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EAT THE WORD

I like to eat. Lately my physique shows that more than I would like. Food is our friend, and like any friend I enjoy its company. Of all the food groups my favorite is chocolate. In some circles I am known as one who likes exotic foods. (By that I mean Thai, Greek, Cantonese, and Japanese rather than snake, spider, ant, or dog.) Of all the things in the Bible that people are told to eat or not to eat, perhaps the most interesting is the word of God.

Most people like or dislike foods based on their experience, culture, and physical characteristics. Some people may like one food, while others despise it on the first taste. On rare occasions that which a person likes as a child becomes detestable later in life, or that which was hated as a child becomes tolerated or enjoyed in adulthood. Generally, though, our tastes are established in childhood and remain essentially the same throughout life. So it is also with the law and prophecies of God

There are those who, by training or nature, love the taste of God's word. David was such a person. He wrote about the taste of the teachings of God. "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps 119:103) (I never was terribly fond of honey, so I just replace that word with chocolate in my mind.) Jeremiah also said he ate God's word, and liked what he tasted. "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts." (Jer 15:16)

On the other hand we find people today who seem to find God's word distasteful. Some of them are like I am with snake and squirrel. They have never tasted the word, and have no desire to do so. Others have eaten the words, but were unable to digest them. Clarence Darrow, for instance, had read the Bible before participating in the John Scopes "monkey" trial. He had found no flavor in it, and proceeded to use what he could not savor to try to destroy those who found it sweet. Still others today find they cannot eat the word because they have been taught that bitter was sweet. They enjoy the bitterness of sin and cannot enjoy the sweetness of righteousness.

God specifically commanded two of his prophets to eat scrolls with his prophecies on them. Both were conditioned to regard God's instructions as sweet. Their reactions are instructive.

On the one hand there is Ezekiel. "Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll, and go speak unto the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that roll. And he said unto me, Son of man, cause thy belly to eat, and fill thy bowels with this roll that I give thee. Then did I eat it; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness." (Ezek 3:1-3) The nation of Israel was in the midst of captivity and persecution. The message was of restoration. What could be sweeter to a captive than that? The word of God was sweet because of the results that were promised.

There are many parallels between the books of Ezekiel and the Revelation. In a clear similarity to Ezekiel, John is told to eat a scroll of God's prophecy. "And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter. (Rev 10:9-10) Unlike Ezekiel, John found God's word both sweet and bitter. It sounded sweet, but when fully digested caused unease. Unlike Ezekiel, John and the church were enjoying a measure of freedom and peace. Unlike the prophecy to Ezekiel, the scroll that John ate promised persecution. It was sweet, because it promised ultimate victory, but before that victory must come the Roman persecution.

Just like the prophets, God's people today may find the Word both sweet and bitter. The word of salvation is like honey to those who are aware of sin. It is refreshing to know the promise of salvation. Yet the man of God must also realize that there are many who reject that promise. The sweetness is tinged with the bitterness that some will reject it. When one loves others, God's promises may be bitter along with the sweet.

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GO DO LIKEWISE

I make my money by the freeway exit. It's not much of a life, nor is it much of a living. Nevertheless, it is what I have. It is about all I have. Shelter is scarce, food scarcer. Dignity is almost a forgotten commodity. Education I have, but scant good it does me. My constant companions are weather and hunger, and maybe a few pigeons that live in the underpass. (And if I could reach their nests, they might no longer be companions.) Yes, I am that homeless man.

I stand on my corner with my sign. "Homeless, Hungry, Please help. God bless you." Someone once suggested I add that last line because it would bring in more money, and it probably has. Guilt is a wonderful thing. Yet, maybe I believe it just a little. Did God put me on this corner so I could give you a chance to get his blessing? If you give me something I really do mean the blessing.

There I stand, and the cars come by. When the light is green I don't even try. They won't stop; they are conditioned to go on green. Besides which, they have somewhere to go. Otherwise they wouldn't be passing my

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corner. There's no reason to stop here, other than for a red light. But when that red light comes, I come alive.

