

A Hard Saying

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I mentioned today, we're continuing our study in John's Gospel and we've come to the last section of John chapter 6. I'd like us to just read again at verse 60 where it says, when many of the disciples heard it, they said, this is a hard saying. Who can listen to it? We're taking our title from that verse with, sorry my thing's not quite working here, my computer's locked up, but not to worry, it's on the screen there. The title we're taking, our title today is from that verse where it says that it's a hard saying. And we've been saying this all along for the past two or three weeks, that John chapter 6 is not the easiest chapter to understand, particularly the further you go along through it. It's a very long chapter, it's rich, it's quite intense I suppose at times, and it's definitely hard to take it all in. And in many ways, it's also hard because throughout the whole chapter, it's forcing us to think about eternal life. It's forcing us to think about ultimate reality. It's confronting us with the stuff that really matters for life, for death, for time, for eternity. And the chapter gets more and more intense the further on you read, and it culminates with this stark situation at the end where some people who had eagerly followed Jesus turned back and walk away. And between the beginning and the end of this chapter, you've got an amazing contrast, a remarkable contrast where you've got people who are literally walking miles to see Jesus, they're part of the crowd of 5000 that have fed Him, they follow Him back over to the other side of the lake, people literally walk miles to follow Jesus by the end of the chapter, they walk away. And they don't follow Him anymore. Today I want us to just think about all of that, and we're going to do so under three headings, that we're going to say hard to understand, hard to accept, impossible to ignore. So first of all, hard to understand. The latter part of this chapter, which Murdo read for us, is definitely not the easiest to understand.

And if you are sitting there, reading and thinking, I don't know what this means, then don't panic, it's very understandable if you felt like that. Particularly difficult other words of verse 53 to 56, Jesus said to them, truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, which is a reference to Himself, and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I'll raise him up in the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in Him, abides in me, and I in Him. Now you think, what does that mean? Are we supposed to take that literally?

Is that kind of symbolic language? Is it referring to something else? Is Jesus using imagery? What does that mean? All of this is getting us to think about how we interpret the Bible. And this is something that we mentioned from time to time, and it's something that's very, very important because we can easily pick up the Bible, open a page, read a few lines and think, oh, that's saying to do this, that there are the next thing. And what can very often happen in those situations is that you misinterpret what is being said. And so it's very important for us to think about this, particularly because God's special revelation to us, which is what we call the Bible, his unique revelation to us of himself and of his plans for salvation, that's been preserved for humanity as a piece of literature, the Bible. And that means that in order to understand God's communication to us, we have to be able to understand a piece of literature. And that means we need certain literary skills as we look to read it. And so it's always good for us to think about this from time to time. I want to just highlight two very important things that you need to keep in mind whenever you're reading any part of the Bible and trying to figure out what a passage is saying. First key thing is context. You'll have heard me say that many, many times, but it's so crucial. Whenever you read a verse in the Bible or a passage, you've got to recognize that what that means is shaped by the wider context of the chapter and of the book. And really that's true of all literature. Context kind of a massive effect on what a phrase might mean. I'm going to give you an example, this is an example that I made up. Here is a phrase, okay? And I was drinking up everything that she was pouring out. Okay? Now I'm going to give you two examples of sentences that that phrase can go at the end of. The farmer took his cow into the shed and began milking. There was so much milk that the bucket overflowed and I was drinking up everything that she was pouring out. The lecturer began explaining how the novels of Jane Austen portray the struggles faced by women in all eras of history.

Her teaching was so passionate and encouraging and engaging and I was drinking up everything that she was pouring out. There you go. Exactly the same phrase. The context makes a massive difference to what it means. One is inspiring, other disgusting. Same phrase though. And so that's just an example of why context is so, so crucial. Whenever you go to a passage of the Bible, you've got to make sure you don't just pluck it out and hold it in fresh air. You've got to look at what's come before it and comes after it. That's the first thing you need to remember, context. Second thing you've got to remember is the wider teaching of the Bible. If we flip to the next slide. The wider teaching of the Bible is crucial to keep in mind when you look at any particular passage. That's a key principle that's been at the heart of the Reformed Church for the past 500 years. And the basic rule is summarized in the phrase, scripture interprets scripture. Now what that phrase means is that if you come to one part of the Bible like this one, that's hard to understand. You have to use other parts of the Bible that are not so hard to understand to help illuminate and explain what is being said in the passage that you're looking at. So for example, you know, if you go to the Old Testament, you can find Jacob, for example, who takes more than one wife.

