

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
September 8, 2024

## **Bring Your Appetite**

Nehemiah 8:1-18

Folks have been signing up for the dish they plan to bring to next Sunday's church anniversary potluck dinner. The Hospitality Committee will be providing the fried chicken, the sheet cake, and the beverages. As of earlier this week, we also had promised contributions of green beans, pasta salad, and finger foods. And by the time we're done here today, the list of side dishes will probably have grown even more.

I'm guessing that just by mentioning the items on the menu, I've whet your appetite to join us at the table next Sunday. Last Sunday, you came together with us around the Lord's table as we shared the bread and the cup. That was after we had been nourished with the word of God through preaching. It helps to pause and reflect on just how much of the Sunday morning worship experience has to do with hunger and our spiritual eating patterns. When we gather in the Lord's house, we always bring our appetites, whether there's a fellowship meal scheduled that day or not.

Some of you have heard me tell this story before, so if you hear it and think, "Gee, that illustration tastes like leftovers," you're right. But remember that leftovers can be very satisfying and nourishing. So the story bears repeating.

Several years ago, *The British Weekly* published a provocative letter which read:

Dear Sir:

It seems ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I have been attending church quite regularly for thirty years, and I have probably heard 3,000 of them. To my consternation, I discovered I cannot remember a single sermon. I wonder if a minister's time might be more profitably spent on something else?

For weeks a storm of editorial responses ensued, finally ended by this letter:

Dear Sir:

I have been married for thirty years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals—mostly my wife's cooking. Suddenly I have discovered I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet . . . I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago.

Because we preachers believe that the second letter captures the matter well, we keep going into the kitchen week after week and preparing a generous helping of God's word for you. By my rough count, I've probably preached a little over 1,100 sermons during my ministry as your pastor. I don't know how much you remember from them, but I do hope that through them, your appetite for the word has been satisfied, and cultivated.

I once stood at this pulpit and showed you a pocket-size Bible, or at least what was left of a Bible. It was the kind of Bible the Gideons distribute. It belonged to Athalie, Debby's mom, whose son's dog had gotten real hungry, or at least real eager to chew on something, and

gnawed his way through a good portion of the New Testament. In the church where I grew up, we once had a pastor who was fond of saying that we need to feast on the word of God, but that case of my mother-in-law's dog was sort of ridiculous. So this morning, when I speak about the importance of having a hunger for God's word, that's not what I mean.

What I actually have in mind is the kind of hunger for the word on display in this morning's Scripture passage from Nehemiah. We're told that Ezra led the people in a fresh hearing of God's word, and the results were dramatic. Recall that Nehemiah had put forth a vision for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. In fifty-two days, the job was completed. Now, with the security of the walls and gates around them, Nehemiah and Ezra led the people in spiritual renewal. And one of the primary factors in their revival was the work of the word.

The people of Israel came in droves—men, women, and all who were old enough to understand. They assembled in the square near the Water Gate, on the east side of the city. This wasn't just an instance of the pastor saying, "Come on, we're going to have a brief service this morning because I know you folks need a small portion of God's Word to settle your spiritual stomachs." It was much more than that. The people were incredibly hungry for the word. They were starving for God's instruction. They were craving his commands. They recognized their deep and desperate need for spiritual transformation.

The stage was set. Thanks to a small but devoted team of workers, comprised mainly of folks from the Buildings and Grounds committee, a large wooden platform had been constructed so that everyone in the assembly could see and hear the reading of the word. There was Ezra in the middle of the platform flanked by thirteen priests, seven on his right and six on his left. Don't ask me to go over those names again. It was hard enough trying to read them earlier. Then, at the request of the people, Ezra brought out the scroll of the law of God. When he opened it in front of the people, immediately they all stood. They lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then the people bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. They remained standing for the duration of the reading, which would have taken most of the morning, except for those times when they went into their breakout groups for questions, discussion, and explanations.

Notice that this remarkable gathering was a combination of reading the law and interpreting the law. The thirteen Levites took what was read and explained to the people what they had just heard. They enabled the people to understand the meaning of the Scriptures for their lives, much like we pastors do when we deliver the sermon every Sunday morning, or when you're in a small group Bible study of some sort, listening to your teacher or learning from one another.

