’s home. These references to holiness in seemingly unusual or unexpected places may seem incongruous, but they suggest just how pervasive and constant our focus on holiness needs to be.

Partaking of the Savior's flesh and drinking His blood means to put out of our lives anything inconsistent with a Christlike character and to make His attributes our own. This is the larger meaning of repentance: not only a turning away from past sin but also "a turning of the heart and will to God"³³ going forward. As happened with my friend in his revelatory dream, God will show us our flaws and failings, but He will also help us turn weakness into strength.³⁴ If we sincerely ask, "What lack I yet?"³⁵ He will not leave us to guess, but in love He will answer for the sake of our happiness. And He will give us hope.

It is a consuming endeavor, and it would be terribly daunting if in our striving for holiness we were alone. The glorious truth is we are not alone. We have the love of God, the grace of Christ, the comfort and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the fellowship and encouragement of fellow Saints in the body of Christ. Let us not be content with where we are, but neither let us be discouraged. As a simple but thoughtful hymn urges us:

*Take time to be holy, the world rushes on;
spend much time in secret with Jesus alone.
By looking to Jesus, like him thou shalt be;
thy friends in thy conduct his likeness shall see.*³⁶

I bear testimony of Jesus Christ, "the living bread which came down from heaven,"³⁷ and that "whoso eateth [His] flesh, and drinketh [His] blood, hath eternal life,"³⁸ in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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