And so you could look at that and you could say, oh, look, the Bible and Doros's polygamy. And people have said that they're like, oh, look, the Bible and Doros's polygamy. But of course, the wider teaching of the Bible doesn't the Bible to teach you the Bible makes it absolutely clear that God does not endorse polygamy. And so that's a that's another example of why, you know, the context of Jacob's life won't tell you in a very obvious way that the Bible outlaws polygamy. But the rest of the Bible does both the early chapters of Genesis, the teaching of Jesus, and the ethical instructions of the epistles. So you've got to you've got to keep that in mind. And again, that's exactly the same, the same as true in other parts of life as well. This is not unique to the Bible. If you take, for example, a local council that provides clean needles to people who are addicted to substances, you could be like, oh, they provide clean needle clean needles to drug addicts. Oh, the local council here is in favor of drug taking. No, of course, it's not. The local council is not in favor of drug taking, but it's trying to it's also not in favor of horrific diseases that can be transmitted through dirty needles. And so you can't, you know, you can't just pick one policy without without recognizing the wider position of an organization. So same thing applies to the Bible. So these two things are so important. context of the immediate passage, wider teaching of the Bible. It's maybe helpful to think about I was going to draw this, but my pen's not working to think about like a road. So if you think about a passage to the Bible, it's like a road, you know, so you're standing on the road, you got to think about what's come behind you, you got to think about what's ahead of you. So that's the context. You got to think about that as you read through a passage.

[8 : 47] But that road has got lots of other roads, other junctions coming off it, just like you have on a map. And those other roads are connecting you to other parts of the Bible and other key teachings of the Bible. Some of those roads might be motorways, big, big, big important teaching in the Bible. Some of those roads might just be little roads, little like the Pentland Road, still not as significant, but still nevertheless important. I find that a helpful image to bear in mind. Just the context is the road you're on, the wider teaching is the bigger network that you are connected to. So with all that in mind, Jesus says right there, you need to eat my flesh, and you need to drink my blood. Now, you could grab that phrase and be like, that's just like horrific, primitive, cannibalistic weirdness. But of course, that's not what it means. And it's not to be taken literally. In fact, we know that it's not to be taken literally because later on, verse 63, Jesus says, the words that I've spoken to you are spirit and life. In other words, one of the things he's emphasizing there is that I'm not talking about literal physical stuff. I'm talking about spiritual realities. So when Jesus says we need to eat his flesh, drink his blood, the language is symbolic. And this makes perfect sense, if you remember, the context of the passage, because we've walked through this long, long path of John chapter six, which starts off with the feeding of the 5,000 with the loaves and the bread. It then moves on to Jesus talking about him being the bread of life, that he is the key staple thing that we need in order to live eternally. And then he presses the metaphor further to say that bread, you've got to receive it, you've got to eat it. And so he speaks in terms of eating his flesh, drinking his blood. And so he's building up a presentation of how he can offer eternal life. Verse 27, he's saying that's the food that we must prioritize. I think that should be on the screen. There we go. We must seek that bread. Verse 33 and 35, he himself is the thing that we need for eternal life. He's the bread of life. In order to make that bread available, verse 51, he will give his flesh. And then verse 53 to 54, we need to be connected to that flesh and blood if we're going to benefit. Okay. Now that's the kind of line of argument in the chapter, that's the context, but you could still be forgiven for saying, well, that still sounds a bit weird and it's still a bit confusing. But the key thing that we need to remember is that it's symbolic. It's pointing us to something else.

It's pointing us to that wider teaching of the Bible that we have been trying to highlight. And that raises the question, well, what's it pointing to? And the answer is it's pointing to everything that the rest of John's gospel is pointing to. It's pointing to the cross.

And when you read John 6 in light of the cross where Jesus died for our sins, it all makes perfect sense because on the cross, he is laying down his life. He's giving his body.

He's shedding his blood. He is the one who's come down from heaven to do that. He's giving himself so that we might have life. And we can only benefit from that. We can only have that eternal life if we are connected to him, if we trust him, if we replace a reliance on what he's done. In other words, if there's no connection to the flesh and blood of Jesus as he died on the cross, then we don't benefit at all. We don't have life.

