

Hunger:

What Hunger Teaches Us About God



I once knew a guy who talked about food all day long for eight days straight.

He talked about cheeseburgers and fries and pizza. He spoke about meat loaf and mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese and green beans and cornbread. He dreamed about ravioli with lasagna piled on top and a side of garlic bread. He drooled over thoughts of chocolate and cinnamon rolls and ice cream. He relished thoughts about every kind of good food a person could possibly want.

He went about his days, doing the things he was supposed to do, but all of his focus was on food. Day after day, even during the night sometimes, whether walking or sitting or standing, he just kept talking about food. It occupied his thoughts and his words; it utterly consumed him to the point where nothing mattered in the entire world except food.

That guy was me. And I was really hungry.

I graduated from the United States Air Force Academy with the Class of 2000. During the summer of 1997, I, along with a thousand of my

classmates, went through Combat Survival Training (CST). The purpose of CST was to teach us how to survive and evade capture should we find ourselves in hostile territory during wartime, which was taxpayer money well spent on a future space systems program manager in California.

CST was the most dreaded time in every upperclassman's cadet career. It was mandatory for all cadets to complete in order to graduate, so we had no choice, and we knew we wouldn't eat much while out in the field as that was part of the training environment. The first half of field training was called Survival, so we constructed our tents and learned to make fires and practiced finding and decontaminating water sources and that sort of thing. I don't know if you've ever had the chance to drink muddy water, but it doesn't taste very good. We were taught how to strain the water so that it would become less muddy, and we were given iodine pills to make it potable, but iodine-flavored, faintly muddy water isn't that much better than plain muddy water, and it doesn't do much for hunger either.

The second half of field training was called Evasion. Our task was to navigate, in teams of three, several miles through the woods and mountains, using only our compasses, maps, and knotted rope. Each night, we were expected to find our way to one of four waypoints, crossing several miles of mountain forest while moving slowly and quietly enough to evade capture from the scores of cadre who were sent out to catch anyone they could find.

At each waypoint, we faced simulated allies who were kind to us or enemies who were harsh. Some of the waypoints were easy to find, others harder, but all the while, our hunger was driving us crazy. Our group ended up making our way through all four waypoints, and we even did well enough to score a helicopter ride home rather than a bus ride with most of the other cadets. Getting back to the academy felt great after a week in the woods, as did a shower and a bed, even one with hospital-cornered sheets.

But what I longed for the most was food. After 45 minutes of scrubbing

in the shower, desperately trying to get the camouflage and dirt off my hands, head, neck, eyelids, and ears, I headed back to my room, where I dialed up a local Italian place for delivery. I decided to start small: just a large pizza and a plate of ravioli. I figured I could get to the cheeseburger and ice cream later.

The next 30 minutes felt like a lifetime. I don't know the feeling of watching the birth of your first child, having waited anxiously for nine months and dreamed day and night about the upcoming moment, but I bet it feels a little bit the same way I did when the delivery guy showed up at our stairwell. I paid him and tipped him well. I may have even hugged him.

The first bite was amazing, and relief washed over me. The next bite was even better, my taste buds coming to life and savoring every moment. But the third bite brought a different sensation. It was neither relief nor pleasure; it was the feeling of being full. I had not eaten any substantial food in weeks, my stomach had downsized, and I could no longer eat anything close to a full meal. I wanted more, but at the same time, I didn't. My hunger was satisfied with the smallest amount of food.

My CST experience is now in the past, and I hadn't thought about it much until recently when I read a book that brought back a lot of these memories. The book is called *The Heavenly Man*, and it is the true story of a man named Brother Yun, who was one of the leaders of the house-church movement in China in the last 30 years.

During the course of his life, Yun was imprisoned on many occasions for preaching the gospel, and he suffered beatings, ridicule, and all sorts of torturous and demeaning acts. His prison time sounds horrible, but his story of going on a food strike is the most amazing. While Yun was in prison in Nanyang in 1984, he sensed the Lord calling him to fast. He used his time of fasting to seek God, but the prison authorities took it as a sign of rebellion, so they continued to beat and torture him. Yet in spite of his

harsh treatment, he persisted in his fast. Days turned into weeks, and his fast was unbroken, as was the torture. His body grew weaker, but he felt more and more sustained by God, so he continued to fast.

He soon approached the thirty-ninth day of his fast, and he was nearly overcome with temptation by the devil. Jesus had fasted for 40 days, so surely Yun would not presume to try and surpass his Lord in this fast. But God seemed to be calling him to persevere, so he persisted in his refusal of food. Soon he approached the fiftieth day of the fast. Then the sixtieth. Then the seventieth day.

