

They were all leaving. It felt like just hours ago there was a multitude of thousands gathered around, well-fed and inspired for the fight, and now they were leaving in droves. It wasn't a virus induced frenzy, there was no ban on groups of 10 or more. But suddenly, the warrior found himself looking at a troop of 12. His army had walked off the battlefield, back to their lives, back to the things they were doing before. They abandoned him, leaving him to face the powerful enemy alone, and by leaving his side, they really were going over to the other side. They had deserted the **Son of God Going Forth to War**.

No matter how battle-tested this warrior was from all the scrapes he had been in, no matter how valiant he would prove in the war to come, the fact is: these wounds hurt. They were daggers coming from those who called themselves fellow soldiers, followers, disciples. Turns out, they were only in it for the bread, and bread wasn't enough to keep them faithful for the long run. Today we get a glimpse into this Warrior's heart **as he's rejected by many followers**, but we also see the key to victory for the faithful who cling to the **Son of God Going Forth to War**.

Our text for today comes from John 6: 66-68. **"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."**

The day before, Jesus had fed five-thousand men, along with a whole multitude of their families, with little boy's lunch. The miraculous sign was enough to baffle them about as long as their bellies remained full. They were more than willing to crown him as their master and commander, as long as he kept the food coming. **"Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."** (John 6:14).

But Jesus knew they intended to make him king by force, to keep him around like a genie providing for their every wish. Imagine the army that never has to worry if there is enough bread and toilet paper around and on top of it, the general himself can heal everyone's wounds. That's the kind of army to enlist in!

But they soon came to realize something. It wasn't going to be that easy. As much as they hoped for a continuous supply of *Wonder Bread*, all their leader Jesus seemed to want to talk about was himself as some kind of mysterious bread from heaven. **"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day...This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever."** (John 6:53,54,58).

Just who does this guy think he is? **"Is this not Jesus, the Son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? (John 6:42). "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52).** So when they heard him say these things, many said, **"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (John 6:60).** I'm not following this lunatic anymore. **"From that time on many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."** (John 6:66). They flaked on him. The bread they wanted wasn't the kind he was going to keep offering, and the bread from heaven he was offering wasn't what they wanted.

So the saying goes, "Beggars can't be choosers." But don't we do this begging and choosing all the time. "On this journey with Jesus, I love the parts where he takes care of me, and provides me, and gives me a mansion in heaven. But I'm not so sure I want to chew on the rest of this bread he's offering. There's pain with it, there's suffering, there's self-denial, there's loved ones dying, there's isolation. I don't think I can swallow all that! That sounds like a battle I'm not really interested in.

So, daily, the old Adam in us, deserts the front lines of battle and takes the same walk of shame those followers took back to the things we did before. The battle is too fierce, I'd rather go back to what seemed so much easier, eating and drinking and being merry, the life of self-indulgence. This battle is hitting kind of close to home and I'd rather not actually face my real problems, so I'm going back to the shadows where I can hide. The war has changed over the years

and I'm not going to battle with marching orders that are 2000 years old. And another thing, I'm not risking my skin anymore if my commander isn't going to run everything by me to make sure it's okay, first.

If it was up to everything inside of us, we'd walk of the field and away from our God forever, just like those disciples rejecting Jesus on that day. Imagine the pain, the rejection, the isolation that the Warrior felt on that day—abandoned, betrayed, used. It's not just paying lip-service to say that Jesus is able empathize with us in every way. At moments like these, we see how true it is, **“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” (Isaiah 53:3).**

You can almost taste the disappointment in his voice as he turns now to the Twelve (disciples). **“You do not want to leave too, do you?” ... (John 6:67)** half-expecting his closest friends to follow suit and walk away.

In these crazy times of encouraged social distance, where you're feeling isolated, lonely, abandoned, your Warrior knows exactly where you're at, what you're going through, and how you feel. An “Army of One” was never literally more true than the Warrior Son of God's battle campaign to Calvary. Even forsaken completely in his final moments as his Father turned his face away, yet the Warrior finished the war with his dying breath. So the promise of the Warrior is sealed in blood, **“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5).**

The Warrior's commitment is unwavering, he's courageous, full of integrity, everything you'd want in your leader. So why do so many turn back? Because the road he treads is hard. The crown of life comes only from him who wore the crown of thorns, and so it is for us too. **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22).** First, the cross, then the crown!

So what is it that keeps us from deserting? What keeps us in the fray? Surely not our determination, not our own unwavering commitment, for we've seen how often that fails us. It's the powerful words he has spoken to our hearts. **“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day...Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.” (John 6:57).**

What is he talking about, what does he mean—to eat his flesh and drink his blood? **“I tell you the truth,” Jesus says, “he who believes has everlasting life.” “I am the bread of life...if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.” (John 6:47,51).** To eat and to drink is to believe in the Son of God.

“These words are spirit and they are life.” (John 6:63) These are the words that calm our shaking knees, that bind us to the Warrior in faith. They steady our wavering hearts, and inspire our mouths to Peter's bold confession, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68).**

When everything else in this world brings death, your words alone bring life, O Lord. Your words bring pardon and peace, your words bring comfort and solace. You beckon us to your side and bolster us with your presence. There is nowhere else to go, not back to fleeting pleasure, not back to the shadows, where we bowed to the idols of ourselves, not to the brilliant teachers of the day. Everywhere is death, but **“we believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:69).** **“You have the words of eternal life.”** You have come that we may have life, and have it to the full. There is nowhere else to go, but to stand at your side.

The Son of God really was the Promised Warrior, mighty in battle, an “Army of One.” As Luther wrote in his beloved hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*, “For us fights the valiant one, whom God himself elected...he holds the field forever.” He is the solitary warrior, able to stand alone, but we are not him. We can't stand alone; we must stand in his shadow. We need him every waking hour of the battle, “by our side upon the plain, with his good gifts and Spirit.” And he has surely promised to be there with us always to the very end of the age. With the Warrior King by our side, and his eternal Word in our heart, the “kingdom's our forever.” Amen.

“Now let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:23) Amen!

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John 6:66-68 The Warrior Rejected by Many Followers

Pastor Timothy Prieue