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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Lesson 30

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John 6:52-71

"To Whom Shall We Go?"

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Introduction

Paul has a phrase that would be suitable as a title for this section of John's Gospel. It is the phrase, "the offence of the cross," which he uses in the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Galatians. There he writes, "And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution?, then is the OFFENCE OF THE CROSS ceased." The Greek word translated, "offence," is the word from which we get our English word scandal.

The "offence" of the cross is its condemnation of the human race. It says very plainly that man cannot save himself. He must have a Substitute to bear the penalty of sin. Thus, to preach the cross is to preach the sin, guilt and condemnation of man, as well as the saving sufficiency of the atonement accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The word "offence," the English rendering of the Greek word skandalon, is not quite as vivid as the figure in the original, for skandalon referred to the trigger stick of a trap, to which the bait was fixed. When the bait was touched, it sprang the trap on the animal, leading to its death. Thus, the skandalon was a fatal, deadly thing. It was intended to kill, and it did kill. Thus, while often rendered in English by offence, it is to be understood as a moral, fatal offence. That is what the apostle sees the cross to be, the fact that Christ had

to die for the accomplishment of redemption giving evidence of the fatal condition of those for whom He suffered. The cross, then, is the death-stick to human self-righteousness. Let us put it in these ways:

- 1. It is the death-stick to morality, since it indicates that works of righteousness cannot save.**
- 2. It is the death-stick to philosophy, since the cross is an appeal to faith and not to human reason.**
- 3. It is the death-stick to culture, since its truth is revealed to babes.**
- 4. It is the death-stick to caste, since not many noble are saved.**
- 5. It is the death-stick to the human will, since it calls for its surrender to divine revelation.**
- 6. It is the death-stick to pride, since it reveals clearly and openly the fatal wickedness of human sin.**
- 7. It is the death-stick to self, since it openly proclaims the truth, "Ye must be born again" (cf. John 3:3, 7).**

When a man has become enlightened by the Holy Spirit, however, that which formerly was a death-stick to human nature becomes something to "glory in" (cf. Gal. 6:14). The saints who know their need and its sufficiency take great joy in singing,

***"I take, O cross, thy shadow,
For my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than
The sunshine of His face;
Content to let the world go by,
To know no gain nor loss,—
My sinful self my only shame,
My glory all the Cross."***

This matter will come before us as we complete our study of John, chapter six. Jesus' final words on this occasion include the final words of His conversations with the Jews, who are disputing among themselves (cf. vv. 52-59), and His final words to some of His disciples who begin to fall away from Him due to the frankness and the severity

of His words concerning His atoning work (cf. vv. 60-65). The final few verses describe the falling away of the disciples, our Lord's appeal to the twelve, and Peter's response (cf. vv. 66-71).

THE DISCOURSE SUMMARIZED

The occasion (John 6:52; cf. vv. 25, 41, 60). The conversations with the various groups took place in Capernaum, and they were occasioned by questions (cf. v. 25), by requests (cf. v. 34), by dissatisfaction (cf. v. 41), and by a striving among themselves (cf. v. 52). The disciples, hearing the replies of the Lord, also respond by questioning comments (cf. v. 60). To all of these things the Lord has replied or replies.

After the mentioning of the fact that the bread that He will give is His flesh, which He will give for the life of the world (that is, of both Jews and Gentiles), the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (cf. v. 52).

Our Lord's reply to the question is primarily repetitious of things already said. He has said, "I am the bread of life" (cf. v. 35). He has also said that men should eat it (cf. v. 50). And He has said that the bread is His flesh (cf. v. 51). The conclusion is plain: Men should eat His flesh. The conclusion was difficult for His listeners and provokes the question, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

The content (John 6:53-58). To some the following words have to do with the Lord's Supper due to the similar sounding phraseology, but there is little reason other than that to identify the words of our Lord with the communion.¹ Perhaps we can get at the meaning of the section by answering several questions.

First, what is the meaning of Jesus' *flesh and blood* (cf. vv. 51, 53-56)? The "bread of God" (v. 33) is His flesh and blood (v. 54), or simply Jesus Himself (v. 57). Thus, our Lord Himself is the force of His flesh

and blood. Two activities are ascribed to Him: (1) He came down from heaven (cf. vv. 51, 58): *incarnation*; (2) He gave His flesh for the life of the world (v. 51): *vicarious satisfaction* of the divine justice *in death*. It is clear from the words here that He did not accomplish His atonement by incarnation alone.

