

## Eating: How Good It Is! (Part Three)

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As we have seen previously, the lives of Jacob and Esau provide major spiritual lessons. Esau represents the uncalled man of the world, and Jacob, the elect of God. The Bible plainly shows that Jacob's election gave him a decided advantage over Esau in fulfilling God's purpose. Inherently, he was no better than Esau, but his outlook on life—his perspective or worldview—was decidedly different. His approach to the business of life did not happen suddenly, but it developed as God led him through life. This enabled him to make better choices than Esau because he contemplated and desired a better alternative, one that Esau's totally carnal mind could not access.

Another important instruction for us derives from the same series of incidents. Most of the choices involved in God's way of life will take place within common, ordinary circumstances, like eating, drinking, working and relating within a family and community. In Ephesians 1, the apostle Paul lists some of the major advantages God's calling provides, yet even these have no value unless we choose to use them as God intends in the everyday events of life.

Today we live in cultures that lure people into a spiritual stupor that gradually desensitizes people to true spiritual and moral values. Jesus warns that the time would come when, because lawlessness abounds, the love of many in the church would grow cold (Matthew 24:12). He also warns through Paul that in this time people would be so perverse as to be without even natural affection (II Timothy 3:3). We live in those times, and it requires a clear vision and a steadfast conduct to avoid being sucked into following the worldly crowd. God has given our cultures over to allowing the carnal mind to spend itself on continuous sensation-seeking stimulation. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life are virtually running wild.

One paraphrase of Romans 1:28 changed the term "reprobate mind" (KJV; *debased mind*, NKJV) to "degrading passions seeking stimulation." Another rendered it as "irrational stimulation resulting in monstrous behavior." Without a strong resistance to this almost unrelenting pressure, such stimulation will gradually produce a stupor, an apathy, an unfeeling indifference toward the highest priorities of life, that is, our relationships with God and fellow man. If a person does not defend himself against lawlessness, he will lose his God-given love. A Christian must guard himself strongly against becoming caught up in the stupor-inducing spirit of the times of which Paul forewarns us.

His warning is that now is the time of our salvation, and we must use our advantages yet not look down in scornful pride on the unconverted. We have these advantages only because God has favored us, not because we are in any way inherently better than others. They are not based on anything we have earned through any works we may have done. The world around us is indeed stumbling around much like Esau did, but God is bringing good to us now. In common terms, Paul is saying to us, "Hey! Wake up! You can be replaced. Don't lose your crown through carelessness and laziness."

Paul writes in Romans 11:22: "Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off." He minces no words in informing us that patient kindness and sternness are both aspects of God's character. Despite how we might feel at any given time during a trial, He has showered us with abundant kindness. This understanding, however, must be balanced with the knowledge that His

demeanor toward us can be reversed if we waste so great an opportunity as the grace He so abundantly pours out on us. We, too—though His elect—can be objects of His sternness.

In the church's scattering, we are even now recipients of a measure of His sternness. Yet even so, His sternness is carried out in love ultimately to prepare us better for His Kingdom than we would have been had things continued as they were. It is good to recall that when an unconverted person's blindness is wiped away, God grafts them in as He did us. God accepts some now and rejects others because God wills it. We, then, need to dig in and take care of the business at hand, God's business, submitting to His work of forming and shaping us into His image.

With this in mind, we must consider this sobering question: Will we, like Jacob, use our advantages profitably, or, like the likeable Esau, fritter them away in the world?

### **Feeding the Mind**

The experiences of Isaac's sons lead directly into a vitally important principle derived from eating: the assimilation of knowledge into the mind, especially the knowledge of God by which we grow. Everybody knows the truism, "We are what we eat." Our body can work only with the food it is given. Aware of it or not, junk-food junkies run a constant risk of destroying their physical health. They abuse their bodies by not giving themselves the materials they need to function well over a long period. What tastes good on the tongue may not support good health.

The Bible expands upon this, teaching us that feeding the mind runs parallel to this truism. The mind can work only within the quality and quantity of what we provide it in the way of genetics, formal instruction, examples of other's lives and personal experiences digested and assimilated through thoughtful meditation.

Jesus says in Luke 12:22-23, "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing." The phrase "do not worry" suggests a greater-than-normal concern about managing what we possess. Jesus directs this admonishment toward everyone because, no matter how much we possess, the drive to get more remains, along with insecurity about losing what we already have. He is not saying we should be unconcerned about the quality of what we eat; His concern is that we worry too much about whether we will have *anything* to eat.

