

Weekly Bible Study Series, Vol. 8, No. 19: 22 July 2007

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BAD FOOD OR BAD TASTE?

Today's Text: Daniel Chap. 1

Extracts:

[King Nebuchadnezzar] instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the [Judah] king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans. And *the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them... but Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. ... So Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "Please, test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink"* [Dan. 1: 3-5, 8, 11-12]

On Friday, 1 March 2002, Paul Appleby, Secretary of Oxford Vegetarians, gave a talk to members of Oxford Green Party Students on "Do Vegetarians Live Longer?"¹ He reviewed and reanalyzed six studies conducted in Western countries (Europe and America) between 1959 and 2001, and concluded that, although vegetarians have low mortality rate compared with the general population, much of that benefit is attributable to non-dietary lifestyle factors, such as the avoidance of smoking and a high socio-economic status.

When it comes to food or fashion, many of us do whatever we see our role models do. Of late, many of us have given up meats because we have been told that being vegetarian makes you slimmer and healthier. However, there is a new movement called SPCP, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Plants!² Soon, we shall have nothing to eat unless we put our dietary practices in their true perspective. If vegetarian diet per se does not guarantee better health than a non-vegetarian option, as the Oxford Vegetarians' analysis above suggests, what else do we need to know? Is there bad food or bad taste or both? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ www.ivu.org/oxveg/Talks/veglongevity.html

² "Speak up for plants: Join the 'SPCP'" <http://apps.caes.uga.edu/news/getstory.cfm?storyid=795>

1. Daniel and his colleagues ask for vegetables!

For background, we shall examine the first chapter of the book of Daniel. You will recall that, following the sack of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar, he brought back to Babylon Hebrew princes and youths [Dan. 1: 1-2]. He instructed the master of his eunuchs, Ashpenaz, to choose from among them “young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king’s palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans” [vv. 3-4]. King Nebuchadnezzar went beyond that. He approved for the selected team of young Hebrews “a daily provision of the king’s delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king” [Dan. 1: 5].

Daniel approached the chief of the eunuchs to excuse him and his colleagues from eating the prescribed food. The man feared the king and was not ready to risk his job or life should the countenance of Daniel and his colleagues be worse than that of the rest that had agreed to eat the king’s delicacies. Nevertheless, Daniel requested of the steward (to whom he and his companions had been assigned), saying, “Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables³ to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king’s delicacies, and as you see fit, so deal with your servants” [vv. 9-13].

The steward consented to Daniel’s request. After ten days, the features of Daniel and his colleagues “appeared better and *fatter* in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king’s delicacies.” The steward took away their portion for himself and gave them vegetables [vv. 14-15]. Daniel and his friends looked better and fatter in flesh (not slimmer!) than the rest that were fed on the king’s delicacies.

On the surface, we may conclude that Daniel and his colleagues appeared better because vegetarian diet is superior to non-vegetarian meals. However, there is much more to it than meets the eye. Let us dig more deeply into the subject.

2. But Daniel ate vegetables by faith not by taste!

After God had created plants and animals, He made man (male and female) in His image and likeness. He gave the man dominion “over the *fish* of the sea, over the *birds* of the air, and over the *cattle*, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Then, He added, “See, I have given you every *herb* that yields seed which is on the face of the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; *to you it shall be food*” [Gen. 1: 28-29]. Later in human history, God specified which animals, birds and sea foods were clean or unclean for food [Lev. 11: 1- 23]. Therefore, according to the Creator’s diet, there is nothing wrong *per*

³ pulse or beans, depending on the version of your Bible

se with non-vegetarian diets. For example, in King Solomon's palace, the food provisions "for one day [were] thirty kors of fine flour, sixty kors of meal, ten fatted *oxen*, twenty oxen from the pastures, and one hundred *sheep* besides deer, *gazelles*, *roebucks*, and fatted *fowl*" [1 Kgs 4: 22-23]. We have no record of obesity or heart problems among his servants! So, why then did Daniel ask for a vegetarian dish?

The Babylonian king knew that he was dealing with a different kind of captives because this group served one living God whereas everyone else served gods or idols. Why would the king take such a risk, given that most conquering masters would prefer to keep their captives ignorant and illiterate so as not to threaten their rule over them? I believe that God was at work here for "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; like the rivers of water, He turns it wherever He wishes" [Prov. 21: 1].

If the king was ready to share his special dishes with the Hebrew captives, a privilege that the eunuchs that served in the palace did not enjoy, there was much more to it than mere concern for their health. The word of God says, "When you sit down to eat with a ruler, consider carefully what is before you; and put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite. *Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food*" [Prov. 23: 1-3]. Understandably, therefore, Daniel and his close companions, Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach) and Azariah (Abed-Nego), were skeptical of the king's offer, and Daniel "*purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank*" [Dan. 1: 7-8]. Therefore, even if he could not live without meat and wine, he could afford to skip it at that time. So, *Daniel became a vegetarian because he believed that the option (eating the king's delicacies) would defile him*. Paul put it succinctly when he wrote, "I know and I am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; *but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean*" [Rom. 14: 14].

God rewards those who diligently seek Him [Heb. 11: 6]. Since the four young men chose to eat vegetables for His sake, God rewarded them by giving them "knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom." When the king interviewed them at the end of their training, he could not find among the rest anyone like Daniel and his three companions. He found them "ten times better than all the *magicians* and *astrologers* who were in all his realm" and he gladly appointed them to serve the king [Dan. 1: 17-20]. Now you know that the king was more interested in their spiritual gifts than in their body appearance!

