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Exodus 16:16-30

Twenty-third Message

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HOW WE EAT

SERIES: BASIC TRAINING – SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL CAMP

We are continuing our series, *Basic Training: Spiritual Survival Camp*, tracing Israel's exodus from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. Already we have seen that the first three of five lessons which Israel will learn have to do with the basic human appetites of thirst and hunger. God uses our most essential and strongest physical appetites to shape our spiritual appetites, thus demonstrating that physical disciplines are a vital training ground for cultivating spiritual habits. The fourth lesson will teach Israel how to be victorious in the face of vicious external attacks, while the fifth will teach her the importance of maintaining healthy relationships. These five disciplines will give the nation an attentive ear to hear God's voice on the mountain.

Last week, we began our study of the second discipline, which shows how God uses hunger to shape our spiritual longings for him. What we eat is not only vital to our physical health, it is a good indicator of our spiritual health and habits. In a vast wilderness where nothing grows, Israel's hunger took on exponential proportions. With no hope in sight, and a supernatural barrier lying between her and Egypt, she discovered that it was impossible to feed her appetites with the idolatrous bread of Egypt. Finally, when Israel was on the brink of despair, Moses and Aaron redirected her focus away from Egypt, commanding her to face into the wilderness for a holy encounter with God. There she discovers that in a world where nothing grows, the Creator God provides bread from another place—heaven itself. The next day they find themselves completely enveloped in food, with meat in the evening and bread in morning. Exactly one month after the Passover feast, God miraculously replicated the feast in the wilderness. The theological summary of this event is given by Moses in Deuteronomy:

“He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you to know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.” (Deut 8:3)¹

Thus God taught Israel to look to heaven for something as basic as bread. This truth, which became central to the teaching of Jesus, is reiterated by the Church every time we recite the Lord's prayer: “Give us each day our daily bread.”

The focus now shifts from what Israel eats, to *how* she eats. Last week, the theme word was “grumble”; today it's the verb “gather” (*laqat*, “reap,” “harvest,” “gather,” “glean”), found nine times in this chapter. God is very concerned with how Israel handles this gift from heaven, for how she gathers and distributes the bread will be a mirror for how the community relates to one another and to God.

The text leaves us with this question, How do we eat? Three specific instructions are given to Israel concerning the gathering and distribution of the bread. Following each instruction is a report of how Israel succeeded in mastering these disciplines. Each instruction becomes foundational for Israel's future faith and ethics, and continues to be central to the teaching of Jesus for the life of the church.

I. The First Instruction: Gather Only What You Need! (16:16-18)

A. The Instruction for Gathering (16:16)

“This is what the LORD has commanded, ‘Gather of it every man as much as he should eat; you shall take an omer apiece according to the number of persons each of you has in his tent.’” (Exod 16:16 NASB)

Every morning, the Israelites were instructed to take their measuring cups out into the desert to gather an adequate amount of food for every member of the family. The narrator records that an *omer* is one-tenth of an *ephah* (16:36). Ten *ephahs* made up the equivalent of a *homer*, which was the amount of grain a donkey could carry (about 90 kg). *Omer*, which also means sheaf (Lev 23:10; Deut 24:19), referred to the quantity of grain threshed from an average sized sheaf.² The point that God was making is that there was plenty of manna for everyone, so Israel need not panic. The amount of manna available would be enough to feed the entire nation every day. Unlike the time of their captivity in Egypt, gathering bread in the wilderness could be accomplished without anxiety, because supply would equal demand, ensuring that everyone would have a sufficient amount. The way Israel eats affirms two basic doctrines: first, that God is generous, and second, that all men and women are created equal, and thus should be treated the same.

B. Israel's Obedience (16:17-18)

The sons of Israel did so, and some gathered much and some little. When they measured it with an omer, he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no lack; every man gathered as much as he should eat. (16:17-18)

Israel did as God commanded. When everyone returned from their gathering, the amounts initially appeared unequal, because of different abilities and initiative. But when the manna was measured and distributed, to everyone's amazement, each person received exactly what he or she needed. No one went away hungry, and there were no leftovers. In the wilderness, the heavenly food distribution center worked perfectly by faith. Each morning there was an adequate supply, and at the end of the day there was no waste.