Our focus, though, is on His statement that life is more than food and clothing. It indicates that stability and serenity of mind must come from within a person, not from outward, physical provisions. To set one's heart on material possessions or to worry about the lack of them is to live in perpetual insecurity. This approach to life is a sure-fire way to deprive ourselves of a major blessing of life God wants us to enjoy. His calling enables us to live an abundant life in peace and joy. In order to do this, we must be weaned away from our overwhelming dependence upon physical things. In other words, we will not find balanced emotional stability unless and until our minds are fed with a nutritious spiritual diet.

God reveals this truth in II Timothy 1:6-7: "Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." It takes the Spirit of God to produce a truly sound mind. This verse also implies that, as long as the mind is devoid of God's Spirit, it cannot be considered to be truly healthy. Any mind that lacks the Holy Spirit will, like Esau's, be limited in its outlook, unstable to

some degree, and focused on itself. It may be very sharp regarding material things, but it will be deficient in the ability to cope with life in a godly manner because it cannot see things in a proper, righteous-or-unrighteous context. Instead, it will have a strong tendency to twist situations toward its own self-centered perspective. This does not make for good relationships.

### **Definitely a Parallel**

In John 6:63, Jesus expands on a part of this subject: "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." This is a simple yet profound statement. God's Spirit is truly more than words, but to understand this point, it is enough to know that God's words—"the words *I* speak to you," as Jesus says—are spirit, and they play a large role in producing the abundant life God intends we live. This quality of life is not achieved through physical things. Material things can be helpful, but without the true concepts contained within God's Word, the abundant quality will be missing because true abundance ultimately depends upon spiritual things, not material ones.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 adds to this concept:

And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.

This is one of the earliest references to the parallel between physical and spiritual eating. It is not directly stated but implied. God intended Israel's experiences in the wilderness to instruct the Israelites that all of life, both physical and spiritual aspects, depends upon God's providence. These verses also confirm that leading a good life, an abundant life, is dependent upon one's spiritual, mental and emotional base. These elements of the mind determine one's outlook, goals and reactions to the myriad vicissitudes of life. These verses confirm that God directly leads us into many of them, as a means of instructing us, producing dual results: first, to experience them and develop certain characteristics; second, to test us so both He and we can see where we stand and how we cope.

A major problem is that human nature compels us to focus almost totally upon the physical. God provides us "wilderness experiences" to let us know that there is a spiritual aspect to life that requires feeding and maintenance just as surely as the physical. Prayer, study, meditation and obedience are the assimilation process in this parallel. Within this feeding/assimilation process, our relationship with God, worship and religion should be enhanced to play an effective, positive role in life. Worship is more than adoration and reverence; it is the *response* of the whole person to the entirety of God's will in all aspects of life. In the church, at home, on the job and in the community, our direction must always be whatever God wills.

Starvation of the spirit is less obvious on the outside than physical hunger because the spirit starves much more slowly and it resides within. Spiritual malnutrition may go unrecognized for long periods because the body and life goes right on. Yet just as surely as one's body gives signs that it needs nourishment, so does the spirit, and it, too, will eventually be recognized on the outside by its symptoms.

When the body cries out for food, one feels emptiness in the stomach, weakness in the muscles and even sleepiness. If it goes on long enough, a faintness and headache may arise. But when the spirit is malnourished either from deprivation or a harmful diet, the gradual reaction in life is different.

Spiritual weakness appears, as does sin. With sin comes anger, irritability, exasperation, depression, discouragement, melancholy, despondency, gloominess, bitterness, hatred, resentment, self-pity, hopelessness, despair, paranoia, envy, jealousy, family conflict, arguing, divorce, drunkenness or other addictions, and competitiveness as self-centeredness deepens.

A purpose of Deuteronomy 8:2-3 is to emphasize to Israel and now to us that the *source* of spiritual nourishment is more important than the nourishment itself. If we have the right source, the nourishment will be good. Otherwise, the situation is hopeless. Our source of nourishment must, of course, be God.

When tempted by Satan, Jesus quotes this verse (Matthew 4:4). He implies in His answer that, unlike Esau, He received a vitality that sustained Him even though He had not physically eaten. Therefore, He had no need to succumb to Satan's temptation. Israel also demanded bread in the wilderness. They ate and proceeded to die there. Jesus denied Himself bread, instead trusting God in submission to Him, retained His righteousness and lived.

Something similar to this appears again in John 4:31-34:

In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But He said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." Therefore the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought Him anything to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work."

The disciples expect Jesus to be both physically tired and hungry. John notes in verse 6 that he was indeed wearied from the journey. But when they urge Him to eat, He is no longer weary. In the meantime, doing the work of God and seeking His Kingdom had become His food; it drew Him, filled Him, energized and strengthened Him. It is exhilarating to know God's will and to know that we are doing it! What a sense of satisfaction and well-being it adds to our lives!

