

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN VI. 60–65

60 Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard *this*, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?

61 When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you?

62 What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?

63 It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh

profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, *they are* spirit, and *they* are life.

64 But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him.

65 And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.

WE learn from these verses, that *some of Christ's sayings seem hard to flesh and blood*. We are told that "many" who had followed our Lord for a season, were offended when He spoke of "eating His flesh and drinking His blood." They murmured and said, "This is an hard saying: who can hear it?"

Murmurs and complaints of this kind are very common. It must never surprise us to hear them. They have been, they are, they will be as long as the world stands. To some Christ's sayings appear hard to understand. To others, as in the present case, they appear hard to believe, and harder still to obey. It is just one of the many ways in which the natural corruption of man shows itself. So long as the heart is naturally proud, worldly, unbelieving, and fond of self-indulgence, if not of sin, so long there will never be wanting people who will say of Christian doctrines and precepts, "These are hard sayings: who can hear them? "

Humility is the frame of mind which we should labour and pray for, if we would not be offended. If we find any of Christ's sayings hard to understand, we should humbly remember our present ignorance, and believe that we shall know more by and bye. If we find any of His sayings difficult to obey, we should humbly recollect that He will never require of us impossibilities, and that what He bids us do, He will give us grace to perform.

We learn, secondly, from these verses, that *we must beware of putting a carnal meaning on spiritual words*. We read that our Lord said to the murmuring Jews who stumbled at the idea of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life."

It is useless to deny that this verse is full of difficulties. It contains expressions "hard to be understood." It is far more easy to have a general impression of the meaning of the whole sentence, than to explain it word by word. Some things nevertheless we can see clearly and grasp firmly. Let us consider what they are.

Our Lord says, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth." By this He means that it is the Holy Ghost who is the special Author of spiritual life in man's soul. By His agency it is first imparted, and afterwards sustained and kept up. If the Jews thought He meant that man could have spiritual life by bodily eating or drinking they were greatly mistaken.

Our Lord says, "The flesh profiteth nothing." By this He means that neither His flesh nor any other flesh, literally eaten, can do good to the soul. Spiritual benefit is not to be had through the mouth, but through the heart. The soul is not a material thing, and cannot therefore be nourished by material food.

Our Lord says, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." By this He signifies that His words and teachings, applied to the heart by the Holy Ghost, are the true means of producing spiritual influence and conveying spiritual life. By words thoughts are begotten and aroused. By words mind and conscience are stirred. And Christ's words especially are spirit-stirring and life-giving.

The principle contained in this verse, however faintly we may grasp its full meaning, deserves peculiar attention in these times. There is a tendency in many minds to attach an excessive importance to the outward and visible, or "doing" part of religion. They seem to think that the sum and substance of Christianity consists in Baptism and the Supper of the Lord, in public ceremonies and forms, in appeals to the eye and ear, and bodily excitement. Surely they forget that it is "the Spirit that quickeneth," and that the "flesh profiteth nothing." It is not so much by noisy public demonstrations as by the still quiet work of the Holy Ghost on hearts that God's cause prospers. It is Christ's words entering into consciences which "are spirit and life."

We learn, lastly, from these verses, *that Christ has a perfect knowledge of the hearts of men*. We read that "He knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray Him."

Sentences like this are found so frequently in the Gospels that we are apt to underrate their importance. Yet there are few truths which we shall find it so good for our souls to remember as that which is contained in the sentence before us. The Saviour with whom we have to do is one who knows all things!

What light this throws on the marvellous patience of the Lord Jesus in the days of His earthly ministry! He knew the sorrow and humiliation before Him, and the manner of His death. He knew the unbelief and treachery of some who professed to be His familiar friends. But "for the joy that was set before Him" He endured it all. (Heb. xii. 2.)

What light this throws on the folly of hypocrisy and false profession in religion! Let those who are guilty of it recollect that they cannot deceive Christ. He sees them, knows them, and will expose them at the last day, except they repent. Whatever we are as Christians, and however weak, let us be real, true, and sincere.

Finally, what light this throws on the daily pilgrimage of all true Christians! Let them take comfort in the thought that their Master knows them. However much unknown and misunderstood by the world, their Master knows their hearts, and will comfort them at the last day. Happy is he who, in spite of many infirmi-

ties, can say with Peter: "Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee." (John xxi. 17.)

NOTES. JOHN VI. 60-65.

60.—[*Many therefore of His disciples.*] It is plain that these were not true believers. Many who followed our Lord about, and were called His "disciples," had no real grace in their hearts, and followed Him from carnal motives. We must expect to see the same thing in every age. Not all who come to church, nor all who profess to admire and follow popular preachers, are real Christians. This is far too much forgotten.

[*This is an hard saying.*] This does not mean "hard" in the sense of being "difficult to understand." It is not so much "hard to the comprehension," as "hard to the feelings." Parkhurst defines it as "shocking to the mind." It is the same word that is used in the parable of the talents: "Thou art an hard man" (Matt. xxv. 24); and in the Epistle of Jude: "the hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him." (Jude 15.)