How was God shaping Israel's appetite? By conforming to these instructions, he was training the nation that because there was an adequate supply, heavenly bread could be gathered and eaten without anxiety or rush. Everyone would receive an equal daily portion, regardless of status, ability or age. Israel's trusting God for her bread placed the whole community on an equal footing, as each individual was guaranteed an adequate portion. Any inequality in the field was used to bind the community into one family, as one person's surplus met another's need. God was training Israel through its appetites to be a community of fidelity and trust, where no one was hungry and there were no gluttons. In this way the presence of God was experienced as they ate in an atmosphere of sweet fellowship and concern

for one another. Love brings more to enhance the quality of a meal than lavish recipes. As the proverb would later proclaim:

**Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it
Than a house full of feasting with strife. (Prov 17:1)**

Having eaten in both settings, I confess my most satisfying meals and profound experiences with God have occurred in the former. I'll never forget traveling to Romania in the summer of 1988, during the time when the tyrannical dictator, Ceaucescu, was exporting most of the country's food supply to pay the national debt. Each family was rationed to five eggs per month. Yet when I sat down in my host's home to eat, I found myself staring at two eggs. I had never eaten in that kind of sacrificial atmosphere before.

This is so foreign to the modern world. Today, success is driven by competition, at the expense of relationships. Three of the most popular reality television shows, *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Amazing Race*, all thrive on cutthroat competition. There is only one million-dollar prize or one coveted job available at the end; the rest must make do with the gift of failure. All but one contestant will at some point hear one of these dreaded phrases, "I'm sorry to say you've been eliminated from the race," or "The tribe has spoken," or worst of all, "You're fired!" The only way to succeed is not just by being creative, skilled or hard working, but resorting to deception and betrayal. And if you should happen to land in that dreaded boardroom in *The Apprentice*, to be questioned about your performance by that self-appointed deity and his two spineless rubber stamps, your only chance for survival is to verbally abuse your fellow-competitors to their face. Such tactics destroy relationships and leave the rest of the world dominated by unfulfilled desire. These shows, though entertaining, are in reality a mirror of the depravity of our competitive culture, which knows little about formulating communities based on sacrificial love and mutual trust.

In stark contrast, the way Israel is taught to gather manna removes all competition and quiets the human heart with that rare jewel of contentment. It also trained Israel in the art of hospitality, since there was always enough for everyone. After Israel entered the land, this text became her model for ethics. God asked her to provide for the poor and the helpless, just as he had done for her in the wilderness. Furthermore, he asked those who owned plots of land to not glean the harvest completely, but to leave a significant amount in the field for the poor, that they might come and gather freely, just as Israel had gathered the manna in the wilderness (Lev 19:9; 23:22). Again, one individual's surplus was used to meet another's need.

The prime example of the one who obeyed this injunction was Boaz, during the dark days of the Judges. The same term "gather" or "glean" (*laqat*) is the key term of Ruth 2 (found 12 times). Because of Boaz's commitment to feed the poor, Ruth the Moabitess is able to find redemption for her family. Boaz and Ruth fall in love and marry, and from their union, King David, and ultimately the Messiah, are born. This is a wonderful example of what happens when we use our surplus to care for the needs of others. Not only are the needs of the poor met, but also, as in the case of Ruth, new bonds of friendship are born that can be life changing.

So Paul would exhort Timothy, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world...to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed" (1 Tim 6:17-19). The rich are not just to give of their money, but also their time, so that they too can create intimate bonds with the less fortunate, and in so doing seize eternal life. At

my father's funeral in 2001, I learned something I had never known about him. At the service, an elderly Chinese doctor rose to speak and explained that he practiced in Chinatown, where most of his patients were poor. He had often referred patients to my father when they needed surgery, and most could not afford to pay. My father, he said, with tears in his eyes, never charged them. None of us should be using 100% of our time to make money or to be homemakers. We should set aside some of our precious time to serve the poor through the professions which God has given us.