## **The Pure Word of God**

Jeremiah experienced a similar exhilarating fullness:

O LORD, You know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. Do not take me away in Your longsuffering. Know that for our sake I have suffered rebuke. Your words were found, and I ate them. And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.  
(Jeremiah 15:15-16)

Isaiah 55:1-3 contains an appeal, continuing the theme that there is a spiritual food that nourishes the inner man and fills one's life in a way and with abundance that all of a person's material things cannot:

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen

diligently to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance.  
Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an ever lasting covenant with you—the sure mercies of David.

That God is speaking about His Word is seen in the word "listen," which is directly connected to the phrase "eat what is good." This food is, of course, spiritual, and its source is God. Interestingly, He says to come and buy, but not with money. This food cannot be purchased with material wealth. All the money in the world cannot purchase it, but it still must be bought. Recall that the foolish virgins in Matthew 25 are advised to go out and buy oil from those who sell in preparation for the coming of the Bridegroom.

The "food" in Isaiah 55 and the "oil" in Matthew 25 can be bought only by means of the dedication and commitment of one's life in submission to Christ. By being a living sacrifice in prayer, study, meditation and obedience, one becomes energized by the food of God's Word. In addition, one can "purchase" it only from those appointed by God to "sell" it. It can only be bought from those already converted and provided by God with the gifts to teach it to others. In most cases, this is the ministry of the true church.

Jeremiah 3:15 provides us with clear Old Testament evidence that the principle of feeding the mind with the correct instruction leads to good spiritual health: "And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." God clearly states that a mind fed with the right things can produce wisdom, holiness and happiness. In other words, He promises that those who hear Him will be fed the elements of an abundant life through shepherds who exhibit godly character. God's Word, if it is believed and practiced, produces a unique perspective of life and a balance that cannot be found through any other means. Nothing that man has produced through philosophy or religion can even come close. These elements of human society have played major roles in producing restless, anxious, violent cultures.

We must choose to secure the best diet for the mind to utilize and assimilate into one's moral and spiritual character, as well as other expressions of personality. The world produces an almost overwhelming amount of spiritual junk food and outright spiritual garbage, and it is within easy reach of any mind anywhere no matter where one lives.

Peter writes:

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because "all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever." Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. Therefore, laying aside all malice, all guile, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby. (I Peter 1:22-25; 2:1-2)

Notice the implications for one's mental health in this passage. Today, health experts emphasize eating organic foods grown without harsh chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Non-organically grown foods are known to be deficient in nutrients and may also contaminate the body. Modern health practitioners also emphasize cleansing the body internally through certain regimens. Peter is saying a similar thing here in a spiritual, moral and ethical context. God's pure Word can purify the mind,

freeing it from the corruption of our pre-conversion experiences. This will happen, though, only if we consistently—daily—eat it and use it as we would eat and use good foods in feeding and caring for our physical bodies.

Ephesians 5:25-27 confirms this spiritual process:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.

All of the companies that produce "health foods" claim that, if we will just use their products, our physical health will improve. Peter essentially claims the same thing will be the benefit of eating and using God's Word—except that he extends improved health all the way to eternal life! He specifically points out that one benefit is the production of unfeigned love of the brethren. It is love expressed that makes life abundant for both giver and receiver.

### **God Expects Growth**

Following I Peter 2:1, in which he admonishes us to rid ourselves of the fruits of spiritual junk food, Peter lists evidence of a mind afflicted with a poor spiritual diet. Malice is ill will, the desire to inflict pain. Deceit is lying or crafty, seductive and slanderous activity. Hypocrisy is pretending to be what one is not. Envy is the strong desire to possess what belongs to another. Evil speaking is using the tongue to gossip, deceive others or destroy reputations.

Peter proceeds to encourage us to crave God's Word just as a baby craves milk. He is not encouraging us to desire elementary spiritual food but emphasizing the energy we should exert to get good spiritual food. Babies demand milk as if their very life hangs in the balance at each feeding.

The apostle calls God's Word pure, meaning uncontaminated, unpolluted by fraud or deceit. God's Word is truth (John 17:17). David says that God's Word is refined seven times (Psalm 12:6). Truly, Peter is teaching us that God's Word promotes spiritual growth and good health just as good food can do physically.

In using milk as a metaphor, Peter is in no way chiding people as Paul does in Hebrews 5:12-14. The former uses milk simply as a nourishing food because his emphasis is on desire, not depth. Paul uses milk as a metaphor for elementary because he wants to shock the Hebrews into comprehending how far they had slipped from their former state of conversion.

