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Bodybuilders - Keep Me Fed

Proverbs about the Stomach

Jeremiah 30 v 1-7

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. For behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the Lord, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it."

These are the words that the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah:

"Thus says the Lord:

We have heard a cry of panic,
of terror, and no peace.
Ask now, and see,
can a man bear a child?
Why then do I see every man
with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labor?
Why has every face turned pale?
Alas! That day is so great
there is none like it;
it is a time of distress for Jacob;
yet he shall be saved out of it.
[Jeremiah 30 v 1-7]

Introduction

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that the body has many parts and none are more important than the other. Yet if we were to place them in order of most to least favourite, I'm sure the stomach would come fairly low in the list. In fact in the US and France, studies have shown it is by far the least favourite body part, both with women and men. What is it, after all, apart from a bag for our food to go in? And one that perhaps many people would say of themselves, is bigger than it ought to be.

And yet the stomach is hugely important. Maybe we need to give it a bit more love.

- The stomach is the engine of the body. Just as a car has an engine which converts fuel into kinetic energy to move the wheels, so our stomachs convert the fuel that we eat into

chemical energy that flows in our bloodstream to be used by our muscles, to move, or our brains, to think, or our fat cells to get stored for later use. It's amazingly efficient, in fact too efficient for many of us who don't want quite so much energy stored all over us.

- The stomach also protects us, by rejecting toxins. I'm sure we've all had the experience of being sick after eating something that disagreed with us. It's not very pleasant. But have you ever thought about the consequences of not being sick? If the poison is left inside us to do its work, we wouldn't last very long. In fact that's the reason rat poison works well. Rats are unable to vomit, and so once they've eaten poison there's no way for them to get rid of it. Another unusual thing we can thank the Lord for!
  One of Job's friends uses the picture of the stomach rejecting bad food to say that the wicked person, though he might find evil sweet to taste, still has a built-in reaction to it that causes him to spew it up:

  Though evil is sweet in his mouth,
  though he hides it under his tongue,
  though he is loath to let it go
  and holds it in his mouth,
  yet his food is turned in his stomach;
  it is the venom of cobras within him.
  He swallows down riches and vomits them up again;
  God casts them out of his belly.
  [Job 20 v 12-15]

- The stomach is the source of much of our temperament. We can get a bit short-tempered when we're hungry, or when our stomachs are causing us pain. We feel contented and sleepy when our bellies are full. Our reading this evening painted a picture of a people holding their bellies in pain, distressed at the situation they're in. The picture in this case wasn't so much of eating something bad, but of childbirth. The Lord said the men of Israel were like women in childbirth, feeling the extreme pain of their situation. And yet God's promise here was that something good would come out of the pain: *it is a time of distress for Jacob; yet he shall be saved out of it.* The pain of labour normally results in the blessing of a child, and though Israel was going to suffer greatly in their exile in Babylon, a blessing was going to come from it, as a remnant would return to Jerusalem, and a saviour would come from that remnant.
- Conversely, the stomach can be affected by our mood. If we are nervous we feel "butterflies in the stomach", if we are stressed or anxious, it can cause a real, physical effect on our stomachs. Stress can affect our digestion, causing pain, and can change the acid level in our stomachs, leading to ulcers. We'll talk about this a bit more, later.
- An appetite is an indicator of health. Often we lose our appetite when we're ill, and a return of appetite is generally a sign that we're getting better. That "Keep me Fed'

message from the stomach to the brain is what drives our daily schedule. It's rare that we need reminded of the need to eat, though I did used to have a colleague who had "go to lunch" scheduled in his diary every day.

- In olden times a well filled belly was an indicator of wealth. It someone had some extra girth it showed that they had enough to feed themselves and more to spare. We live in a very rare time, when the majority of our part of the world is able to buy more than enough food to survive. We can moan about the cost of living, and perhaps rightfully so, but remember that historically, filling our bellies is still remarkably cheap. We spend on average about 12% of our income on food today, compared with 33% 60 years ago. If you live in Tanzania you'll spend about 60% of your income on food. So it's worth remembering this when we read stories in the Bible. The Moabite king, Eglon, is described as being fat, and the picture there isn't so much gluttony and laziness, but of overwhelming riches among a country oppressed, taxed and starved half to death.

What Does Proverbs Say?

But what does Proverbs say about the stomach. We've been looking at the subject of bodybuilding, and how Proverbs can help us build our spiritual selves as it references various body parts. So far we've thought about the heart, the hands, the eyes, the tongue and the ears.

There are only two references for us tonight in Proverbs. Let us have a look at what it says.

1. The Righteous is satisfied, the Wicked is in need

The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite,

but the belly of the wicked suffers want.

