

The Distinctive Food of the Distinctive Family - Craving Christian Calories

Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, ² as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. (1 Peter 2:1–3)

Thanks to the web, there is an explosion of interest in nutrition: in what to eat, what kinds of food, where it's from, how it's grown, how it's stored or processed, what food groups, how many calories, how many times a day. And since the human body is the most complicated organism on earth, there are just countless theories about food. One of the popular ones right now is the idea of super-foods. This is actually just a marketing term to get you to buy what has always been there by God's design: certain foods really high in vitamins, fibre, antioxidants and good fats. If you eat these, the chances are, with God's overruling providence, you will likely get sick less often, and have less long-term health problems.

There is a superfood not only for the body, but for the soul. It is a superfood that you need as a pilgrim, walking through a world that does not receive you. It fuels you and strengthens you as you suffer in this world, and as you live distinctively in the world. You are what you eat physically, and you definitely are what you eat spiritually. Just like you cannot go for long if you don't eat, you cannot go for long as a Christian if you are not eating spiritually like you're supposed to – the right amounts, in the right way, with the right regularity. What Christians take into their minds and hearts will determine how healthy, and how vital will be their walk.

We've already been introduced to this superfood in 1 Peter. It turns out to be not only what we live on, but the very thing that gave us life.

²³ having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, ²⁴ 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, ²⁵ But the word of the LORD endures forever.”* Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:23–25)

The Word of God is this indestructible, eternal, permanent message. Jesus said ‘heaven and earth will pass away, but my Words will be no means pass away’. This eternal, permanent, ever-relevant, always truthful, unfailingly accurate Word is what God used to turn rebels into His children. Verse 23 tells us we were born again by this Word, and verse 25 tells us it was the Word preached. As the Word was preached, as we were drawn, we believed, and God spoke into our hearts, “Let the light of Christ shine”.

This same word that gave us life, sustains our life, as we find out in our text today. The same Word that placed us in this distinctive family, gives us the growth needed to love this family of God.

To be a distinctive family that loves one another and comforts one another in suffering, we need to be feeding and growing on the Word that gives us life and love.

That's why the first Word of our passage is therefore. In light of this superfood that gave us life and love, here is how you need to respond to it.

Here Peter is going to instruct us how to eat the distinctive food of God's distinctive family, how to crave Christian calories, how to digest doctrine. And the key word for this passage is the word *desire* in verse 2. This is all about spiritual appetite for the Word. How much you want the Word, what stops you from wanting the Word, how you take in the Word. Your appetite *is* your spiritual health. There are plenty of ways people's appetite for food in the world can be warped: overeating, under-eating, anorexia, bulimia, too much junk food, too much rich food, and they lead to serious problems with the body.

And there are ways that Christians can have a deformed spiritual appetite: Some starve themselves and are spiritually undernourished, some are obese, overfilled with truth that is never exercised, never turns into obedience, some are full of other things and end up with no appetite for the Word.

Verse 1 is all about removing what destroys the appetite, verse 2 is about growing the appetite, and verse 3 is about retaining the appetite.

I. Desire the Word By Repenting From Sin

¹ Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking

Now the first command here to gain a spiritual appetite is a negative. There are some things we are to put away, to lay aside, to repent of, if we are going to have a healthy, robust appetite for the Word. Some things block or spoil your appetite, and you need to remove them from your diet.

The phrase *laying aside* is actually a clothing metaphor, like the gird up your loins metaphor he used in 1:13. It possibly even alludes to ancient baptism, where the candidates would throw off their garments, symbolically leaving behind the world before being baptised.

It's a word used by other writers of the New Testament, always meaning repenting, forsaking, leaving behind.

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:21)

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (Hebrews 12:1)

that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, (Ephesians 4:22)

Think of this like the preparation before a meal. There are two things our mothers always told us before dinner. Don't eat snacks before the meal and spoil your appetite, and don't eat with unwashed hands. The first prohibition prevented us from spoiling our appetite so we didn't want to eat, the second prevented us from contaminating our food so that it harmed us instead of helping us.

So in the same way, certain sinful actions spoil your appetite for God's Word, and even contaminate and pollute your experience of God's Word when you read it or hear it. What are these things?

Peter lists five things here. The first word, translated malice is just the word for general sin, wickedness, evil. Any kind: word, thought, or deed. Sins of omission, sins of commission. Sins of intention, and sins of expression. Sins of attitude and sins of action.

Sin is filling yourself with things other than God, so that when God and His grace and offer of real life comes your way, you say, 'No thanks, I've already eaten.' Sin is choosing to drink at a fountain other than God. Peter says, stop spoiling your appetite with God-substitutes. I cannot come the Word, stuffed with worldliness, fleshliness, selfishness and expect to have a spiritual appetite. Don't snack on sin, if you want to be hungry for the Word.

The next four words have a very relational meaning. Deceit refers to treachery, betraying each other. Hypocrisy refers to pretence, fakery, phoniness with each other. Envy is jealousy and displeasure at another's success, coveting another's life. Evil speaking is slander.

There is a connection between my relationship with the body of Christ and my appetite for the Word.