Most of the cars that pass, you would think the drivers don't see me. How can they not? I am standing right by the window. They look the other way, and pretend to be saying something to the passenger. Or maybe they are talking about me. Either way, they look away. They saw me, because we made eye contact. But it was brief and, to them, undesirable. They have their own lives, and I am not part of them. They have their own gods, and even my sign doesn't wake them. If they could cross over to the other side of the street, I bet they would, but this side is the turn lane; this side leads to where they want to go. As soon as they turn their head, I know. This person will give me nothing.

A few of the cars that are stopped are a little different. There is that one guy in the three piece suit that sometimes gives me a buck. Some toss me change. Others toss it in the street, just to see me risk my life

for it. When I hear the windows coming down, I know that I will at least get something. I've gotten to where I don't care that, most of the time, it is just to ease their conscience. I pretend they really want to give more, but just can't, even though they wear a three piece suit.

One guy was different, though. He was stopped at the red light, and opened his window. When I went up to the car to get whatever he offered he said, "Get in." Whoever heard of somebody telling the homeless guy on the corner to get in? I wasn't about to get in that car. Who could say whether he was going to take me somewhere and beat me up? You always hear of people who let you into their cars and then rob you at knife point. Still, he waited even after the light turned green and the cars behind were honking. I couldn't cause a scene, so I got in. He drove to the next street, made a left, went past the hospital, and stopped at the diner a block or so later.

This man got out, came around the car, and even held the door for me to get out. Scared me half to death. But then he led me into the diner. I know the person seating us tried not to look at me, but this man just said, "A booth for two, please." When we were seated he recommended the chicken-fried steak. "They say they have the best in town."

As we waited for the food I finally had to ask. "What is this all about? What are you doing?" His answer stunned me.

"I'm just doing what my king told me to do." His king? This is America; we have no kings. And he was clearly a local. What sort of king could he be talking about?

He explained. He said he was part of a different kind of kingdom. It doesn't have boundaries. Its currency is good deeds, and its king is Jesus. Now, I know about Jesus. Who, with any education in this country, hasn't heard about Jesus? We may not believe he is who he claims to be, but we have heard of him. This man was claiming to be one of his subjects.

The food came and we talked a while. He asked me about myself. Hey, I'm a homeless man. What is there to say about me that you can't see? I'm hungry; I'm dirty. (I admit I would like to clean up more often, and the few times it rains are a blessing.) I beg money on the street corner, for God's sake. What more could anybody want to know? But he asked me other questions. Who was I? Where did I grow up? What was it like growing up? He could tell I was an educated man, so he asked about school, and whether I had gotten a degree. I was trying to eat, but this man was actually getting my life story out of me. The good and the bad. I thought I had grown too

numb, but he even had me crying as I told about my parents, and people I grew up with. The thing was, he wasn't just asking questions; he was listening to my answers. Occasionally someone will talk to a homeless man. Usually it is not repeatable in polite company; but then I am rarely in polite company. Even when someone talks to a homeless person, though, they usually aren't ready to listen. This man was ready, willing, and able.

After he heard my life story, he said he wanted to tell me about another homeless man. Hey, this was his dime, so what could I do but listen. Besides, the pie had just come.

This other man, he said, lived a long time ago. He was born on the bottom floor of an inn, or perhaps in an outbuilding. His first bed was a place to store hay. Before he was two years old his parents had to leave the country, just to save his life. When he did return to his homeland he had to move to another area, because the new king where he had been born would still want to kill him. (And he was not even five years old.) His dad probably died before he became a man. He was trained as a woodworker, but rarely relied on that trade. When he grew up he became homeless. His mother was still living, and he could—and sometimes did—stay with her. He became homeless out of choice. He said he had a job to do that wouldn't let him stay anywhere, because his home was not really here. As far as he was concerned, he had been homeless all his life, and was soon to go home. He went around the country teaching and healing. And it seemed that some of those who got his most special help were the homeless. He healed one guy who lived in the cemetery. He helped lepers, who had to live alone outside the city. He told one person who said he wanted to follow him that he had no place to lay his head. (I know all about that.) He was a homeless man who cared about homeless people.