Second, what is the meaning of *eating and drinking* (cf. v. 53)? The figures are a very graphic way of referring to believing in Christ in His crucified character as spiritual nutrition to the soul. Eating and drinking suggest personal assimilation (cf. vv. 35, 40, 47). Calvin is right, I would think, in referring the activities to faith. He says, "faith alone is, so to say, the mouth and stomach of the soul."²

The remainder of the section deals with the results of His work, and there are several truths to stress here. In the first place, ***His death is vicarious***. The preposition "for" is the Greek word *hyper*, and a sacrificial meaning is intended.³ It is also likely that it indicates a substitutionary force in this instance.⁴ (Cf. 13:37-38; 15:13; 17:19; 18:14)

In the second place, ***His death provides eternal life*** (cf. vv. 53-55, 58). Presupposed is spiritual death and alienation for all. What we obtain through the death of Christ is something that is higher than the life that Adam had before the fall. And, further, in every case in which the flesh is eaten and the blood drunk there is the gift of eternal life, and that necessitates the resurrection of the body. In other words, the appropriation works in every case; there is eternal security for those who eat and drink. This is not the case with the life that the Arminian gets, for it may come to an end in his estimation. As Spurgeon says somewhere, the Arminian, if he has believed in Jesus Christ, will "sweetly find out his mistake," will have "the good luck," to use a term a non-sovereign plan of God might countenance, to find that his life will be a well of water springing up into everlasting life. The final

perseverance of all the partakers of the Lord Jesus, wrought out by the preservation of God, is guaranteed by the Word of God.

In the third place, ***His death provides union*** with Christ, the believer's Representative (cf. v. 56). United to the Last Adam in the union of the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:9), life unfolds in enlightened understanding, ardent love, and joyful hope of the fullness of the presence of God. What a future unfolds for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ! Like birds, which have been hatched by a stranger, when they hear the voice of their true mother, fly to her immediately, so the soul born of God, when the Father's voice is heard, flies to His wings and takes eternal refuge in His bosom.

Finally, ***His death provides resurrection*** (cf. v. 54). Here is the climax of the program; from depravity via sanctity to the glory of God!

There are several other thoughts that may be found in this section also. In the first place, the blood of Christ suggests deliverance from wrath by the death of a substitute, and calls to mind the sprinkling of blood on the doorposts and upper lintel at the time of the Passover. The flesh of Christ suggests life and reminds of the eating of the lamb at that time. Resurrection is, then, the natural conclusion to the partaking of His life (cf. 11:25-27).

And another point is of interest. In verse 53, the aorist tenses are used, pointing to the eating and drinking as an event, perhaps suggesting initial salvation. In verses 54 and 56, present tenses are used, perhaps referring to continuous appropriation, that of the process of sanctification. He is not only the giver of life, as in the feeding of the 5,000, but also the guide of life, as in the walking upon the water.

In verses 57 and 58, the Lord points out that all life is dependent upon Him. We live "by" Him.

The locale (John 6:59). This verse concludes the paragraph, "These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum."

THE DIFFICULTY STATED

The aversion of the disciples (John 6:60) . One must keep in mind the three groups of peoples that appear here. First are the Jews (cf. vv. 41, 52). Then there are the disciples (cf. vv. 60-61, 66). And, finally, there are the twelve, a term for the apostles (cf. vv. 67, 70). Keeping the separate groups in mind will clarify matters here. In chapter seven further groupings will be seen.

Many of the disciples of the Lord, when they heard the words of Jesus concerning the eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood, added to the strong words concerning unconditional election, murmured at His words, taking offence at them, and said, "This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" The Greek word, rendered by the English word "hard" in the Authorized Version, is a word that means hard to take rather than hard to understand. That is why Jesus says, "Doth this offend you?" (cf. vv. 60-61)

This reaction to the necessity of the shedding of the blood of the Messiah is a trait of fallen human nature to this day. Some years ago I visited a home in pastoral ministry, and the lady of the home told me how she had gone forward in a meeting as a child many years ago in a small town in Texas, thinking that she was accepting Christ as her Savior. She joined the Methodist church and was a nominal Christian for years. Then, I came to their home for an Inter-Varsity Christmas meeting, for her son had become interested in the fellowship in the local university. I spoke from the Epistle to the Romans. She recounted her experience in this way, "Romans! I was so surprised, for a Christmas message. The next Sunday we came to your church and kept coming off and on for a few months. Then, as you were preaching a series on the blood, or something along that line, I remember a morning in which I felt a great burden roll off my

shoulders. It was just like a great weight, and I felt free for the first time in my life, I believe (she did not seem to realize that she was saying things very similar to the experience of Bunyan's Christian in his Pilgrim's Progress). We went out to the car, and I got in and said to Jay (her husband), 'Something happened to me this morning. I don't know what it was, but something happened. I felt a great burden leave.'" In the following years she has grown in the faith, and her son is a missionary for a well-known mission agency.