Now, a couple of things I want to highlight here. Just a couple of lessons to draw out of this point. Very, very briefly, sometimes people have thought, you know, is this chapter referring to the Lord's Supper? So eating flesh, drinking blood, and people have kind of drawn connections with John 6 and the Lord's Supper. And what that sometimes led to in the historical church is the idea that you've got John 6 eating his flesh, drinking his blood, the idea that when you come to the Lord's Supper, that somehow the bread and the wine transforms into the flesh and blood of Jesus. Some people have thought that. I just wanted to highlight that because that's not what we believe. You know, there's kind of the view that John 6 eating flesh, drinking blood, pointing to the cross where Jesus gave us flesh and blood, pointing to the Lord's Supper where you have to take his flesh and blood, eat and drink, and by doing that, you're saved. We don't believe that. That's the kind of view that it's like pointing, John 6 pointing to the cross, cross pointing to the Lord's

[13 : 55] Supper, and the thing you really need is the Lord's Supper. That's not the position of our church, and it's not the reformed position. What we would say is that John 6 is not really talking about the Lord's Supper. It's pointing to the cross in anticipation, and there's a little bit of correspondence to the Lord's Supper because the Lord's Supper is pointing backwards to the cross. So I was going to draw it, but my pen's not working, but I hope you can get the idea that instead of being like John 6 cross, Lord's Supper, that's the thing you need. We're saying John 6 is pointing to the cross. Lord's Supper is pointing to the cross because the thing that you need is the cross. That's what you need.

You need to look to Jesus, dying and rising again for our salvation. Now, if that didn't make any sense, that's okay. You can talk to me afterwards, and I'm more than happy to answer any questions you may have. More importantly is the second two points I want to highlight.

When we talk about the importance of having, recognizing the context of a passage, and when we talk about the importance of recognizing the wider teaching of the Bible, this is teaching us a massively important lesson for both us as Christians and for anyone here who's not yet a Christian. For those of us who are Christians, I'm going to say this just very bluntly, please do not ever present one aspect of Christianity in a way that is out of context or isolated from the rest of the Gospel. Okay? And for anyone who's maybe not yet a Christian in here or watching online, please don't judge Christianity on something that you've taken out of context or on its own. Now, I'm saying that really important. I'm saying that because this happens so often. As Christians, we can kind of pick one aspect of the Bible and we kind of overemphasize it as though that's the most important thing, and it completely obscures what the rest of the Gospel is all about. And we've seen that many times in our own context where we can kind of give the impression that the only thing God cares about is what you do on a Sunday, or what you wear to church, or which church you go to, or whatever it might be. That's to completely elevate one aspect of the truth to a point that obscures everything else and it's completely unhelpful. But as those who aren't yet Christians, the opposite happens, and you're like completely offended by that thing, and you're like, oh,

I was told off by a Christian for playing on a Sunday 30 years ago, so I'm having nothing to do with the church. That's to elevate that one thing and take it in isolation and to ignore the rest of the Gospel. And both of those are crazy things to do, so please don't do them. Please don't do them. Let's make sure that we have a very balanced approach so that we present the whole truth of the Gospel. We must make sure that we don't overemphasize one thing in presenting the Gospel. We mustn't make sure that we overemphasize one thing in judging the Gospel. Please just make sure that you focus on the whole thing as a complete body of truth. Third thing I want to say is that the language that Jesus is using here, the fact that he's pressing that metaphor quite far, and the whole of his discourse in John 6 culminates in really in words that risk being offensive. All of that's reminding us about something wonderful, that's wonderful, that's true about how Jesus communicates with you. It's reminding us that Jesus communicates with you on the assumption that you can think.

And so when we talk about John 6, we're talking about metaphorical language, we're talking about imagery, we're talking about the culmination of an argument, we're talking about all this kind of stuff being pressed further and further. The reason that Jesus does that, yes, it's complicated and yes, maybe it's hard to understand, but that means that he is assuming that you can think. And it's so important to recognize that. I think we've made a mistake about this many times. I think ministers like me have made a mistake where we've kind of give the impression that following Jesus is just you doing everything we tell you, believing, we're saying, believe this, think this, do this, do that, and as though you're not meant to think for yourselves, that's not helpful and not appropriate. Jesus doesn't do that because Jesus knows that you can think. Jesus wants you to think. And that's why at times he uses rich and really quite provocative language. He's expecting you to think. And I guess the crucial lesson that that raises is that do you come to church every week, but never really think, never really think about Jesus and about the claims that he's making about eternal life, about what really matters. Jesus is speaking to us in a way that assumes that we can think.

