

## **Introduction**

I'd like to show you two things I have here and ask you a question about them. One is my favorite candy bar, a Reese Cup. The other is God's written word the Bible. The question is this. What do these two things have in common? The answer is that we can eat them both and that's what I'm going to preach about today – eating (not the Reese Cup) but the Bible. Turn to Ezekiel 2:8-3:3 and let's see what that's all about.

## **Ezekiel Eats God's Written Word**

In 605 and 597 BC, the Babylonians conquered Judah, the nation of God, and exiled a large portion of its people into Babylon. In chapters 2 and 3, God called and commissioned Ezekiel to be His prophet to those exiled people. 2:8-3:3 reveals part of that call and commission.

Verses 9-10 in that text mention a scroll, upon the front and back of which were written lamentations, mourning, and woe. That scroll represented God's word that Ezekiel was to preach to the exiles. Lamentations, mourning, and woe refer to the content of that word - judgment on Judah for its sins. That its front and back were written on symbolized that Ezekiel was to add nothing to or take nothing away from it. He was to preach exactly what God gave him, which he did.

Now, notice what God commanded Ezekiel to do with His word - eat it. As strange as that may seem, the experience wasn't unique to him. Revelation 10:10 reveals that John ate God's written word as well.

And so should we. Just as Ezekiel and John ate the written word that God gave to Him, so we should eat the written word He gave to us, the Bible. That's our call and it raises two issues, both of which I want to address today – why and how we should eat the Bible. First, the why.

## **Why We Eat the Bible**

Why we eat the Bible has to do with its purpose. Let me ask you a

a question in that regard. What is the purpose of the Bible?

Let me quickly say what it isn't – to meet our needs.

I've talked before about the consumer or client Christianity that marks the American church today. That kind of Christianity has created many market-driven notions in people's mind, one of which is this. The Bible exists to meet our needs. That notion regards it principally as a self-help tool. We see that in the things people say about and do with it.

Some, for example, turn it into an instruction manual for successful living. It's the idea that we'll get what we want if we learn and follow what it says. Televangelists and pastors present it that way all the time. One televangelist I saw looked into the camera and said: **"Do what the Bible says with money, and you won't be trying to keep up with the Jones'. They'll be trying to keep up with you."** That kind of approach turns God into a self-help guru and the Bible into an instruction manual for success, neither of which is the case.

The bottom line is the purpose of the Bible isn't to meet our needs?

Well, what is it then. I'll tell you. It's to transform us. The very best gift that we can present to God, the one that glorifies Him the most, is to become like Jesus. Eating the Bible is one of the central activities by which that is achieved.

3:3 helps us understand why it is. Notice what Ezekiel is to do with God's word, the scroll. He is to feed his stomach and fill his body with it. C.F. Keil, one of the greatest Bible commentators who ever lived, explains what that activity involves. Ezekiel is **"to receive into his innermost being the word of God presented to him."**

The key phrase there is "into his innermost being." That's exactly what God's word, including the Bible, is capable of doing. It's able to penetrate into the very ground of our being and alter us there. Hebrews 4:12 expresses its power to do that as well as any verse does. It says that it is **"living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the**

**heart.”** In conjunction with the Holy Spirit, it performs surgery on our minds, spirits, and souls. It changes us inside, profoundly.

I mentioned Psalm 131 in last week's sermon. I didn't just study the three verses that make up that psalm. I ate them as well. They then went into the innermost parts of my being and changed me there. I'm a different person now after eating them than I was before. I'm actually less self-centered and more selfless than I was. They made me more like Jesus, in other words, which is their purpose.

So that's why we eat the Bible - to be transformed.

### **How We Eat the Bible**

Ezekiel 2:8-3:3 raises a second issue. How do we eat the Bible? Ezekiel and John ate God's written word literally in their visions. That obviously isn't what we should do. We'd have indigestion for a month if we did. We should eat it spiritually.

A name has been give to that, *lectio divina*, which means spiritual reading. To eat the Bible means to read it spiritually. *Lectio divina* is an ancient practice. Friends of Jesus have done it and been transformed by it for centuries.

Henri Nouwen had a picture hanging in his home. It showed a woman with an open Bible on her lap, but gazing upward to God. Its point was that she was looking for God through the Bible. That, Nouwen said, is *lectio divina* and he was right. What we're trying to do is see through the text, even beyond it, to the God of it, to the one who wrote it. Our purpose is to encounter Him through it.

Eating the Bible, spiritual reading, is comprised of five basic elements. Richard Foster explains each in his book *Life with God*.

### **Preparing**

The first element is preparing. We don't practice spiritual reading cold turkey but warm up for it. I'd compare it to stretching out our muscles before we exercise physically. We prepare by doing four things.