That was a favorable reaction to the blood, but Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy's was different and fatal, for she has said, "Jesus' blood was no more efficacious to cleanse from sin when shed upon the cross, than when it was in His veins" (*Science and Health with A Key to the Scriptures*, p. 330; 1913 ed.). This is the same woman who spoke of marriage as "legalized lust."

The answer of the Lord (John 6:61-65). The answer of the Lord to the complaint of many of the disciples is threefold in nature.

First, He says that, if the things that He has said offend them, what will be their response when they see Him ascend up where He was before? Cf. vv. 61-62. It is possible that He means that the process of the return to the Father will either clarify the faith of the believers, or it will further stumble them. The fact that the condition contains no conclusion, or apodosis, makes the precise force of our Lord's words somewhat doubtful. Barrett comments, "The whole process of the return of Christ to the glory of the Father, including as it did the crucifixion, was both the supreme scandal, and the vindication of Christ as the Bread of Life; and, at the same time, the proof that eating his flesh and drinking his blood was neither murderous nor magical."⁵ Barrett leans to the view that Jesus means that, if they are offended now, they will surely be offended then, so far as some are concerned, but also that others will find the offence removed, as they respond in faith. In other words, he sees a possible double sense in the words,

just as Westcott also does.⁶ The death, resurrection, and ascension would pose a crisis for them, demanding a decision of faith.

Second, Jesus points out that the Spirit, not the flesh, quickens (cf. v. 63). One cannot understand spiritual truths found in the Word without the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit and, further, His words are life-giving, pointing to the work on Calvary where life is won for believers. His words and His work are one.

Third, some, He says, cannot believe, because they have not been "given" to Him by unconditional election, calling, and justification by the Father (cf. vv. 64-65). The expression, "from the beginning," occurs again in this precise form in the Greek text only at 16:4. It probably refers back to the beginning of the ministry of the Lord, but it would not be impossible in this gospel for it to go back to the beginning found in 1:1. Further, a very similar expression, seemingly meaning essentially the same as the one found here, occurs in 8:44, 15:27, and often in 1 John, and it may refer to a more distant past. At the least, it means that Jesus knew the believing ones from Judas at the beginning of the ministry. Morris comments, "John uses this as the opportunity to tell us that Jesus knew those who would believe and those who would not. This was not simply a matter of observation, but right from the beginning He knew."⁷

Seeking to explain the departure of some to the true believers, so they would understand what was happening and had happened, Jesus said that it was for this reason (AV, "therefore") that He had said, "no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father." (Cf. v. 44) Morris puts it well, "The predestinarian strain continues. Jesus has already told them that it is only as the Father draws a man that he can come to Him (v. 44). He explains now that He had told them this so that they might not be perplexed when some did not believe. Unbelief is to be expected apart from a divine miracle. It is impossible for anyone to come to Christ without the Father's giving him the grace

to do so. Left to himself the sinner prefers his sin. Conversion is always a work of grace."⁸

In effect, then, the Lord has replied to those who murmured about the hard to take sayings, "Hard? Impossible it is for some!" (Cf. Mark 10:26-27)

Barrett is right, "Coming to Jesus is not a matter of free decision, and the present circumstances will make clear (vv. 66 ff.) the difference between opinion and faith."⁹

THE DEPARTURE OF MANY DISCIPLES

The declaration of John (John 6:66). From that time a large number of disciples ceased to follow the Lord, evidently not only leaving the synagogue but also all that discipleship meant. Did they return to their former vocations, after having left them to follow our Lord in His itinerant ministry?

It would seem, although there is basis for a difference of opinion, that John regards them as apostates. This would seem to be so from the fact that Peter's confession that follows is a simple confession of a fundamental belief in the Messiahship of Jesus. And the disciples who went back are distinguished from the faith of Peter and those that remained. They must not have had Peter's faith, namely, that He was the Holy One of God. One thinks of 1 John 2:19, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us" (NASB). The seeds of this departure, manifested then and often through the centuries in the professing church, will culminate in the future in the manifestation of the Man of Sin.