[19 : 32] So it's a hard saying that's hard to understand. It's also a hard saying that's hard to accept. We see that in the passage verse 56, many of the disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. And that's happened many times since then across the last 2000 years.

People have heard Jesus' message, maybe to begin with they've shown an interest, but then they've turned away from him. And it's even true for us today. We are surrounded by people in our families and in our community who we love so much, but they don't want to accept the claims of the gospel. Why is this so hard to accept? Well, there's lots of reasons. I think that this passage highlights three that are very important. The first is authority. So you see that in verses 53 to 56 and verses 60 to 62. I'm not going to read it all. I just want to highlight that especially important is the phrase, Son of Man. You can see it in the air. If I had my glasses on, I would be able to see it as well. But you can see second line down, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. Now that's a title that comes from the Old Testament, especially from the book of Daniel chapter seven. And again, I don't have time to explain it all. I'd happily explain it to you afterwards if you've got questions. I just want to highlight the conclusion, the fact that that term Son of Man is a title that expresses absolute authority. When Jesus calls himself Son of

Man, he is saying, I am the one who has authority. And that comes from how the titles used in Daniel chapter seven in the Old Testament. And it makes sense with the wider stuff that Jesus is saying. He's saying, I've come down from heaven. He's come from God. He is God himself. That gives him authority. And so Jesus is saying to them, if you could see who I really was, then you would recognize the authority that I have. And of course, that is just consistent with everything else that John has been telling us. If Jesus really is God the Son, if he really is the Word made flesh, if he really can turn water into wine, if he really can multiply loaves and fish to feed 5,000, if he really can walk on water, then he has unique and unmatched authority. Second key thing that we see here is atonement. You see that hinted at in verses 51 to 56. Jesus says he gives his life, he gives his flesh for the life of the world. Now this is really just getting us to the heart of how the Gospel works, getting us to the heart of what the cross is about. Sin is so serious that it puts humanity on a path to death. Now that's a crucial thing to recognize if you're going to understand how Christianity works. Sin puts humanity on a path to death. Not sin can do that, might do that. Sin, that is what sin is. It is the placing of humanity on the unstoppable path to death. That's at the heart of the definition of sin. That path to death can't be broken because by definition sin is, that's what sin is. It's the rejection of God that puts us on a path to death. So the path to death that sin creates cannot be broken. It can only be redirected. And the way that the Gospel works is that the sin that we've committed, that provokes and deserves death is directed off us and onto Jesus. In other words, he dies in our place and in doing so his death deals with our sins. He recognizes us to God and the word we used to describe that as the word atonement whereby the relationship with God that was broken is restored. And so we are saved through that, through Jesus' death and resurrection and by being united to him by faith. And the seriousness of all that is reflected in the transition that Jesus makes in his words where he goes from speaking about bread to speaking about blood because ultimately he's pointing us towards his death.

Jesus saves us by dying a brutal, unjust, agonizing death. And then the third thing that's highlighted is dependence. You see in verse 44, verse 65, both these verses emphasize that for us to come to Jesus we are totally and utterly dependent on God. We can't do it ourselves. We need God to open our eyes. We need him to take the initiative. We are helpless. We are powerless without him. So I'll just summarize them because I went through them quickly. They'll be on the screen. Jesus has absolute authority. And so that means that we are not in control. Our sin is desperately serious. That means that we're not okay. And we are totally helpless on our own. That means that we're not capable of sorting it out.

