

One of the themes associated with the Lord's Supper is that of spiritual nourishment. At the Lord's Supper we eat the bread and we drink the wine or juice. The eating and drinking suggest that one of the purposes for the Lord's Supper is to provide nourishment to sustain our spiritual lives. This is not spelled out explicitly in any of the texts that refer to the Lord's Supper, but like so much else about the Lord's Supper, this theme is implied by what is explicitly taught as well as how it connects to other passages and themes in Scripture. And Scripture uses eating and drinking as metaphors for the intake of truth into our hearts. And one of the key passages that does this is the latter part of John 6 where Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life and even speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Now the verses in John 6 which deal with this topic are not explicitly about the Lord's Supper and scholars debate whether Jesus was thinking about the Lord's Supper when he spoke of himself as the bread of life. The reality is that the idea of eating and drinking Jesus is found in this passage and in the Lord's Supper and so it is helpful to use this passage to think about the Lord's Supper. It is possible to think of this passage without referring to the Lord's Supper and yet the ideas are relevant to the meaning of the Lord's Supper and so whether Jesus was thinking about the Lord's Supper when he spoke these words or not, what he says here does help us to understand the meaning of eating the bread which is a symbol of Jesus broken body and drinking the wine/juice which symbolizes Jesus' blood.

Now there is something odd about the language of eating Jesus' flesh and blood. Eating him as the bread of life does not sound so bad, but once the image gets interpreted as eating his body and drinking his blood, it starts to sound a little weird. And that's for us who are used to the idea. For someone who is not used to the idea, it sounds very weird. And in the time of the early church this kind of language led some in the unbelieving world to refer to the Christians as cannibals. But we know that Jesus is speaking symbolically and the truth he is conveying is very precious and that is what matters. Jesus was not hesitant to say things that offended people's sensibilities. And he also had a very good reason for saying whatever he did say and we need to profit from all what he taught us even though in this case the symbolism of eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood is rather strange.

Jesus uses the metaphor of eating him as a picture of believing in him. He speaks about eating him as the bread of life. He speak of himself as the living bread that came down from heaven. He says that the bread is a symbol for his flesh which he gives for the life of the world. And he goes on to speak of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. All of this points to the same thing. It refers to Jesus dying on the cross and offering himself to us as the one who died and rose again. All of this imagery of bread and flesh and blood refers to Jesus offering himself to us as the one who died that we might have life. Eating and drinking are symbols for believing and what we receive through eating and drinking Jesus' body and blood is eternal life.

Jesus uses these symbols to give us pictures with which to imagine spiritual realities. And in the Lord's Supper he goes one step further and gives us physical bread and physical wine/juice that we actually eat and drink.

These all give us ways to picture the spiritual reality of Jesus giving himself to us as the one who died for us and of us receiving him by faith. The symbols help us to understand and appreciate the significance of the spiritual giving and receiving.

One of the truths behind the symbolism is that just as we need food and drink for our physical lives, so we need spiritual food and drink for our spiritual lives. Our bodies need food and drink. The food and drink sustain our lives. There is a fundamental connection between food and drink and life. God gives us life at the moment of conception and from that moment on our lives are sustained by food and drink.

Well, Jesus came to bring us eternal life. Remember what he said in John 10:10, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” Apart from Christ we are dead in sin. We are alive physically, but we are dead spiritually. That is a fundamental biblical idea. Sin and death go together. Apart from a relationship with Jesus Christ we are dead in sin – which means slaves to sin and dead to God who is the source of life. This truth underlies the whole biblical teaching about Jesus and salvation. True life is experienced only in relationship with God and the absence of that relationship is spiritual death.

In this passage, Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life and he teaches that anyone who eats of this bread receives eternal life. Eternal life is spiritual life and it lasts forever. It is the life that Jesus obtained for us by his death. We were under the sentence of death because of our sins. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins by his death and because the penalty was paid he rose from the dead. That life is eternal life and that is what he gives to those who trust in him. Those who have this life are forgiven their sins. True life can only be received where there is forgiveness. That is why Jesus here speaks of giving his flesh for the life of the world and that he why he speaks of his blood. Jesus died – shed his blood - to pay the penalty of sin and so receive life and that life he gives to those who believe in him.

Life is being accepted by God. It is being forgiven. It is being loved by God and loving him in return. And that life is eternal life – it is the life of the age to come – a life that will never end. Jesus says in verse 58, “Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”

The imagery of eating and drinking are symbols of faith and so they help us to understand faith. They give us pictures to help us to know what faith is like. Faith is compared to eating and drinking. Eating and drinking are symbols of faith. Let’s think for a moment of what we learn about faith by thinking of it using Jesus’s symbols of eating and drinking.

The most obvious point of the symbolism of eating and drinking in this passage is the connection between eating and drinking and life. Eating and drinking physical food and drink sustains our physical lives. Eating and drinking Jesus’ body and blood sustains our spiritual lives.