The incident tells us a good bit about the preference of the Lord regarding the manning of his spiritual army of followers, who are to do

the work of the Lord, after He has gone. "He preferred a little knot of men confirmed in the faith," Godet notes, "and resolved to make the sacrifices it imposed, to such numbers who were only in appearance attached to his person. Seen from this point of view, the method followed by Him in the preceding scene is easily explained. The words by which He had characterized the nature and privileges of faith were eminently adapted to attach believers to Him for ever, and at the same time to revolt such among these crowds as were impelled by the instincts of carnal Messianic views." ¹⁰

The declaration of Peter (John 6:67-69). To departure of the disciples Jesus' response was a question directed to the twelve, "Will ye also go away?" (Cf. v. 67) ¹¹

That provoked Simon Peter's great statement of attachment to Christ and his accompanying confession of faith. He replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (NASB). ¹²

The passage is of some importance. Our Lord's ministry in the beginning had provoked great interest and large crowds had followed Him as He walked and taught. The popularity now is beginning to falter, since men are beginning to perceive that He is not attempting to be the head of a popular, politically involved, Messianic movement to wrest rule from the Romans. The Jewish leaders, now the multitude, and even some of His "disciples" have deserted Him. The big test is at hand. What about the apostles? Will they, too, follow the others?

It is at this point that Peter, the spokesman for the twelve, gives his magnificent expression of undying allegiance to the ministry of the Lord Jesus (cf. Matt. 16:13-19). The defection of those close to the Lord does not move him and them with him. How can they forsake the Lord (give the word here its full meaning)? He speaks words of eternal life (cf. v. 63).

The verbs of verse 69 are perfects, suggesting the arrival at a settled conviction of faith and knowledge; in this they continue. The personal pronouns, "we" and "thou," bear some emphasis in the original, the apostle stressing both their conviction, as over against those who have departed, and the Lord's position and person.

The term, "the Holy One of God," is quite rare, applied to our Lord on only one other occasion by the demon-possessed man in the synagogue at Capernaum (cf. Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). It is rare in the Old Testament, although it is similar to the often occurring, "Holy One of Israel." It stresses the consecration and separateness of our Lord. "It sets Him with God and not man," Morris concludes.¹³ It does seem to have Messianic force here.

Peter's question is one for our day, "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

Various inadequate answers are suggested. Shall we go to philosophy?

Now, philosophy is a valid study, in spite of what some men say ("Philosophy is man's attempt to befuddle himself scientifically!"), dealing with consistency and clarity concerning reality. But philosophy, being human reasoning, must always be under, not over, the Word of God.

A man cannot talk without the use of philosophy. The Laws of Thought are simply part of a branch of philosophy, or logic. The law of identity, "whatever is, is," the law of contradiction (or non-contradiction), "nothing can both be and not be," and the law of the excluded middle, "everything must either be or not be," are part of our speech, communication, and thinking. So everyone is really a practicing philosopher in this sense.

Aristotle saw the issue clearly. He said to the opponents of philosophy: Either one should philosophize or one should not philosophize, but if one should not philosophize, then only in the name of philosophy. In other words, we are faced with the nasty question, "In the name of what discipline can we make the assertion that there is

no philosophy?" So, even if one should not philosophize, still one must philosophize. It is really a simple issue: Shall we philosophize well or poorly. Now, we philosophize best, when we recognize the limits of philosophy and subject it to divine revelation.

Shall we go to science? It is the popular view that science is neutral, but it is not neutral. It begins with its own set of presuppositions. These are faith stances, and science has a passel of them. To mention only a few:

- (1) *The universe can be understood by a rational procedure. Can that be proved, or has it been proved?*
- (2) *Order exists in the universe and is discernible. Has that been scientifically proved?*
- (3) *Nature behaves in the same way, whether observed or not. Proof?*
- (4) *The phenomena observed here and now are also valid there and then (cf. Rev. 21:251).*
- (5) *The human mind is able to form descriptive concepts of the universe.*
- (6) *A direct, correct correspondence exists between events of the universe and our sensory-brain responses.*
- (7) *Scientists and their fellow-workers do and report their work honestly. Science itself provides no a priori basis for these faith stances, or assumptions. It is not simply the Christian believer who lives by faith. He is in the company of all the scientists, although the latter are unable to see their companions in their work of faith.*

In fact, science and the scientific method are grounded in the inductive principle, but that principle is incapable of being proved or disproved by an appeal to experience.¹⁴

Russell illustrates the failure to induction by relating it to the fact of association and the resultant idea that frequent repetition is the cause

of the expectation of the same thing. "A horse," he points out, "which has often been driven along a certain road resists the attempt to drive him in a different direction. Domestic animals expect food when they see the person who usually feeds them. We know that all these rather crude expectations of uniformity are liable to be misleading. The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken." ¹⁵ In the after-life, it is doubtful that the chicken believes in the principle of induction as an infallible method of understanding reality!