Sometimes the word we hear from God is a word that encourages us. Sometimes the word we hear comforts us. Sometimes the word renews us. Sometimes it guides us. Sometimes it teaches us. Sometimes it exhorts us. Sometimes it challenges us. Sometimes it convicts us. Sometimes it judges us.

The story is told of a woman in an East African village who walked around always carrying a Bible. Her neighbors teased her and frequently asked why she carried it everywhere she went. They suggested there were many other books she could read and carry. Her response was, "Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me."<sup>1</sup>

According to Nehemiah, as the people listened to the reading of the law and heard it explained, they too realized that the Scriptures were reading them. Their sin was revealed to them. Their eyes were opened to the enormous gap between God's law and their lives. In fact, their experience was so powerful that they began weeping as they listened to the word.

One person has said, "Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them."<sup>2</sup> As you and I gather for congregational worship, we need to be open to what the word wants to do in our lives. And we shouldn't be surprised that often, the word we hear is a word that contradicts us, a word that calls us to account to our Maker, a word that judges us and points us toward mercy, redemption, and reformation in Christ.

During the French Revolution, when prisoners were crammed into dungeons, it is said that one man managed to sneak in a Bible. Because the cell was so dark, it was impossible to read. But the prisoners came up with an idea. Once every day, for a few brief moments, a tiny shaft of light would come through a small window near the ceiling. Because of their longing to hear the word of God, the prisoners would take the man who had the Bible and lift him on their shoulders and into the light where he could read from the Scriptures. When the light was gone, they would carefully lower the man to the ground and always ask the same question: "Tell us, friend, what did you read while you were in the light?"<sup>3</sup>

May God give you and me the kind of longing for his word that will cause us to do whatever we need to do to hear it and receive it and digest it. So much of who we are, how we think, and how we behave is shaped by our various appetites. The kinds of things that we crave, whether approval, attention, money, sex, power, recognition, peace, stability, love, affection, and so on, form us. I like the way that James K. A. Smith puts it when he points out that the fact that we get hungry is part of our human biology. "But," he says, "the 'direction' our hunger takes—what we hunger for—is, in important ways, learned. So it's not just that you are what you eat; you are what you *want* to eat, and this is something that is learned."<sup>4</sup>

Here in the life of God's people, we learn appetites that can shape our lives in the direction of God's will. We cultivate a craving for the word of God that can form us into lives of holiness and righteousness. In the community of Jesus' followers, we learn not just what to eat, but what to want to eat.

Today's call to worship began, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Where can I go and meet with God?" (Ps. 42:1-2). In this case, the psalmist draws upon the imagery of thirst to speak of the desire for God's presence. Author Frederica Mathewes-Green takes us back in the direction of food when she writes:

My hunch is that you are already sensing something of God's presence, or you wouldn't care. Picture yourself walking around a shopping mall, looking at people and the window displays. Suddenly, you get a whiff of cinnamon. You weren't even hungry, but now you really crave a cinnamon roll. This craving isn't something you made up. There you were, minding your own business, when some drifting molecules of sugar, butter, and spice collided with a susceptible patch inside your nose. You had a real encounter with cinnamon—not a mental delusion, not an emotional projection, but the real thing.

And what was the effect? You want more, *now*. And if you hunger to know the presence of God, it's because ... you have already begun to scent [God's] compelling delight.<sup>5</sup>

Thirst, taste, smell. You'll need all of them next Sunday when we gather for our church's anniversary, especially the potluck dinner. But how about your appetite for God's word? How about your hunger for his presence? There's already plenty of nourishment for that here today. Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites comforted the people. They told the crowd, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." When you come to church, come hungry. Bring your appetite. Receive the nourishment of the word. Be filled and satisfied with joy of the Lord's presence.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald A. Wells, "The Book That Reads Me," *Comment*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 1997) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Source unknown.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Carl III, "What's the Spirit Got to Do With Preaching?" *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January-March 1996) 38.

<sup>4</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016) Kindle edition.

<sup>5</sup> Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer* (Brewster: Paraclete, 2009) xiii-xiv.