Paul also uses milk as a metaphor for weak or elementary in I Corinthians 3:1-2: "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able." Paul judges the Corinthians as weak based upon their behaviors and attitudes, which reflected no spiritual progress. So he "fed" these immature Christians elementary knowledge because things of greater depth would have gone unappreciated, misunderstood and unused. These references directly tie spiritual diet to growth in understanding, behavior and attitude.

Paul's milk metaphors are scathing put-downs! Undoubtedly, he seriously hurt the feelings of many in the congregation, yet he is free and clear before God of any charge of offense. He does not

question their conversion, but he certainly rebukes their lack of growth. He rightly judges that they *need* to have their feelings hurt so they could salvage what remained of their conversion.

Hebrews 5:12-14 repeats this imagery:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

In I Corinthians 3, the embarrassing immaturity that required him to feed the people like babies also produced strife and factions in the congregation, proving that the people were far more carnal than converted. The Hebrews account is more complex: The people had once been more mature but had regressed. It is a situation vaguely similar to elderly people becoming afflicted with dementia, except that faith, love, character, conduct and attitude were being lost rather than mental faculties. This resulted in the people drifting aimlessly.

An additional insight regarding an insufficient spiritual diet appears in the next chapter. Paul tells them that their problems are directly related to being lazy. *Dull* in the phrase "dull of hearing" in Hebrews 5:11 is more closely related to "sluggish" or "slothful." It is translated as such in Hebrews 6:12, ". . . that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

Paul charges them with being lazy listeners; they are not putting forth the effort to meditate and apply what is taught them. They are, at best, merely accepting. That they are not using what they hear is proof enough for Paul to understand that they are not thinking through the seriousness or the practical applications of the teachings. In other words, they are not assimilating what they hear, and the result is a lack of faith and a consequent faithlessness. His rebuke is far more serious than the one in I Corinthians 3 because these people are older in the faith. They have frittered away a large amount of time that would have been far better spent on spiritual growth.

Paul attempts to shame and shock them into realizing how far they had slipped by calling these grown people—some of them undoubtedly elderly—infants. He goes so far as to tell them that they are unacquainted with and unskilled in the teaching on righteousness. In other words, he attributes to them the one particular trait of infants: that they do not understand the difference between right and wrong, a characteristic that defines immaturity. A parent must instruct and chasten a child until it understands.

The Bible provides ample evidence that a poor spiritual diet results in a spiritually weak and diseased person, just as a poor physical diet works to erode and eventually destroy a person's physical vitality. Similarly, we can see that a person can be in good spiritual health but lose it through laziness or another form of neglect. Just as a mature adult needs good, solid nourishment to maintain his vitality and remain free of disease, the spiritual parallel follows. For one to grow to spiritual maturity and vitality, a mature Christian needs solid, spiritual nourishment, assimilated and actively applied, to continue growing and prevent regressing, as opposed to the Hebrews sluggish spiritual deterioration.

### **The Shepherd's Responsibility**

Near the end of his first epistle, Peter writes, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint [*compulsion*, margin] but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (I Peter 5:2-3). The Greek word translated as "shepherd" embraces all the things a shepherd would do for a flock of sheep such as protecting, penning, guiding and feeding. All these categories fall within the notion of promoting growth.

These two verses succinctly define a pastor's job as promoting growth in the flock by feeding, protecting, guiding and leading the minds of those within it. This function is accomplished in a wide variety of ways, including preaching, counseling, publishing material, being a godly example and correcting appropriately and in measure.

Jesus magnifies our understanding of a pastor's responsibilities by adding His authority in His command to Peter in John 21:15-17:

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to Him, "Tend My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep."

The King James translators blur a distinction Jesus makes by translating two different words into the single word "feed." The New King James corrects this deficiency in verse 16 by using "tend," the exact same word translated as "shepherd" in I Peter 5:2. It has a far broader application than the word rendered "feed" in verses 15 and 17. Taken together, these words reveal that a pastor has broad responsibility for the overall health and protection of the flock. Applying this principle back to physical health, good health and well-being require a multifaceted program beyond just eating good food. For instance, we must also get regular and sufficient sleep, avoid bodily injury and maintain good attitudes.

Earlier, we saw that Jesus speaks about the energizing power of spiritual food. As we progress in following His teaching, an interesting and vital transition occurs: He becomes His followers' spiritual food, and unless we are eating of Him, we find we have no life in us. God willing, we will pursue this aspect of maintaining good health in Part Four.