And all three of those things are hard to accept. They're really hard to accept. I think you have, you know, and you think especially for us today, because all three of those things flies in the face of postmodern secularism that dominates Western society. You know, we live in a world that sort of says, you know, well, you are ultimately in charge of your life. You're deep down good. And you can be who you want to be if you just put your mind to it. And the Bible is saying wrong, wrong, wrong. And you're like, it's hard to accept. But what if all those three are true? What if those things really are true? And this is where we see how amazing the gospel is because the gospel assumes that all those three things are true. But, but they're not the whole truth. Because to get the whole truth in terms of the gospel, you need to add a fourth line. The Jesus died on the cross in your place to fix this. And he did it because he loves you so much. And that's the crucial point that if you don't accept the reality of one, two and three, you are never going to see the incredible beauty of number four. I want to ask four questions and I'm asking everybody here, everyone, whether you're believers, not yet believers, not sure, someone in the middle, I'm asking you all. And I just want you to think about these questions. Can you accept the supreme lordship of Jesus? They're all accept questions. So can you accept the supreme lordship of Jesus so that you recognize him as the Lord of the universe and so that you wake up tomorrow morning thinking, I want to serve him because he is Lord? Or do you want to just keep Jesus in a little corner of your life? Next question. Can you accept the raw, shocking beauty of the cross where the seriousness of sin is so stark and the magnitude of God's grace is utterly breathtaking? Or do you want a much more toned down version?

[27 : 49] Can you accept your utter dependence on God? Recognizing that we've got nothing. We stand before him with empty hands and without him, we can't do anything. And do you want to throw yourself into his arms? Or do you want to just keep things in your own hands a wee bit more? And fourth, and I think for many of you, this would be the hardest one of all. Can you accept that your sin is so serious that Jesus had to die for you and that his love for you is so deep and so strong and so unshakable that he had to die for you? And I'm asking everybody those questions because as Christians, we can live our day to day lives as though we don't accept these things. Many Christians live a kind of double life where we, on Sunday, will come and say, yes, Jesus is Lord and we worship him and then we spend the rest of the week being horrible to our family or our colleagues, being a nightmare to live with and work with. Sometimes we can find ourselves thinking, actually, yes, Jesus has forgiven my sins, amazing, but I'm actually going to just dabble with this sin in the corner of my life, in my private life. As long as no one sees it, it'll be okay. We can find ourselves also thinking, you know, well, God only likes me when I'm doing well. So when you're good at praying, good at reading, good at coming to church, then God likes you better. We can think all those kind of things. And all of that kind of thinking is because we're not accepting, you know, we're not accepting the fullness of what these truths proclaim. So can I affect us as Christians? And for those who are maybe not yet Christians or not sure, all I want to say is that this is what the gospel wants you to think about. And it comes back to what I was saying before, that Jesus wants you to think. And I just want you to think. I just want you to think about it. And if you want to talk about it, please let me know anytime, anytime. But to follow Jesus means accepting all of this. His absolute authority, the desperate seriousness of our sin, our total helplessness and dependence on him, and the fact that his love for you is bigger than anything that I can describe. And that takes us to our last point, which is very, very brief. We're saying that this is hard to understand, hard to accept, impossible to ignore. By the end of the chapter, we've got this stark description of how people respond, verses 66 to 69, where many of the disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the 12, do you want to go away as well? And those who walked away, they weren't ignoring Jesus. They were rejecting him. And so Jesus turns to the disciples and asks them, do you want to go away as well?

Peter replies with one of the greatest statements that a Christian has ever made. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And this is where I hope you can see everything fits together. It all makes sense. John 6 is a long and complicated chapter, but it fits together so beautifully. And because the whole chapter starts talking about eternal life, and it culminates in that great recognition of the fact that the question of eternal life is impossible to ignore. And really, those verses on the screen there are giving us a glimpse of how the whole of history will culminate. Ultimately, when every one of us stands before Jesus, there will be those who had walked away and rejected him. And there'll be those who've trusted him. And Jesus came so that we'll be safe on that day. And his amazing invitation is coming out to all of you today to just trust in Jesus. And that invitation, that question, this whole issue is something that's impossible to ignore. And that might sound like a hard saying. And I get it if it's like, oh man, it makes me a bit uncomfortable to have to think about this. It is a hard saying. But since when has the stuff that really mattered in life been easy? The big, big, big stuff in life that really matters, all of it's hard. But that's because it really matters. And that's why we've got to think.

And so, maybe today, trusting in Jesus seems like that enormous mountain like I spoke to you with the kids. It really is not. Do you know what the enormous mountain was? The enormous mountain was God the Son leaving heaven. God the Son being born in the womb of a virgin.

God the Son growing up as a human. God the Son being despised and rejected by men. God the Son going to the cross and all of God's wrath being poured out. God the Son rising from the dead. That is the mountain. And He went over it. And all that's left for you is a Toblerone. You just need to fit your trust in Him. It's just a wee step of faith.

Amen. ■■■ ■for, ■ installed the healing.