Now here we encounter a difference between this passage and the Lord’s Supper. This passage refers both to the beginning of spiritual life as well as the maintaining of spiritual life. What Jesus says in verse 51, for

instance, is evangelistic. It is an invitation for non-believers to believe. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.” There were lots of unbelieving Jews listening to Jesus here and his teaching was an invitation to them to believe on him. But Jesus also speaks of the ongoing eating and drinking that belong to the ongoing life of faith. Verse 56 says, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks of my blood, abides in me, and I in him.” Once you begin eating the bread of life you do not stop eating. Just as you need to eat and drink literal food to keep on living so you need to eat and drink Jesus body and blood to keep on living.

This passage then speaks both of the beginning of spiritual life using the imagery of eating and drinking and the ongoing sustaining of spiritual life through eating and drinking Jesus’ body and blood. The Lord’s Supper is only about the sustaining of spiritual life through eating and drinking Jesus’ body and blood. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper he was with his disciples. He did not institute it out among the crowds and invite everyone to take part. The Lord’s Supper was given to sustain and strengthen those who had already believed. When Jesus was preaching to the crowds, he invited people to take and eat the bread of life. That was evangelism. It was not the Lord’s Supper. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, only his disciples were present – representing the church. The Lord’s Supper is for strengthening the faith of those who already believe.

So the imagery of eating and drinking Jesus’ as the bread of life or his body and blood refers both to receiving eternal life initially, but also to maintaining eternal life and in the Lord’s Supper it refers to the maintaining and nourishing of eternal life. In both cases the imagery of eating and drinking is connected to life.

Another point about eating and drinking as symbols of faith has to do with the relationship between faith and Jesus Christ. This is where we see the relevance of the strange language of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood or eating Jesus as the bread of life. That is very striking imagery and what it points to is the profoundly intimate relationship between the believer and Jesus Christ that is established by faith.

In this passage you have the believer and you have Jesus and you have eternal life. But the believer does not eat and drink eternal life. He eats and drinks Jesus’ body and blood and by receiving him he receives eternal life. Eating and drinking refer to receiving Jesus himself and with him we receive the gift of eternal life. The passage also uses the imagery of coming to Jesus to mean the exact same thing as eating Jesus as the bread of life. In verse 35, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” Coming to Jesus and believing in Jesus and eating Jesus as the bread of life all mean exactly the same thing.

And what is central to them all is the idea of receiving Jesus himself. We receive him as our saviour. Salvation is a relationship with Jesus. You cannot separate what Jesus gives us, such as forgiveness and new life, from Jesus himself. What this means is that when we believe in Jesus we are united to him. He dwells in us and we dwell in him. This is something that is very clear in the Lord’s Supper. We actually eat the bread and drink the

wine. The bread and the wine, which symbolize Jesus having died for us but who is risen to new life, are taken into our very bodies. Faith actually brings Christ into our very being. This is easier to understand if we remember that Jesus dwells in us through his Spirit. Through the Spirit Jesus actually lives within us.

Paul speaks of this in Galatians 2:20 when he says, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” What this means is that the eternal life that Jesus is speaking about in John 6 is not sort of out there as something Jesus gives us, but rather it is Christ’s life which he shares with us by coming to live in us through his Spirit. The forgiveness of sins is not some reality that is out there it is Christ’s own righteousness that becomes our righteousness because of we become one with him.

This is the meaning of the language of eating Jesus as the bread of life and eating his body and drinking his blood. Jesus makes it clear that faith in him makes us one with him. We receive Jesus into our very being so that his life is our life and his status is our status. Jesus makes this explicit in verse 56 when he says, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.” The imagery of eating and drinking teaches us that when we believe in Jesus we receive Jesus himself into our being so that he abides in us and we in him.

This idea is explicitly connected with the eating and drinking at the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:16 which says, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” The key word here is participation. That word is not used in John 6, but as we have been seeing that is the idea conveyed by the imagery of eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ. We participate in Jesus.

Now this is not something that we can fully comprehend. It is different from our normal way of thinking about things. It’s hard to imagine exactly what it means. The key is to just follow the idea as far as Scripture takes it and not to stress over the fact that this way of thinking is very different from how we usually think of things. Jesus is speaking about a profound spiritual reality – that in some profound way he and his people are united together. The best way to deal with this type of thinking is just to take it as far as Scripture takes it and delight in what it says and what it means without getting frustrated because we can not fully understand it.

Here Jesus is teaching us that we receive eternal life through receiving him – that when we believe, we receive Jesus himself and thus we abide in him and he in us. And that unity – that oneness with him – is salvation. It is all tied up with our becoming one with him. And that means eternal life. We receive his very life and that life is the life of the world to come. But that life is inseparable from Jesus himself. Eternal life is this close relationship with Jesus and with the Father through the Spirit. It is a sharing in the very life of God.