By the seventy-fourth day, the prison authorities had exhausted all of their disciplinary techniques on Yun, and in their haste to bring his fast to an end, they arranged for his family to come see him, hoping they would convince him to finally eat. His family was brought into a room, and a cellmate carried Yun to see them because Yun was far too weak at that point to move anywhere by himself. At first, his family didn't recognize him. But then his mother identified his birthmark, and his family soon faced the fact that the shrunken and shriveled body that lay before them was their beloved Yun.

Brother Yun's wife, Deling, recounts seeing her husband at the end of his fast:

After some time a tiny figure was carried in...he looked like a little child [because he had dropped from 165 pounds to 65]...he was so little that he didn't even look like a human being. Most of his hair had been torn out. His face was gaunt. His eyes appeared larger than normal, and his mouth hung open, displaying yellow teeth.¹

I don't know if you have ever seen a picture of someone in this condition,

but I'm sure it's a stark image. The human body is frail, and it doesn't take too many days without nourishment to show its weakness. I can't imagine the feeling of seeing this strong, virtuous man reduced to nothing more than tightly stretched skin over beaten, bruised bones.

As I tried to imagine myself as Yun's mother or wife, eyes scanning across this shriveled form of a man, I remembered CST. I lost 20 pounds during training, not 100, but I didn't exactly have 20 pounds to lose. My skin stretched more tightly across my ribs; some of my already scarce muscle mass disappeared altogether. I was a picture of relative malnourishment, and while I was nowhere near the condition Yun had been in, my body was still in obvious need of sustenance.

But then my thoughts turned inward. I wondered what my spirit would look like if I could see its health. Would it appear strong and vigorous, filled with the power of God, or would it appear weak and shriveled, evidencing a lack of spiritual nourishment?

Of course, I have no idea what my spirit looks like because I can't see it. I would like to think my spirit is ridiculously ripped, that it is tall and strapping, moving with purpose and the subtle weight of authority. I'd like to believe my spirit always has facial hair and smells like sawdust or fresh dirt because that's what manly spirits are like, right?

Most likely, my spirit is not ridiculously ripped, but ridiculously skinny. I bet it's small and frail, bent over by the torture of a thousand cares and emaciated from lack of any true nourishment. For much of my life, I have eaten some spiritual food, never really starving myself to death but never really feasting either. On the rare occasion my spirit does feast, I too quickly forget the feeling of satisfaction and go back to table scraps. But feasts and scraps aside, the point is I just don't know what my spirit looks like.

Thinking about what my spirit might look like reminded me of the day I

met Cal after a surf session in Manhattan Beach on a Tuesday morning. Cal had been living on the beach for many years, and he was in need of good conversation. He's a smart guy, very friendly, and in pretty good shape. He was a little more than 50 years old at the time, with a tanned complexion and a cloud-white beard. But living on the beach doesn't give a man the opportunity to clean up too much. So one afternoon, I invited him up to my apartment for a shave and a shower. He headed into the bathroom armed with a small pair of scissors, a bottle of shaving cream, a razor, and a towel. I didn't see him again for two hours.

When he finally came out, he looked much happier. He also looked good; his beard was trimmed, his hair was combed neatly, and he had a big smile on his face.

"You look good, Cal," I said.

"It's crazy. I hardly recognize myself," he replied, shaking his head. "I haven't looked at myself in a mirror in a long time. These eyes are not the eyes I remember. My hair and beard don't look like I remember. My skin looks different too."

Hearing Cal's perspective got me thinking. I've never forgotten what I look like because I look in a mirror at least once a day. If I think of the times I've been camping or something like that, I'd say the longest I've gone without seeing my own reflection has been a couple of days. So I can't imagine what it feels like to see myself as I am and not recognize the person I see. The experience is probably a little scary and a little confusing. I bet I would just stare, trying to wrestle with the fact that I'm not the person I thought I was.

What Cal lacked was the opportunity to see himself on a regular basis, and it caused him to lose sight of who he was. I wondered if my inability to see my spirit on a regular basis had a similar effect on my own vision.

Fortunately, Jesus had something to say on this subject: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”²

These Pharisees thought they were the picture of spiritual health. They followed all of the customs and rules of their religion, even to the smallest degree. They were the keepers of the sacred text, the teachers of God’s law for their people. They gave generously (and publicly), prayed fervently (and publicly), and fasted regularly (and publicly). Everyone in town knew these guys were spiritual; if you wanted to be spiritual too, you needed to be like the Pharisees.