In conformity to God's first instruction, we should seek to control our physical appetites as a means to enhance the welfare of the community. We should take our meals in peace, and eat moderately, always being eager to share what we have, since all are one. And perhaps like Boaz, we may be surprised by some new sacred bond that develops.

The second instruction speaks to the sanctity of the bread.

II. The Second Instruction: No Leftovers (16:19-21)

A. Instruction for Eating (16:19)

Moses said to them, "Let no man leave any of it until morning." (16:19)

After giving the instruction about the gathering and distribution of the bread, Israel is instructed on how to eat it. They are to consume on the same day everything that is gathered, leaving none of it over for the next day. There were to be no leftovers! This prevented Israel from hoarding God's gifts. The desire to hoard comes from a lack of faith and fear that the God who provided today will not be present to provide for tomorrow. Brueggemann describes this as the desire to "develop a zone of self-sufficiency. The people in the wilderness immediately try to replicate the ways of Egypt by storing up and hoarding out of anxiety and greed."³ With plenty of reserves in the bank, hoarders don't have to trust God daily. We can relax in our own self-sufficiency. Today, hoarding is evident in our insatiable appetites that consume so much more than our daily requirements. Our impulsive buying is fed by an endless stream of catalogues that flood our mailboxes, burying us in an avalanche of clutter. It is my opinion that the more we possess, the less able we are to allow the life of God to possess us. This can be dramatically seen in people who are dominated by an extreme compulsion to save everything because they are unable to throw anything away. Another telltale sign of hoarding is the drive to provide for every future financial need before we allow ourselves time to relax to enjoy the presence of God or venture into ministry.⁴ These responses are symptomatic of a lack of faith that the God who provides today will not be present tomorrow.

The first discipline is based on the generosity of God and the equality of man, while the second is based on the sustaining presence of God. The first frees us from anxiety in the present, the second from anxiety regarding the future.

B. Israel's Disobedience (16:20-21)

But they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul; and Moses was angry with them. They gathered it morning by morning, every man as much as he should eat; but when the sun grew hot, it would melt. (16:20-21)

Israel's disobedience is a clue that this discipline is not as easy as it seems. Our natural tendency is not to live day by day, but to be anxious about the future and store up heavenly bread for tomor-

row. We wonder, Yes, God did provide today, but can I trust him for tomorrow? But the nature of the bread from heaven forces Israel into compliance. This manna is sacred. It will not be managed or manipulated to serve Israel's private purposes. It must be completely eaten and shared the same day. If she tries to hoard it for her private future purposes, it turns sour, breeds worms and melts.

How many in this congregation quit working for daily bread and banked all their hopes on stock options, thinking that by sacrificing today's time for a future windfall, they could one day relax, build bigger barns and retire in self-sufficiency? But for many, the dream melted and turned sour. And for the few of you who did make it big, what did it do for your faith and the experience of encountering the living God on a daily basis? How much daily awe did you postpone for future returns? How many of your children's soccer games did you miss? And in the end, who really paid for all the time you sacrificed? Was it your children, who lost their father, or your wife, who felt like a widow, or your health, which deteriorated under the stress? If you want the bread of oppression, then you might as well go back to Egypt.

Yes, living day to day is a difficult discipline, but by God's grace the creation obeys his laws and often forces us into compliance. We are rebuked by eating the fruits of our own ways. All our storehouses melt under the hot sun, which forces us back to Spirituality 101, to look to God for our daily bread. Often when I come alongside one who is suffering and ask how he or she is doing, the common response is, "I'm living one day at a time." I used to think that was temporary Christian living during seasons of severe hardship, but now I realize it is a sign of spiritual health and ought to be the norm. As Jesus taught his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself." (Matt 6:31-34)

How then should we eat? First, we are to control our appetites and take only as much as we need, always with a view to sharing with others, trusting in the generosity of God. Second, there are to be no leftovers. We are not store up for tomorrow, for God's life is sacred and we may not manipulate or manage it for our own ends. Instead, we are to trust in his sustaining presence, for not only is he generous, he will never leave us.