Just as all sin spoils our appetite, so these horizontal sins contaminate our hands when we come to the Word. The Word of God is a community treasure. It is not supposed to be interpreted, understood or applied in total isolation. We are to teach *one another* (Col 3:16), no Scripture is of private interpretation (2 Pet 1:21). Correct Scriptural understanding happens in the context of the local church. God did not design His truth to be delivered in sealed envelopes to individuals.

Jesus taught to us to be right with each other before proceeding with any act of corporate worship. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23–24)

If the stomach and the liver are in severe disagreement and non-cooperation, it is pointless to send down more food. I cannot come to the Word envying my fellow-Christians, slandering them, deceiving them, being phoney with them, and then expect a pure reception of the Word. My hands are dirty. Picture being at a dinner table with people, and despising the people. What will happen to your physical appetite if you are deeply uncomfortable with people at the table? So it is with the food that brings us new birth and unites us with the family of God. I cannot allow envy, hypocrisy, slander, deceit to be in my heart if I want to enjoy the Word. Besides, these sins grieve the Holy Spirit, and He is the one who illuminates the Word to us.

Before the priests were allowed to enter the Tabernacle or Temple where they would eat the Bread of the Presence, they had to present a sacrifice for their sin, and they had to wash in the laver, a basin of water with mirrors at the bottom. And before we receive the Word, we must put off, lay aside, wash. We must confess and forsake any sin between us and God, and any sin between us and others. Because the Word of God is not just information for a brain to process. It is personal instruction from God to us, an experience of His presence in His Word. So we should make ready to be in His presence. Don't snack on sin. Wash your heart, and then approach.

II. Desire the Word By Relishing Growth

as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby

Peter now gives us an image. It is the image of a baby. And not just any, but a newborn baby. The newborn baby's desire to feed, to nurse, is urgent. Anyone knows just what kind of reaction a little baby gives you when you deny him his food. Those eyes squeeze tight, and that scream fills the room.

In some other Scriptures such as Hebrews 5, and 1 Corinthians 3, the writers use babies and milk as a negative illustration to teach Christians that they should grow up and become able to digest deeper doctrine. But that is not what Peter means here. Here the image is used very positively, exhorting us to be just like that newborn infant.

How do newborn babies desire their milk? They are absolutely needy, they are desperate. As newborns, they're aware of little else except their appetite. They are craving the food.

Crave the pure milk of the Word. Milk is what a newborn needs to live. And it needs to be pure. "Dishonest merchants in that day would add water to their milk to make more profit, or add chalk to water. Not long ago, it was found that milk producers in China had been diluting cow's milk and adding the industrial chemical Melamine. This chemical was added because it artificially enhanced

protein readings. Several infants died and others became seriously ill.

So the Christian needs the uncontaminated, unadulterated milk of the Word. Without guile: the Word taught and preached without deception, without ulterior motives, without twisting the Bible to teach health and wealth, or self-esteem, or signs and wonders, or quirky doctrines, or doomsday-cult eschatology. Just the straight, plain, unmixed, undiluted, 100% Word of God.

And when you have it, treat it like something you absolutely need, something you must have at all costs, something you will do your utmost to read, to hear.

John Wesley: "I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over a great gulf; 'til a few moments hence I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing—the way to heaven ... He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* (a man of one book). Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone. Only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to Heaven."

Now here's the way we have that attitude. Peter adds this purpose clause: that you may grow thereby. The Word of God is your only means for growth. The Word is vital for growth and maturity, and just as there is no life without it, so there is no growth without it.

This is why James says, But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. (Jam 1:22-25)

If you're about to run a marathon, or do a serious hike, or doing serious exercise or fitness, you eat for fuel, not for fun. You take in because you're about to expend energy.

See, ask yourself, do I think of the Word as necessary or as a nicety? Martin Luther once said, "There is nothing more dangerous than to be weary of the Word. He therefore that is so cold, that he thinks himself to know enough, and begins by little and little to loathe the Word, that man has lost Christ and the Gospel, and that which he thinks himself to know, he attains only by bare speculation."

J.I. Packer reminds us of how the English Puritans viewed the Bible. "To the Puritan the Bible was in truth the most precious possession that this world affords. His deepest conviction was that reverence for God means reverence for Scripture, and serving God means obeying Scripture. To his mind, therefore, no greater insult could be offered to the Creator than to neglect his written word; and, conversely, there could be no truer act of homage to him than to prize it and pore over it, and then to live out and give out its teaching. Intense veneration for Scripture, as the living word of the living God, and a devoted concern to know and do all that it prescribes, was Puritanism's hallmark."

If you're intent on becoming more like Christ, on maturing as a Christian, on advancing in your faith, you will want the Word. You will want it in greater quantities. And you will want it in the best possible quality. So the great secret of appetite for the Bible is exercise. Obedience. The desire to flesh out my Christianity is words and deeds. And in turn, the great secret of obedience is love: the desire to find joy in God and bring joy to God. So in pursuit of the pleasure of pleasing God, I hunger for the spiritual nutrition that enables that.