Shall we go to materialism? Our Lord's words regarding covetousness and His parable of the Rich Man's Barn, if we may call it that, speak otherwise. Jesus said, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15). The parable of the man who grew so rich that he thought he might have an easy life, with enlarged barns spending the remainder of his life eating and drinking and being merry, concludes with the solemn and terrifying words, "But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (cf. Luke 12:16-21).

Shall we go to Moses? Well, if we were to go to Moses and his Law, he would point us on to Christ. Did not our Lord say, "For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (John 5:46-47).

Shall we go to religion? The religionists of our Lord's day were unable to take the words of the Lord (cf. v. 60), with the result that they departed from Him. In fact, Jesus said to one of the most respected religious leaders of his day, to Nicodemus, the ruler of the Jews,

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." And then he repeated the injunction in a moment, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again" (cf. John 3:3, 7). Man is perishing in his sin, Nicodemus. Do not wonder, or be amazed, at the necessity of a new birth.

The declaration of the Lord (John 6:70-71). The unanimity of Peter's confession in verse 69, with its, "we believe and are sure" is corrected by our Lord. There is one who has not, Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. He is a devil, a subordinate ally of the devil (cf. 13:2), and yet an apostle of Jesus Christ! How close, and yet how far, we may be to Him!

Conclusion

The chapter has included some important revelation concerning Christ. He is the Bread of Life (cf. v. 35), and He has come down from heaven to give His flesh for the life of not only the Jews, but also the Gentiles (cf. v. 51). To have this eternal life (v. 54), we are to eat His flesh and drink His blood (cf. vv. 53-56).

And it also includes Peter's incomparable response to our Lord's, "Will ye also go away?" Peter's question and affirmation, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life" (v. 68); spoke for the apostles. But, is his response ours? How would we reply to our Lord's query? Let me suggest that we put with Peter's question, "Lord, to whom shall we go?," the declaration of the Prodigal Son who, at the end of his rope, in a flash of divine insight exclaimed, "I will arise and go to my father" (cf. Luke 15:18)! Come, rejoice with the saints,

***"Oh, the love that sought me!
Oh, the blood that bought me!
Oh, the grace that brought me to the fold!
Wondrous grace that brought me to the fold!"***

Footnotes

¹It is unlikely that the Lord's Supper is referred to here, because, first, the eating and drinking bring life, and no qualification is mentioned. And, second, a bodily act would

then bring life. And, finally, "flesh" is not commonly used of the ordinances. Cf. Morris, pp. 376-77.

²Calvin, I, 171.

³Barrett, p. 298.

⁴Morris, p. 374.

⁵Barrett, p. 303; cf. Morris, p. 384.

⁶Westcott, p. 109.

⁷Morris, p. 386.

⁸Ibid., pp. 386-87.

⁹Barrett, p. 305. See the last study in the series for some words on the significance of the necessary and sufficient conditions in the passage in relation to divine election.

¹⁰Godet. II, 258.

¹¹The particular negative particle used by our Lord indicates that the question anticipates a negative reply. "You do not wish to go away also, do you," it might be translated. Cf. NASB.

¹²The textual problem is not quite as easy a problem as modern critics make it out to be. They regard the manuscript support for the reading, "the Holy One of God," to be decisive. Further, it, being a rare phrase, can explain the origin of the other readings, such as the AV's, "Christ, the Son of the living God," as expansions in imitation of expressions found in 1:49; 11:27; Matt. 16:16. On the other hand, there is some important textual support for certain of the variants. On balance, however, it is better to go with the opinion of the editors here.

¹³Morris, p. 390.

¹⁴Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London, 1912) , pp. 37-38; R. Harre, *The Philosophies of Science; An Introductory Survey* (London, 1972), pp. 42-48.

¹⁵Russell, pp. 34-35.