First, with paper and pen in hand, we choose a text from the Bible. It should be long enough to stretch our thoughts but short enough to cover thoroughly in the amount of time we have. We might select it from a church lectionary, a sermon we've heard, a devotional book, a Bible story or character we feel drawn to, our own passages of the month, and so on. Let's choose Psalm 131, which I mentioned last week, for our purposes today.

Next, we find a quiet place where we can read undisturbed. Wherever that is, we need to put aside any and all distractions that might interrupt what we're doing, including and especially the telephone.

After that, we still ourselves by breathing deeply, "**quieting the clamor of demands and distractions**" as Foster says it. We shouldn't rush this part. It might be difficult at first, but we commit at least 60 seconds to this silent, prayerful breathing.

Finally, we pray and ask God to prepare us to meet with Him. I, for instance, ask Him to calm me, also to make my mind clear and my heart sensitive to His speaking and moving.

## **Listening**

The second element in eating the Bible is listening

We begin by reading the text all the way through without pausing. We simply take in what we read. We do so with a sense of expectancy, like the woman in Nouwen's picture had. We expect that we will meet God and that He will speak to and work in us through the text.

After the initial reading, we read the text again, slowly. We take the time to highlight, underline, or write down any word, phrase, or idea that seems to come off the page to us. We don't second-guess ourselves here, wondering if it's God or we making them do so. We just trust Him to speak and work if He wills.

As I read Psalm 131, for instance, the words "proud" and "haughty" stood out to me and I underlined them. Then verse 2 just gripped me. I wrote down one of its phrases, "composed and quieted my soul; like a

weaned child." I also wrote down "my soul in me = weaned child." I had the faith as I did that God Himself gave those words and phrases to me.

## **Reflecting**

After listening, we quietly reflect on the parts of the text that we highlighted, underlined, or wrote down. That is the third element in spiritual reading – reflection. We ruminate or mull over what we've highlighted, underlined, or written down. We're alert to something as we do so - any connections that God may make between that and the particulars of our own persons and lives. We may even whisper a simple prayer asking Him, **"What do you want me to see here?"**

I did that with Psalm 131. I looked at the words I underlined and the phrases I wrote down. I then asked God, **"What do they have to do with me?"** So He told me through the text. As much progress as I've made in humility, self-seeking is still as indispensable to me as feeding at the breast is to an unweaned child. I'm still fretting too much for what I want. Remember the old aftershave commercial. A person is slapped in the face and says, **"Thanks, I needed that."** That was my response to God, **"Thanks, I needed that."**

But He wasn't through with the text. He assured me as I continued to reflect that I'm headed in the right direction. And that He has something better for me. That something is the same rest from fretting, the same freedom from the nagging of self-seeking, that the weaned child has from feeding at its mother's breast.

Foster describes the experience of reflection well: **"As we complete the circle of listening and speaking, we know that this written word of God to all people has become the living word of God to us personally."** Experience it once and you'll know what he means.

## **Praying**

There's a fourth element in spiritual reading. It's praying. You and I speak to God about what He revealed to us through the text. That isn't

a difficult thing to do. What He revealed determines the content and subject matter of our prayer. We confess, repent, express thanks, rejoice, express relief, and so on as His revelation to us prompts us to.

Going back to Psalm 131, I confessed to God that I'm an egocentric and asked Him to help me not to be. I then thanked him for the assurance He gave me. I will continue to have more and more freedom from the nagging of self-seeking as I pursue discipleship to Jesus. The rest of the weaned child will be mine. I rejoiced with Him in that.

## **Obeying**

The fifth and final element in spiritual reading is obeying, also called application. God has revealed things to us through the text. We decide to live them out in the experiences, activities, relationships, and events of our everyday lives. We decide to think, feel, and act consistently with them.

Not long ago, I was swamped with things to do when someone, not from the church, stopped by the office unannounced to talk. I felt stirrings of resentment that he did and so focused on Psalm 131. I pictured the weaned baby at rest on its mother's breast and a note I wrote beside verse 1, "**Pride undervalues people.**" Doing that dispensed with the stirrings of resentment and I was soon at rest. I obeyed or applied what the Holy Spirit had revealed to me in Psalm 131.

## **Conclusion**

That then is why and how we should eat the Bible. Why should we eat it? Because it transforms us and makes us like Jesus, which is the greatest gift we can offer God. How do we eat it? It's by *lectio divina*, spiritual reading. We prepare, listen, reflect, pray, and obey.

So, let's just do it. Once again, I show you the Reese Cup and the Bible. May you and I do with the Bible what I'm going to do with this Reese Cup in about ten minutes – eat it.