By the way, one of the reasons trials come our way is that our Father knows it drives us to the Word. When we suffer, we know we need to grow, we know we need strength and maturity and wisdom. And as we desire the growth, we instinctively know we need the Word – we need preaching, we need counselling, we need to hear it and read it and study it.

The old Westminster catechism asks the question: Question 90. How is the Word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation? Answer: That the Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.

A healthy spiritual appetite comes from getting rid of what spoils the appetite or spoils the food. It comes from recognising this is my source of life and growth and earnestly desiring to grow, so craving it with that newborn hunger. But there is one more way to grow appetite.

III. Desire the Word By Remembering The Taste of Grace

if indeed you have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious.

Now here is a very simple principle. You cannot have a taste for something you haven't tasted. Appetite for a particular food comes from a memory: remembering the taste of the thing. It is memory that fuel appetite. You taste something, you delight in it, and that memory is etched in your brain. Even the fragrance of the food, triggers the memory of the taste, and you want it. Now here, Peter says that our appetite for the Word can only exist if, or since we have already tasted that the Lord is gracious. As Psalm 34:8 puts it “Oh, taste and see that the LORD *is* good; Blessed *is* the man *who* trusts in Him!” (Psalm 34:8)

So what is a taste of grace? To taste of grace is to have experienced the kindness and goodness of God to you personally through His Word. You heard the good news of salvation. You heard of Jesus' dying for sinners, and you embraced Him. And flooding into your soul came forgiveness, and consolation, and a future hope, and relief from guilt, and new life, and new purpose, and the love of a Father. You tasted the Lord is gracious.

If you've been a Christian any period of time, then you've been going through some trial, some difficulty, and you heard the Word, and coming to you was a promise, a profound consolation, a deep comfort, a sweet expectation, a hope that strengthened you, refreshed you, lifted your spirits, calmed your soul, soothed your anxiety. You tasted the Lord is gracious.

Or at another season, you were beginning to stray, wonder from God, become hard to the Word, long for the world again, feel casual and cynical toward the things of God, and you heard the Word, and it came to you like a jolt, like being pulled back from nearly walking into a speeding car, like a cold water splash reviving you from a deadly slumber. You tasted the Lord is gracious.

Another time, life seemed perplexing, and the choices so many, and the paths confusingly branching out, and you didn't know what to do. And then you heard the Word, and you saw the simplicity and straight path of wisdom, you saw the assurance of God's sovereignty, you found the consoling path of obedience, you felt the shepherding hand of God leading you in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. You tasted the Lord is gracious.

And we can multiply those situations to include seasons of rejoicing, and times of tragedy, and times of weariness, times of conflict, times of feast, and times of famine, times of youth and times of age, times of society and times of loneliness. Ever and always, through His Word, we taste that the Lord is gracious.

And if you have, then one of the great ways that our desire for the Word increases is we remember

the taste of the Lord's goodness to us in it. Reflect on what it has been like to receive those promises, those warnings, those reminders, those commands, those precepts, those principles, and how they fitted you exactly. Ask yourself if the taste of God's graciousness to you was sweet and delightful. Ask yourself if it was deeper and better than what the world has for you, if the flavour of grace is better than the sugary but fleeting taste of social media, and scrolling, and the world's entertainments.

But perhaps all this talk of experiencing the graciousness of God in His Word actually sounds foreign to you. It would be like someone describing the taste for some exotic fruit, it might sound intriguing, but having no memory of the taste, you don't have appetite for it, only curiosity. If you have not tasted that God's promise of forgiveness relieves your soul, if you have not experienced His promises giving you hope, if you have not felt His warnings, protecting you from disaster, if you have not felt His wisdom guiding you, then perhaps you have yet to taste and see that the Lord is good. Perhaps you must yet close with Christ, receive the sacrifice of the Lamb of God in your behalf, apply the blood of the Lamb to the doorposts of your life, your heart. In other words, you still need to formally, actually, verbally, turn away from living independently and defiantly of God, and personally, actually, ask His Son to clean your heart, save you from wrath and inhabit your soul. That's what the Bible means by believe on Christ, have faith in Christ. Not believe He exists. Not feel vaguely loyal. No, change loyalties, change dependencies, turn and trust.

For the Christians, you should have the equivalent of a photo album in your mind of memories of the Lord being gracious to you in His Word. Page through that album, and feel the appetite grow, the longing increase.

An appetite for the Word is how we will grow and live as pilgrims. No growth and no strength without it. So we repent of what spoils our appetite or soils our spiritual tastebuds. We relish it as we long to grow and be like Christ. And we remember all the times we have had in the Word where God was gracious to us.

A young French girl who had been born blind. After she learned to read by touch, a friend gave her a Braille copy of Mark's gospel. She read it so much that her fingers became calloused and insensitive. In an effort to regain her feeling, she cut the skin from the ends of her fingers. Tragically, however, her calluses were replaced by permanent and even more insensitive scars. She sobbingly gave the book a goodbye kiss, saying, "farewell, farewell, sweet word of my heavenly Father." In doing so, she discovered that her lips were even more sensitive than her fingers had been, and she spent the rest of her life reading her great treasure with her lips. What would it be if you and I had such an appetite for God's word?