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A CARNIVOROUS LAND

Food is an important part of our daily lives. That probably goes without saying, but I said it anyway. It is so important that it creeps (jumps?) into our everyday language. American food idioms include such things as someone being “cool as a cucumber,” or a pretty woman being a “hot tomato.” (That last, of course, is not generally acceptable these days, but it proves the point.) Not only do the foods themselves become part of what we say, but the act of eating does so, too. When I was younger (alert, I am about to show my age) one commercial catch phrase was “I can’t believe I ate the whole thing.” When we flatter a person we hope they “eat it up.” Often we or another person are the eater, but every now and then it is a concept or an inanimate object. We are eaten up by, or consumed with, guilt, for instance. The Old Testament has one such phrase. It talks about a land eating people up.

The first time the idea comes up is in Leviticus 26. Moses is recounting what good things will happen to Israel if they continue to obey God and, in more detail, what evils will befall them if they don’t. Among the evils we find a prediction that they will eat their own children in verse 29, In verse 38, though, we also read this. “And ye shall perish among the heathen, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up.” One could ask, how could a land eat them up? Perhaps the answer can be seen in the fulfillment of Moses’ prophecy. The northern tribes of Israel had a long history of disobedience. From the time they separated from Judah they followed other gods. They fought against their own kin. They refused to hear God, and killed his prophets. As a result, God brought the nation of Assyria against them and caused them to go into captivity. After the Babylonian captivity of Judah a few descendants of those Israelites returned to their land, but most had lost their identity in the lands to which they were taken. By their assimilation into the societies where they went, the land of their enemies ate them up. We now talk about them as the “lost tribes” of Israel.

The next of the three references to a land eating people, and perhaps the most famous, is found in Numbers 13:32. God’s people had left Egypt, received the Law at Sinai, and traveled to the borders of the Promised Land. Moses selected leaders from each tribe to spy out the land.

“And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof” (Num 13:32) Tradition holds that when the spies went into Canaan, God caused the death of a member of every family in the land. In this way, everyone would be distracted with burying their dead and would not notice the spies. It worked, but it worked too well. Instead of the spies seeing God’s hand in their protection, they only saw the funerals. To them, the land was eating its inhabitants; it was a land full of death.

Can we be like the spies? God has done wonderful things for us. He gives us all that we have. He gave up his son so that we could have eternal life with Him. Yet some people see only the negative side of life. They see the threat of hell rather than the promise of heaven. They see the crucifixion but not the resurrection. They see a land that eats its inhabitants rather than the hand of God protecting them.

The last reference to a carnivorous land is a promise of relief. “Thus saith the Lord GOD; Because they say unto you, Thou land devourest up men, and hast bereaved thy nations; Therefore thou shalt devour men no more, neither bereave thy nations any more, saith the Lord GOD.” (Ezek 36:13-14) The land that the spies said ate up people would eat nobody again. When all is said and done, God gives us a chance again to see his hand. He makes his protection more sure and more clear. God’s son has made it so we don’t need to worry about anything or anyone eating us up. We can be sure of entering the Promised Land.

CONTENTS

A Carnivorous Land	1
A Husbandman for God	2
They Get It Backwards	4

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A HUSBANDMAN FOR GOD

Husbandman (n.) – Any person involved in the care of plants or animals, especially domestic animals. One who tills the soil.

The New American Bible has a translation of Psalm 37:3 that involves the above definition. “Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land, and cultivate faithfulness.” It seems, according to this valid translation that we are to be gardeners or husbandmen for God. Our husbandry is not of animals or plants, but of faithfulness. It is certainly something that needs cultivation. It doesn’t grow wild. When neglected, it dies.

The Hebrew word translated “faithfulness” in this passage has several shades of meaning. Each of those shades reveals an area of our lives in which we need to tend, or cultivate, faithfulness.

Steadfastness

The basic meaning of the word denotes firmness. One who is faithful does not move from his position

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easily. When he takes a stand, he stands like a well-rooted tree.

The first time we find the word is Exodus 17. In a battle with the Amalekites, whenever Moses held his hands up Israel took the advantage. Whenever his hands lowered, Amalek started winning. In verse 12 we read,

But Moses’ hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady [faithful] until the going down of the sun.