The third discipline is probably the most difficult of all to master, yet it's the one that is the most beneficial to the soul and the one most needed today—the discipline of rest.

III. The Third Instruction: Rest (16:22-30)

A. Experience Precedes the Instruction (16:22-23)

Now on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, then he said to them, "This is what the LORD meant: Tomorrow is a Sabbath observance, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning." (16:22-23)

Perhaps because of the difficulty of this discipline, the learning process is different from the previous two. Rather than God giv-

ing Israel instruction, followed by her application of faith, it is the reverse: The miracle precedes the instructions. As Israel went out on the sixth day, they gathered as they always did, but when they measured it, there was twice the normal amount needed. Stunned, the leaders of the congregation report the miracle to Moses. He responds, explaining to their amazement that the double portion was God's miraculous provision for the Sabbath. Unlike any other day, the mysterious manna can be prepared several different ways and preserved for the next day without spoiling. In this way, Israel can cease her labor on the seventh day in order to enjoy rest, the Creator's greatest gift to all mankind. Now with a double portion in her hands, Israel has no excuse to work on the Sabbath. God has already provided.

This is what we might call a "hands on" teaching technique. God walks with Israel in their experience, then provides the instruction after they initiate the questions. I have found this to be a very effective teaching tool in my own life. Often in my spiritual journey, God would lead me into some profound new experience. Wanting to understand the reality behind the experience, I would then passionately study the Scriptures to understand the theology behind the event. When experience precedes the theory, students become very engaged in the learning process and highly motivated to study.

B. The Obedience of Israel (16:24-26)

So they put it aside until morning, as Moses had ordered, and it did not become foul nor was there any worm in it. Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none." (16:24-26)

Doing just as Moses instructs, the congregation discovers that as they prepare the manna for the next day, it does not spoil or breed worms. Yet, even with a double portion in hand, Moses knows that, even in the wilderness, greed is a powerful force. Israel will be tempted to go out into the fields and look for an extra supply of manna on the Sabbath. But like a good parent, Moses is prepared for Israel's weakness, and talks them through it ahead of time. He reminds them that even if they do go out, it will be in vain, because when God rests, the whole creation rests with him. The storehouses of heaven will be closed for the day and their shopping will be in vain.

C. The Disobedience of Israel (16:27-30)

It came about on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My instructions? See, the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you bread for two days on the sixth day. Remain every man in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." So the people rested on the seventh day. (16:27-30)

The temptation to greed proves too much for some of the Israelites and they completely disregard Moses' warning. Instead of choosing to be content with God's gracious gifts, they view sacred time as an opportunity for profit, and profane the Sabbath. But just as Moses predicted, the heavens were closed for the day. All the angels had gone home. Israel's flagrant disobedience brings a harsh rebuke by God, coupled with a sigh of exasperation. This nation is trying his patience.

Once again, the Lord goes over the simple instructions step by step until Israel is finally forced to get it: "See, the Lord has *given* you the Sabbath." The irony of the text is found in the use of the word "give." The chapter began with Israel complaining that because of

their hunger they wished that God had “given” them over to death in Egypt (16:3). But instead of the “gift” of death, God gives them the gift of life with bread from heaven, followed by a double portion to give them the “gift” of Sabbath. By God’s design, in a day of solitude and rest, all time would become saturated by the Holy.