Some think that the "hard saying" means the whole discourse. My own opinion is that it refers specially to our Lord's concluding words about eating His flesh and drinking His blood.

[*Who can hear it?*] The "hearing" here is evidently the hearing so as to believe, receive, and obey. "Who can believe, receive, and obey such a saying as this?" (See John v. 24; viii. 43; x. 3, 16, 27; xviii. 37; 1 John iv. 6.)

61.—[*Jesus knew in Himself.*] This means, that He knew by that divine knowledge through which He always "knew what was in man." (John ii. 25.)

[*His disciples murmured at it.*] This would be more literally rendered "His disciples are murmuring about this." He spoke at the very moment of their murmuring.

[*Doth this offend you?*] This means, "Is this saying of mine a stumbling block to you? Is the doctrine of eating my flesh and drinking my blood, too humbling a doctrine for your hearts to receive?"

62.—[*What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend.*] This means, "What will ye think and say of my ascension into heaven?" What will your feelings be, if you behold this body of mine going up to that heaven from whence I came down? Will you not be much more offended? (See John iii. 12.)

The first thing, we must remember, that the Jews "murmured" about, was our Lord's saying that He "came down from heaven." The second thing was, His saying that He would "give them His flesh to eat." Both times our Lord's, human body was the subject.—Here our Lord asks them what they would think if they saw that same body "ascending up" into heaven. Even then, after His ascension, they would have to "eat His flesh, and drink His blood," if they desired eternal life. What would they think of that? Would they not find it even more difficult to receive and believe?

[*Where He was before.*] This is an expression which no Socinian can explain. It is a clear assertion of the "pre-existence" of Christ.

Some think, as Olshausen and Tholuck, that our Lord only means generally, "If you are offended and unbelieving, even now, while I am with you, how much more will ye be, when I go away!" But this is a frigid and unsatisfactory interpretation.

It is fair to say that Stier thinks, with Chrysostom, Cyril, Theophylact, and others, that our Lord did not mean that His ascension would be a greater difficulty to His disciples, but that, on the contrary, it would remove their doubts and weaken the offence which they now felt. Hutcheson and Alford seem to agree with this. But I cannot see it. Stier thinks our Lord implied, "Then, after my ascension, it will be disclosed to you, how, and in what way, my human corporeity, become heavenly and glorified, may be given to be eaten, and to be drunk." (Compare John viii. 28.)

63.—[*It is the Spirit, etc.*] This text is, perhaps, one of the most difficult in the Gospel of St. John. It is easy to slur it over, and be satisfied with a vague impression that it means “We are to put a spiritual sense on our Lord’s words.” That, no doubt, is a true idea. But when we come to a close examination of the words which compose the verse, I think no one can be satisfied with such a loose interpretation of Scripture. That our Lord’s words “are to be taken spiritually,” may be very true. But to say so, is not to explain the verse.

What is meant by the expression, “It is the Spirit that quickeneth”?

(a) Some think that “the Spirit” here means, “the divine nature of Christ” (as Rom. i. 4; 1 Peter iii. 18), in contradistinction to His human nature, here called His “flesh.” (See 1 Cor. xv. 45.) They consider our Lord to mean, “It is my divine nature, as God, which is the means of communicating spiritual benefit to men. My human nature, as flesh, could of itself, do no good to souls. It is not, therefore, any carnal eating of my flesh that could be of use to you, and I did not mean any such eating.”

This is the opinion of Cyril, Cartwright, Poole, Bishop Hall, Trapp, Toletus, Rollock, Hutcheson, Leigh, Burkitt, Quesnel, Burgon, and Wordsworth.

(b) Some think that, “the Spirit” here means “the Holy Spirit,” the Third Person of the Trinity. They consider our Lord to mean, “It is the Holy Spirit who alone can convey spiritual life to the soul of man. The mere eating of flesh, whether my flesh or any other flesh, cannot do good to the inner man. When, therefore, I spoke of ‘eating my flesh’, I did not mean the bodily act of eating any literal flesh, but a very different kind of eating, and a very different sort of flesh.” This is the opinion of Zwingle, Melancthon, Calvin, Bucer, Ecolampadius, Pellican, Flacius, Bullinger, Cocceius, Diodati, Piscator, Musculus, Baxter, Lampe, Henry, Scott, Stier, Besser, Alford.

(c) Some think that “the Spirit” here means, “the spiritual doctrine, or sense,” as opposed to “the letter,” or literal sense of scriptural language. (2 Cor. iii. 6.) They consider the sentence to mean, “It is the spiritual sense of my words, and not the literal, which is quickening, or life-giving to the soul. When I spoke of ‘my flesh,’ I did not mean my flesh literally, but my flesh in a spiritual sense. My flesh literally could be of no use to anyone.” This seems to be the opinion of Chrysostom, Theophylact, Euthymius, Brentius, Beza, Ferus, Cornelius à Lapide, Schottgen, Pearce, Parkhurst, A. Clarke, Faber, Barnes, Webster. But it is not easy to make out clearly, in every instance, what is the precise meaning put on the words, “the Spirit,” by the interpreters who take this third view. There are not a few shades of variety in their opinions.