[Proverbs 13 v 25]

This reads like a simple obedience/reward message: those who are righteous get food, those who are wicked get none. There is some truth in that, in that God promises to bless those who are faithful to him and obey his laws. The Israelites saw this in the promises to their nation. God said that if they followed in his ways he would bless them, but if they strayed from him then hard times would come upon them, specifically in their harvests. This is why when Elijah burst through the doors of Ahab's palace and condemned the unfaithful king, he wasn't just making up a punishment. He knew that God had threatened to take away the rain if the people were disobedient.

However I believe there's more to this verse than the amount of food we get reflecting our status with God. After all, we can look around and see that many of the wicked seem to be doing ok. In fact it looks like they're thriving. That's a common complaint in the Psalms. What I believe the verse is telling us is that even with little, the righteous person is satisfied, and even with a lot, the wicked person still wants more.

The preacher of Ecclesiastes has a similar thing to say:

Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

[Ecclesiastes 5 v 12]

This is what we were talking about earlier: our mood can affect our stomach. The labourer does not have much, but he knows it has been gained honestly, and so he feels rest at the end of the day. The rich man, who has perhaps gained his riches through the oppression of others, cannot find peace. His conscience bothers him and even his full stomach won't let him sleep.

Have you ever felt like that? That something isn't right and you can feel it in the pit of your stomach? You need to get right with the Lord, and possibly sort things out with a brother or sister before you can know peace again.

Jeremiah certainly knew that feeling as he looked upon the deserted streets of Jerusalem, emptied of the people who had disobeyed and were now taken into exile.

"Look, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my stomach churns;
my heart is wrung within me,
because I have been very rebellious.
In the street the sword bereaves;
in the house it is like death.
[Lamentations 1 v 20]

2. The stomach is satisfied from the fruit of our lips

From the fruit of a man's mouth his stomach is satisfied;
he is satisfied by the yield of his lips.
[Proverbs 18 v 20]

This is a bit of strange one. What would we imagine would satisfy our stomach? Good food? Healthy food? Rich food? If we were Jewish we would know of all the classifications of what was good to eat and what was unclean, forbidden. Yet the thing that satisfies here is not what comes in by our mouth, but what goes out. The fruit of our lips is all that we say, and what we say reflects what we are inside. Words come from the heart, and if the heart is soft our words will be kind.

Jesus reflects this thought with a parable:

And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us." And he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this

defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

[Matthew 15 v 10-20]

The pharisees were offended. You see, they spent much of their time defining the minutiae of what was allowed and what wasn't. And yet would spitefully point out perceived sin in those around them. Jesus is saying that these words defile them, revealing hearts that are unclean. The only way to know contentment is to have our hearts cleansed, so that the words that come from our lips are clean too.

What these verses have in common is the idea of contentment.

1. Contentment is for the righteous - the only way we can know it is being made righteous, and the only way for that to happen is to trust in Christ for the redemption of sin.
2. Contentment comes from being righteous - walking daily with God, letting him change us, is reflected in our words and our actions. And seeing the effect of our words and actions upon others is soothing to our stomach when we see it is the Lord at work.

Bodybuilding

Ask a person in a gym what they want most and many will say "a 6 pack". They want their stomach to look and be strong. Ask anyone who has problems with food what they want most and many will say "a strong stomach", but they don't mean externally - they would like to be able to eat what they want and not have problems afterwards.

What is the Bible's spiritual equivalent of a strong stomach? And how do we get there?

- Feed well - feed on the Word of God. We heard last Sunday morning how John had to eat the little scroll, the Word of God - how it was sweet and yet it can be bitter in the stomach. But it is always good for us to feed on the word. If we eat nothing but junk food it will affect out stomach badly, make us lethargic and greedy for more, and so we need to be careful what we feed our spiritual stomachs. If they're working properly we will:
    - Have a healthy appetite - and want more of what we know is good
    - Reject things that are very bad for us
    - Feel us a contentment as we know we're walking in God's way
- Exercise - the fitness folk will tell you about core strength, and how important it is. Likewise we need to build up a spiritual core strength - a resilience that can deal with challenges. Think about the soil types - the seed that grew well was deeply rooted in the good soil. And so it is important for us to be deeply rooted in the Word. Don't just surface skim, but dig deep into God's Word. Ask him to help you see truths that will help you in your life. The scorching sun will come out and challenge your growth, but deep roots will help keep you thriving.
- Routine - ask someone who trains regularly if they enjoy it, and if they always enjoyed it. They will probably tell you they found it very hard at first, but as they stuck with it and set up a regular routine, they found that they missed it when they couldn't train. And it's this

perseverance in following a routine that gradually builds up the strength and fitness. It doesn't happen overnight or even over a week or month. It takes time. So it is with God's Word. It can be a slog to get into a routine but if we stick with it we find that it becomes an essential part of our day. And we will see the changes God brings about in our life over time.

Do all this and you'll have happy bellies. Maybe not washboard flat, but doing a great job, processing what we feed them and converting it into spiritual energy for the Lord.