Rest is one of God’s greatest gifts to mankind.⁵ Yet, like Israel, I find it is one of the hardest to appropriate. There is a powerful force in the human heart that dominates our modern culture. It seeks to remove all sacred boundaries of time. We imagine that by burning the candle at both ends we can increase productivity. And yet, as the psalmist writes, it is all in vain:

“It is vain for you to rise up early,
To retire late,
To eat the bread of painful labors;
For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.” (Ps 127:2)

Sadly, it seems nobody believes this today. Stores stay open longer. We work longer hours, give up our weekends, and seldom take vacation. Even if we do get away, those electronic devices that invade all space and time remain attached to our hips. In the end, we lose all sense of daily rhythm, and time becomes a blur. There is no sacred rest left. The classic symbol of such profanity is the casino, which by its very nature is designed to remove all time distinctions. Submerged in a constant neon glare, with not a clock in sight, one loses all distinction between day and night. The effect is that human beings are transformed into smoke-inhaling zombies with glazed eyes, devoid of all emotion and feeling. When you continually refuse this gift of Sabbath, you eventually become a profane zombie, a walking corpse with no feelings.

But for Israel, the gift of Sabbath set her apart as dramatically different from the nations around her. In this moment of her keeping it, she becomes most human and most divine. Israel finally makes a complete break with all the destructive forces of Egypt, where bread was earned through oppression and eaten in anxiety and exploitation. Now she sits in quiet, lifting her hands to heaven to receive every good gift from above. It “is a world of glad dependence and utter fidelity, devoid of all anxiety and threat. At this moment in time, Egypt’s control has been nullified.”⁶

IV. The Long-term Benefits of a Good Diet

For forty years Israel lived under this disciplined diet. Each day she would look to heaven for her daily bread. Each day she learned to take only what she needed and share with those in need. Each day she learned to relax about the future by not hoarding. And each week, with a double blessing on the sixth day, she learned the ultimate discipline of rest. These are the long-term benefits of a healthy diet.

Last Tuesday, several pastors in this area met with Dallas Willard, a professor of philosophy at USC and a model Christian leader.⁷ He spoke to us on the personal care of our souls when we are in demanding leadership positions. His texts were 1 Timothy and Proverbs 4:3. As he spoke, there was such a spirit of quiet contentment and well being in his voice that I found my over-active soul strangely calmed and centered. Time stood still. I could have listened to him speak all day. I felt as if I was listening to the voice of Jesus. I wondered what was the secret of spiritual formation for his life. Someone finally asked the question, “As a well known professor and sought after

speaker with a busy schedule, how do you maintain the care of your own soul?” His response was twofold. He said he has been diligent to maintain two spiritual disciplines. The first was Scripture memorization, not just verses but long passages of Scripture; the second was fasting. He said that the joy of fasting is that he can fast anywhere and under any circumstance, and when he does, he finds himself strengthened. Like Jesus, he has found that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.

May God by his grace begin to reshape our appetites.

Reshape My Appetite

Layers unpeeled
Revealing deathly desires
Earthly cravings
Deeper even still
Forgiveness offered
Further dying; graves dug
Grace and Mercy covers

Reshape my appetite

All else to fall aside
Rekindle a flame
Ignite a holy passion
Heavenly thirst quench.

Sweet water undeserved
Parched lips relieved
Hunger redirected
Manna delivered daily
Food to satisfy

More of You less of me
Journeying home

– a daughter of PBCC

1. My translation, to emphasize the Hebrew verb “know,” used three times.

2. Omer Marvin Powell, “Weights and Measures,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:897-908.

3. Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:814.

4. I do not mean to imply that prudent saving or wise investing is wrong. Joseph’s prudent preparations and future planning saved the nation of Egypt from famine and provided redemption for his family. The issue here is faith and our dependence on God vs. a “zone of self-sufficiency,” where we try to live without God.

5. Because of space limitations, I am unable to develop the New Testament theology of Sabbath in this message. But I hope these words will still strike home for our need to create boundaries for holy time. The New Testament gives us a lot of freedom in these matters (Col 2:16; Rom 14:5), but at the same time demands a high level of maturity. If we are passive, sacred time, and with it true rest, will never happen (Heb 4:11).

6. Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 815.

7. For Dallas Willard’s home page see: <http://www.dwillard.org>