There came a time, my benefactor told me, when this homeless man drove the government wild. They hated him so much that they killed him. He was so homeless that they buried him in a borrowed grave. The guy who fed me laughed at that. "Borrowed was right. He only borrowed it for about three days, and then didn't need it any more." He told me that the homeless man came back alive and came out of that borrowed grave. He was on his way home to heaven.

Of course I had heard the story of Jesus, so I knew he was the homeless man of the story. I just had never heard the story put in quite those terms before. I had always thought of Jesus as one of the middle class workers, who could afford to travel and give up his job. Instead he lived off the generosity of a bunch of women. And he had a bunch of other men doing the same. They begged for food sometimes. They took grain from the fields, which was legal at that time. This Jesus that I was now being told about was a different Jesus. He was like

me. He was like me so that he could understand me, and I could understand him. This was a man I could identify with.

I'm not saying I believe everything about him. I will have to think about that. But I have plenty of time to think. And to read. In addition to the meal the man in the car gave me a Bible to study. Said he had another one at home. Still, this one was all marked up like it was his every day Bible.

After we had eaten a meal, he took me back to my corner. He gave me a hundred dollars. Made me promise not to spend it all at once. I think I will keep that promise. Said he would come by sometimes and check on me. No, I wasn't going to be some "pet project" to make him feel better. He said this was something his king wanted him to do, so he was going to do it. He called it love.

When he had left I realized that I had given him my name but he had never given me his. That doesn't matter. I think I know his name. It must be the same as his king's.

And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves,

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which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. (Luke 10:30-37)

THE ALARM CLOCK

I am not a morning person. In fact, I have often said, “Any time before noon is too early in the morning to wake up; and any time after noon is too early in the afternoon to do so.” If I had my “druthers” I druther sleep. Therefore, I don’t like alarm clocks, alarm cats, or alarm kids. (At least with my alarm kid I get fifteen minutes before I have to get up.) Other people may not have anything against alarm clocks, but just don’t like to be shaken out of their routine. Anything that makes them change their ways is like an alarm clock.

On the holiday of Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish people yearly hear an alarm clock. The principal feature of that holiday (which falls on September 23 in 2006) is the blowing of the *shofar*, the curved horn of a kosher animal. This instrument was used in history to get people’s attention and to sound an alarm when an enemy came in sight. In a real sense, then, it is an alarm clock.

There was one instance in which the *shofar* was literally used as an alarm to wake somebody up. God told Gideon to take a small army against the vast forces of the invader, Midian. Each man had an oil lamp hidden in a jar, and a *shofar*.

So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the *shofars*, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. And the three companies blew the *shofars*, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the *shofars* in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon. And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried, and fled. And the three hundred blew

the *shofars*, and the LORD set every man’s sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host: and the host fled to Bethshittah in Zererath, and to the border of Abelmeholah, unto Tabbath. (Judges 7:19-22)

I suspect that if I were awakened by three hundred alarm clocks I would flail around like the Midianites. If I had a sword in my hand I might kill a few friends, too. Three hundred alarm trumpets is not a pleasant thought.

I know some people who regularly hit the snooze button on their alarm clocks. They want just five more minutes, and sometimes end up with an extra hour. The holiday alarm clock won’t let you oversleep. Tradition says that the Jews must hear over one hundred blasts of the *shofar* on Rosh HaShanah. This calls for attention, and does not allow for the snooze.

To what does the *shofar* serve as an alarm clock? Normally we use the alarm to wake us up for work or something specific. This alarm clock is no different. It awakens its hearers to repentance. The Day of Atonement is only ten days away, at which time God seals forgiveness or not. The time is short. Repentance makes the difference in life. Awake!

Awake! That was the message of the prophet Haggai. “Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.” (Haggai 1:5-6) Change your ways, God says, and your fortunes will change. Wake up, and repent.

Every day is a day in which we need to repent. We need God’s atonement every day. Perhaps we should wake up to the *shofar* every day.

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