The forgoing suggests that our attitude to food depends on whether we eat by taste or by faith. We eat by taste when we do what is popular at any particular point in time or place. For example, while some people who have too much to eat are watching their weights, others who are in hunger-stricken areas are striving to gain weight. We eat by faith when we eat (or give up food) to glorify God, no matter the time and place where we find ourselves. For example, God forbade

John the Baptist right from his mother's womb from touching wine or strong drink [**Lk 1: 15**], whereas Paul speaking in Spirit advised the young minister, Timothy, to "no longer drink *only* water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake, and your frequent infirmities" [**1 Tim. 5: 23**].

It appears taste is difficult to control because all the labour of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is never full [**Ecccl. 6: 7**!] Yet, if we know our taste, we can have an idea of how it can be tamed. The following types of taste can be found among any group of people that you know:

a) *The glutton*

Some people do not care about what they eat nor do they control their appetite. That is typified by a character in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* who once said that he would continue to drink as long as there was a passage in his throat and wine in Illyria! Eating and drinking may be an obsession with such people, and they will eat or drink anything as long as they can find it! Such people are gluttons.

In some cases, uncontrollable taste may be in response to the availability of cheap junk food masquerading as fast foods. On television, we see each day eye-catching advertisements of snacks and fast foods without adequate attention paid to their food value. When we eat them without paying attention to their effects on our bodies, we wind up with dangerous side effects. Today, obesity has become an epidemic, especially in the advanced economies. Could it not have been checked earlier by controlling taste?

Many of us are spiritually obese since the health of the body is dependent on the prosperity of the soul [**3 Jn 2**]. Sin is forbidden food in the sight of God; yet, we love it. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had the freedom to eat everything except the fruit of the tree of knowledge. That was where they focused their attention. So, Satan crept in and "advertised" that product to them. He assured them that they would not surely die but that from the day they ate it, their eyes would be opened and they would be like God, "knowing good and evil." That aroused Eve's greed and when she "saw that the tree was *good for food*, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate" and also gave to her husband [**Gen. 3: 1-7**].

b) *The indulgent*

Some of us may be conscious of the food value of what we eat and drink but that is where their caution ends. They may not know that too much of a good thing is bad. Too much water is injurious to the body. Too much of

honey cannot be tolerated by the body. Therefore, those who eat too much of good food can still add unnecessary discomfort to their bodies.

c) *The dieter*

Some of us are quite disciplined with respect to food and drink. They watch what they eat. They do not smoke or touch alcoholic drinks. They exercise. However, they do these things because it is fashionable to do so. But, as the word of God says, “bodily exercise profits a little, *but godliness is profitable for all things*” [1 Tim. 4: 8]. When your dieting is not anchored on God’s glory, you are starving and calling it fasting! You can then understand why people practise Yoga when they exercise. Yoga is faith-based (on Eastern religions) but not God-centred. Therefore, Yoga meditation as part of dieting is a form of idol worship. You can do better than that!

A closely related problem to dieting is anorexia, a medical disorder associated with not eating. It may be natural when a sick person is unable to eat. In most cases, however, it comes from some people’s compulsive obsession with losing weight. A good number of young people especially in modelling have died from the condition.

d) *The faith-eater*

Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from God’s mouth [Matt. 4: 4]. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God [Rom. 10: 17]. Therefore, the faith-eater is the person who eats and drinks (or abstains from them) to please God or in obedience to His command. Daniel and his three friends ate vegetables by faith in preference to the king’s delicacies that they saw as defiling of the temple of God that their bodies represented. As a result, they became healthier than the rest of the young men who were fed on non-vegetarian foods.

God fed the prophet Elijah on hamburgers (bread and meat delivered by ravens!) every morning and every evening for several years. Yet, he was never obese and did not have high cholesterol problems because he ate in obedience to God’s command [1 Kgs 17: 1-7]. God fed the children of Israel on *manna from heaven* for forty years and they remained healthy, for “he who gathered much had nothing left, and he who gathered little had no lack” [Ex. 16: 11-18].

There were at the other end of the spectrum those who neither ate nor drank anything over a long period and yet they remained healthier than the rest of us. For example, Moses was on Mount Sinai with the Lord for

“forty days and forty nights (and) he neither ate bread nor drank water.” But when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw him on his return, “the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him” [Ex. 34: 28, 30]. He did not suffer any long term bad effects either. He lived up to 120 years of age and “his eyes were not dim nor his natural vigour diminished” [Deut. 34: 7].

Clearly, your taste has a great deal to do with what you eat. Yes, there are bad or good foods, if so defined by God Himself. However, when you eat out of obedience or to glorify God, it is immaterial whether you are vegetarian or not. You are eating by faith.

3. Conclusion: Jesus is the bread of life!

When Jesus confronted the Jews of His day concerning the Law of Moses, He said to them [Jn 6: 48-56]:

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die.... Most assuredly, I say to you; unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. .. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.

Jesus is good food for your eternal life. You can only eat Him if you have good taste! Some people have gone to gurus or those they call holy men and women; those who can enslave them with demanding food and exercise regimes. Why not come to Jesus whose yoke is easy and burden light? When you then live a life in full obedience to His call, you are eating His flesh and drinking His blood. You can then wait on Him and be amazed how He will renew your strength, how you will run and not be weary and how you will walk and not faint! Even when you eat or drink what is poisonous, it will by no means hurt you [Mk 16: 18].

Acquire good taste like Daniel and let God give a boost to your health and life.