This steadiness is what we need to cultivate in our spiritual lives as well. As steady as Moses’ hands were, so should we be when standing for God.

When Paul introduces the armor of God, this is the idea he uses. “Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore.” We have an enemy. He is not going to give

up in his attacks on us. We must not give up in our defense.

How easy is it, though, to give up. Even Moses got tired and lowered his arms. Such steadfastness is not easy. We have to cultivate it. When I was in college I played the guard in Eugene Ionesco’s *Exit the King*. The part required me to stand at attention through most of the two hours of the play. The first day of rehearsal, I could barely stand without moving for ten minutes. I intentionally added more time each day, until I could stand without flinching for two performances a day, if necessary. When I had to stand fast, I cultivated steadfastness.

How do we do that, spiritually? The same way I learned to stand. Repetition. That is why God tests us. Not so that we will fail, but so we will stand. “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.” (Jas 1:3) Growing plants or training animals is not easy work. Neither is cultivating steadfastness. It doesn’t happen overnight, but every victory brings us closer to the goal.

Another factor in tending firmness is looking beyond today. When we can see the results in our mind, the work is easier. Why does a farmer plant a crop? Because he sees the plant even while it is yet a seed. Why do we stand firm in our faith? Because we see the fruit of our labors. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.” (1 Cor 15:58) When we know our labor is not in vain it becomes much easier to be steadfast in our work.

Truth

A second meaning of the Hebrew word *emunah* is truth. “A faithful witness will not lie: but a false witness will utter lies.” (Prov 14:5) The concept is not far from steadfastness, because truthfulness is merely steadfastness in the truth. People can trust who you are or what you say because your word or yourself has remained firm in the past.

God, of course, is the ultimate example of truthfulness. He is truthful not only in what he says, but who he is. When he says something, it can be counted on. And when you know a trait of God, you know he will always exhibit that trait. In Hebrews 6 the writer argues that when God made a promise to Abraham he swore by himself. In doing so, God swore by two unchangeable things, his words and his self. In everything God is truthfulness.

Because God is truthful, he wants us to be so, too. The lack of truthfulness is one of the things God hates the most. "Lying lips are abomination to the LORD: but they that deal truly are his delight." (Prov 12:22)

These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren. (Prov 6:6-19)

This is an area where we can see everyday that truthfulness needs tending. Left alone, our tendency is toward untruth. We are threatened with embarrassment, so we lie to protect ourselves. We want to spare others pain, so we avoid the absolute truth. There are even people who seem to cultivate lying, who make an art out of being untruthful. That kind of person would be like someone who intentionally plants tumbleweeds. He is worthless in himself, and will reap a worthless crop.

Although we may lie with our lives, it is our words that most often get us into trouble. "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man." (Jas 3:2) When we learn to control our tongue, then the personal truthfulness will fall into place.

Cultivating truthfulness may be one of the hardest things we must do. It is, however, not impossible. We can learn, as the old saying goes, that we have two ears and one mouth to teach us to listen twice as much as we talk. Speaking, contrary to some people's opinion, is not a reflex action. It involves thought. Granted, some people think a lot faster than some of us, but we can learn to think carefully before we speak.

The Talmud says that leprosy was not the disease we know by that name. Instead it was a punishment by God for *lashon hara*, evil speaking. If every time we told a lie, or spoke ill of someone even if it were true, we were stricken with this disease, it might make it easier to avoid an evil tongue. If our lack of truthfulness were manifested by a nose like Pinocchio's, would we learn to be more truthful? Abraham Lincoln is credited with saying, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." He could as easily have added, "and you can't fool God any of the time." If we remember that, we will cultivate truthfulness. It is to the extent that we don't believe that that we let untruth grow wild in our lives.

Faithfulness

The most common meaning of the word in question is "faithfulness." When we talk of being faithful it is usually in relation to marriage, and to sexual faithfulness. But faithfulness is required toward everyone,

not just a spouse. We must be faithful to God, of course, but in doing so we must be faithful to our employers, our friends, our acquaintances, and especially to ourselves.