I must acknowledge that I find it difficult to give a decided opinion on the comparative merits of these three views of the expression before us. There is something to be said for each of the three. On the whole, I think the second and third are more satisfactory than the first; and I incline to prefer the second to the third. But I say this with much hesitation.

Rollock, who holds strongly that “the Spirit” means Christ’s divine nature, maintains that “the flesh” means the whole human nature of Christ. He thinks that the meaning of “the flesh profiteth nothing” is, that all the works of our Lord’s body, whether in life or death,—His fulfilling the law, His sufferings on the cross,—derive their whole efficacy from the union of the two natures. “It is the divine nature that is life-giving. The human nature, alone and separate from the divine, is useless and unprofitable.” He holds, therefore that to eat the human nature of Christ alone (*i.e.*, His flesh) could do us no good; as, unless we could eat His divine nature also, it would be unprofitable. He concludes, therefore, that the only eating of Christ that can be useful to the soul, must of necessity be the spiritual eating of faith, and not any carnal eating of the Lord’s supper. Hutcheson agrees with this view.

The expression, “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life,” is just as difficult as the former part of the text. The word “spirit,” here, at any rate, cannot mean the divine nature of Christ. If it were so taken, the sentence would be unmeaning.—The word Spirit must either mean the “Holy Spirit,” or “the spiritual sense,” as opposed to the letter. The sentence then

might be paraphrased in either of the following ways:—(1) “The words that I speak to you, received into your hearts and believed, are the Spirit’s influence, the ministration of the Spirit, and the Spirit’s means of giving you life.” This is Rollock’s view. Or else (2) “The words that I speak unto you are to be taken in a spiritual sense; or, are spiritual words: and, taken in that sense, are life-giving to the soul.”—This is Augustine’s view.

I must honestly confess that neither of these explanations is quite satisfactory; but they are the nearest approach I can see to a satisfactory interpretation. The sentence is evidently a concise elliptical one, and it seems impossible to convey it in English, without a paraphrase.

Alford paraphrases the sentence thus: “The words that I have spoken, viz., the words ‘my flesh and blood,’ are spirit and life: spirit, not flesh only; living food, not carnal and perishable.” I venture to think that this explanation is not more precise or satisfactory than either of those I have suggested.

The expression “The words that I speak unto you,” must probably be confined to the words our Lord had spoken about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, and not referred to the whole discourse.

After all, however difficult and elliptical the sentence before us may be, there is a truth which throws light on it, with which every true Christian must be familiar. It is the words of Christ brought home to the hearts of men by the Spirit, which are the great agents employed in quickening and giving spiritual life to men. The Spirit impresses Christ’s words on a man’s conscience. These words become the parent of thoughts and convictions in the man’s mind. From these thoughts spring all the man’s spiritual life. The soul is not benefited by bodily actions, such as eating or drinking, but by spiritual impressions, which the Holy Spirit alone can produce. In producing these spiritual impressions the Spirit specially employs the agency of Christ’s “words,” and hence comes the great principle, that “His words are spirit and life.”

64.—[*There are some of you that believe not.*] The connection of this sentence with the preceding verses seems to be this: “The true account of your murmuring and thinking my sayings ‘hard’ is your want of faith. You do not really believe Me to be the Messiah, though you have followed Me and professed yourselves my disciples. And not really believing in Me, you are offended at the idea of eating my flesh and drinking my blood.”

[*Jesus knew from the beginning who...believed not.*] This is one of the many places which declare our Lord’s Divine knowledge of all hearts and characters. He was never deceived by crowds and apparent popularity, as His ministers often are. When it says “from the beginning,” it probably means “from the beginning of His ministry, and from the time when the unbelieving ‘many’ before Him first professed to be His disciples.” Of course our Lord, as God, knew all things “from the beginning” of the world. But it does not seem necessary to suppose that this is meant here.

Rollock remarks our Lord’s example of patient teaching and preaching to all without exception, though He knew that many did not and would not believe. He points out what a pattern it is to ministers. Christ knew exactly who would believe. Ministers do not know.

[*Who should betray Him.*] We should not fail to notice in this expression our Lord’s marvelous patience in allowing one whom He knew to be about to betray Him to be one of His Apostles. It was doubtless meant to teach us that false profession must be expected everywhere, and must not surprise us. How much we ought to tolerate and put up with, if our Lord tolerated Judas near Him! The pain and sorrow which the fore-knowledge of the conduct of Judas must have caused to our Lord’s heart, is a circumstance in our Lord’s sufferings which ought not to be forgotten.

65.—[*And He said, Therefore said I, etc., etc.*] The connection of this verse seems to be as follows: “There are some of you that believe not, and that is the reason why I said to you that no man can come to Me unless the Father gives him grace to come, and draws his heart to Me. The Father has not given you grace, and drawn you to Me, and therefore you do not believe.”