Another insight that we get from thinking about faith using Jesus’ symbolism of eating and drinking is that that faith is experiential. Eating is related to hunger and the satisfaction of our hunger. Drinking is related to thirst and the satisfaction of our thirst. Jesus makes this point back in verse 35, “I am the bread of life; whoever

comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” This teaches us that Jesus satisfies profound spiritual desires.

As human beings we have deep longings and spiritual desires. There is a spiritual hunger that longs for satisfaction. There is a spiritual thirst that longs for quenching. There is an emptiness that longs to be filled. There are desires that long for satisfaction. We long for peace. We long for purpose. We long for happiness. We long for fulfillment. We long for relationships. We long to love and be loved. As human beings we are not complete – there is an emptiness that longs to be filled.

Jesus’ teaching here about eating and drinking him points to himself as the one who satisfies our deepest longings. If we eat his body our hunger will be satisfied. If we drink his blood our thirst will be quenched. In our sinful condition we seek to satisfy our longings and desires in things like money and status and pleasure and human relationships. Human relationships come to closest to giving us deep satisfaction, but even with satisfying relationships with other people there is a sense that something is still missing. The reason that human relationships come to closest to satisfying our souls is that they are closest to a relationship with God.

Jesus claim in this passage is that we are fully satisfied only in him. Verse 27, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the good that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” Verse 35 “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” Psalm 63 speaks of this in OT terms. Verse 5 “My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night.”

This is a multifaceted satisfaction. It is closely related to receiving Jesus as the one who died for us and who rose from the dead. That is where Jesus focuses our attention in connection with eating and drinking. The bread is his flesh which he gives for the life of the world. The blood is shed blood – the blood shed on the cross. The satisfaction comes from receiving Jesus as the one who died for us and who is alive forevermore. That means that the satisfaction is rooted in what Jesus achieved on the cross – the forgiveness of sins – reconciliation with God – life in the Spirit – eternal life. The satisfaction that Jesus speaks about in these verses is the eternal life that is the result of what Jesus achieved by giving his life for us, but as we have already seen that eternal life is his life.

Eternal life one of Jesus’ ways of referring to everything that he achieved for us. Eternal life is the opposite of perishing. It is being saved from condemnation. The one who has eternal life “does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24) It is the abundant life that Jesus speaks about in John 10. And according to Jesus in John 17, it is knowing “the only true God and Jesus Christ whom [he has] sent.”

Robert Yarbrough gives a helpful summary of eternal life in the NT. “Eternal life is one of the unifying themes of the NT. It is a term that describes the salvation that God bestows on those who trust and serve him. It

denotes not only the length of time that God's favor extends to his people but also the quality of existence that they may enjoy as they worship and serve him." (Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology)

Eternal life is not only about living forever, it is about the quality of life as well. This is the ultimate quality of life matter. And it is rooted in life with God. It is all about fellowship with God through Christ. It is about being loved by God and loving God. It is about the enjoyment of worship. It is about the joy in serving God. It is about love for God overflowing into love for people.

But while we are in this life, we do not experience all the blessings of eternal life in their fullness. We receive eternal life through believing in Jesus, but we do not yet experience the fullness of eternal life and our experience of eternal life must be nurtured by ongoing eating and drinking of the body and blood of Jesus. Jesus hints of this in John 6 when a number of times he refers to feeding on him. Verse 54 "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." Feeding is an ongoing action. It is not a one time thing. And that is even more clear in the Lord's Supper where the eating and drinking is to be done regularly until the Lord returns.

We have eternal life in Jesus, but it must also be nourished. This idea is inherent in the imagery of eating and drinking. We must eat and drink regularly both physically and spiritually. And that is where the nourishment idea in connection with the Lord's Supper comes in.

In the Lord's Supper we eat the bread and drink the wine or juice. We eat the bread which is a symbol of the broken body of Christ and we drink the wine/juice as a symbol of Jesus' shed blood. But by receiving the symbol in faith we receive the thing signified. By faith we actually receive Jesus. We are actually receiving Jesus as the one who died for us. We are receiving Jesus as our saviour and so our life is being nourished and strengthened. It is strengthened in a special way because of the sacramental context. These physical symbols and actions have been instituted by Jesus for the purpose of nourishing our faith. We not only hear the message that Jesus gives himself to us, we see it in symbols and in actions. And we not only receive Jesus' offer of himself to us in our minds, we express that faith physically – we act it out. And the combination of inner receiving by faith and taking and eating by faith – is designed by Jesus to strengthen our faith and nourish our souls. The Holy Spirit works in connection with our faith and the actions to confirm to us the reality of Jesus giving himself to us and our receiving of him.

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses this in beautiful and pastoral language. In Q/A 75 we read, "How does the holy supper remind and assure you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all his benefits? A. In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat this broken bread and to drink this cup in remembrance of him. With this command come these promises: First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross. Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and

blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and pour-out blood.”