Again, God is our example of faithfulness. He will not let us down, even in temptation. "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." (1 Cor 10:13)

The most scathing denunciations of Israel by Jeremiah and the other prophets were because God's people had been unfaithful to him. They are compared to a spouse who violates the marriage contract. Indeed, one reason God hates divorce is because it is a sign of unfaithfulness.

When Jesus spoke of the judgement in Matthew 25, what was the commendation of those on his right hand? "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." When God wants to reward us he can find no greater word than "faithful." Therefore, there can be no greater good than to cultivate faithfulness, to God and to others.

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Even in marriage, faithfulness is more than purity. There are many men who would never cheat on their wives who are nevertheless unfaithful. The man who complains about his wife at work is unfaithful to her. Even a man who spends all his time working may be unfaithful to his family. We can likewise be unfaithful to God. We don't have to worship an idol. All we have to do is fail to defend God when those around us belittle him and his church. We can be faithful in attendance at the assembly of the church, but unfaithful to God if that is all the time we give him.

Steadfastness, truthfulness, faithfulness. These are all fruits from the same tree. It is a tree worth growing, because it is a tree that will help us get to God. It takes work to grow this tree. We need to plant the seed in our lives. Like the vinedresser, we need to dig a trench around it, to protect it in our lives. It requires daily, even hourly, watering. There is no rest for the husbandman. Agriculture waits for no man. But the reward is sweet and sure. The reward is being with the One who is steadfast, truthful, and faithful. That is why we must cultivate faithfulness.

THEY GET IT BACKWARDS

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? I'm not sure, but I think Genesis 1 implies that the chicken came first. That is why it is so surprising to me that when it comes to prophecy, many try to make the egg come first. They get things backwards.

From what many people say, and some authors write, you would think that the Revelation of (or to) John would be the first book of the Bible and not the last. In fact, to listen to some, it seems to be the only book of the Bible. Many people make the mistake of interpreting Old Testament prophecy by the book of the Revelation. They have it backwards.

Two books of the Bible that are very similar are Ezekiel and the Revelation. When Ezekiel wrote his prophecy, contrary to some opinion he did not have the book of Revelation as a model. In fact, John was more familiar with Ezekiel than Ezekiel could possibly be with John. There was an almost seven hundred year gap between the two, and Ezekiel came first. Yet many people interpret Ezekiel by the Revelation. They have it backwards. The Revelation can, and should, be interpreted using the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel. But the Old Testament prophecies don't always or often talk of the same time period as the Revelation. The one was written to Jews in captivity, before the coming of Messiah. The other was written to Christians under Rome, after the coming of Messiah.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel promised a restoration of the nation of Israel to the land. They promised a rebuilding of the Temple. They promised the salvation of a remnant of Israel until the coming of Messiah. What many people seem to forget is that these promises, these prophecies, were fulfilled. Most of them were fulfilled centuries before the coming of the

promised Messiah. The Jews returned to the land already. They rebuilt the Temple, and it was still standing until about forty years after the crucifixion of Jesus. A remnant was saved until the coming of Messiah. Those promises are completed, and need no further fulfillment. Yet many people see the restoration of a secular Jewish state on the land in Palestine as a sign of the coming of Messiah. They see the problems in the Middle East as the build-up to Armageddon, even though the Revelation doesn't speak of a battle at that location. In interpreting the promises of Ezekiel and Daniel by the Revelation, they get things backward.

It is true that there is still a remnant of the Jews. It is important, perhaps, that there be a remnant. Paul's whole argument in Romans 9-11 is that a remnant of Israel must be kept so that both Jews and non-Jews may be saved. One implication is that the world will not end until at least a portion of the Jews comes to believe in Jesus as Messiah. Yes, there is a remnant still. But the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel are fulfilled. We don't need a restoration of Israel to the land to restore Israel to the faith in Messiah they once held.

The Revelation was written to first century Christians to tell them to keep the faith. It foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and the persecution of Christians. To that extent, even its prophecies are fulfilled. It tells of a Messiah that is coming again, this time in judgement. He doesn't need a land, since he won't be spending time on earth again. He won't need a Temple, because his people are his temple (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16). Even when some people get it backwards, he won't.

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