Jesus, however, called them filthy, and He also distinguished between two kinds of clean. The first kind of clean (“you clean the outside of the cup”) is a superficial kind, like putting a coat of paint over a mold-infested wall. The second kind of clean (“first clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean”) is a deeper kind. It would require tearing down the wall, killing all the mold, and putting up a new wall in its place. Jesus told the Pharisees that their spiritual health was malnourished and that if they wanted true nourishment, they needed to turn inward first.

But Jesus said something else here as well—He called these Pharisees blind. He didn’t just call them filthy. He called them filthy *and* told them they couldn’t even see they were filthy. But these Pharisees weren’t physically blind, so Jesus must have meant they couldn’t see their true spiritual condition. They couldn’t see themselves as Jesus saw them.

Whenever I read about the Pharisees, I always imagine them as misguided and ritualistic legalists. I rarely identify with them. But you have learned a little bit about me, and you may have noticed some of my Pharisaical tendencies, some of the legalism that has been hanging out on my couch

for many years, and some of my tendency to take hold of some good commandment of God and make it my religion. I am far more like the Pharisees than I care to admit, so I wondered if I was blind to the same thing they were. Do I clean the outside of my cup, learning to say the right words with my friends or measure my level of spirituality by what I do, all the while being blind to the filth on the inside?

I turned to the Scriptures, hoping to regain my sight, and I saw some pretty interesting things. One of the things I noticed was that the Old Testament promised that God would heal the blind.³ It doesn't say He would heal every blind person; it just says that God is the one who would heal the blind.

You likely remember some of the stories of Jesus healing blind people. Two blind shouters outside the city of Jericho cried out for mercy from the Son of David.⁴ Two blind followers tracked Jesus down in a house and were healed.⁵ And when a mute and blind demoniac met Jesus, he ended up talking and seeing. In this last account, Matthew introduces this story by quoting from the prophet Isaiah, opening with the promise about God's chosen servant who, among other things, would "open the eyes that are blind."⁶

So the prophets promised God would heal the blind, and Jesus came and did just that. I don't need to convince you that Jesus is God, but I think His role in our ability to see is crucial if we're ever going to see ourselves as we truly are.

If God is the one who opens the eyes of the blind, then the reason the Pharisees were blind seems to be that He had not opened their eyes to see. Jesus' admonishment to them to clean the inside of their cup was, in part, a call to faith, a call to believe in Him. So even though I feared that I might be blind as well, sharing the company of these Pharisees, I realized that by God's grace, I am not. I know God has granted me sight, having given me the gift of Jesus' righteousness and His Spirit to live within me.

John Newton's words echo the chorus of my heart: "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." I know I have the eyes to see my own filth; I just need God's help to focus and start cleaning.

So I'm somewhat relieved to know I am not blind in the same way the Pharisees were, but this still doesn't help with the fact that I don't really know how healthy my spirit is. Maybe you feel the same way. You know God is for you and you are His because you know the inside of your cup is filthy. I think knowing this is the beginning of seeing yourself as God sees you. It's the staring at yourself in a mirror, as Cal did, and knowing the person you see is you even though the reflection isn't always pretty.

This is where Jesus' picture of the cup is so useful. A cup is meant to hold things. A cup that holds nothing falls short in its true cupness. Perhaps our lives are much the same way. We are all spiritual beings, which means we're all born with a spirit, that something inside us that we know is the real us and not just the outer shell of our body. If, as Jesus said, we are cups, and we hold nothing spiritually, then we fall short of being who we're supposed to be.

But none of us are empty. We all fill our cups with something.

Because we can't see our spirits, we have to rely on something else to give us a vision of our spiritual health. I think this is where our cravings are so instructive. They tell us what we're hungering for, what we're trying to fill our cups with.

Some of us fill our cups with food, believing that a bad day melts away with a bit of chocolate. Others of us fill our cups with sex, thinking that physical intimacy is the way to feel the love and acceptance we long for. Still others search after significance, supposing a job or career will satisfy our deepest longings for purpose and meaning. Committed Christians often fill their cups with religion and rules.

But none of the things we crave, whether food, sex, a career, religion, or anything else in this world, can fill a spiritual cup made for spiritual filling. In fact, any of these counterfeits will make us sick—so sick, in fact, that we will fall into bondage to them and come to hate them.

To see that this is true, we can look at the story of the Exodus from Egypt. In the Bible, Egypt often represents bondage, and God's deliverance of His people out of Egypt is a story of rescue from bondage. God did all sorts of amazing things during this rescue mission: He turned the Nile to blood, sent plague after plague on the Egyptians while protecting the Israelites among them from each one, plundered the Egyptians as His people were freed, parted the Red Sea so Israel could cross on dry land, destroyed Pharaoh's army when it was in pursuit, and even fed the people with manna, or bread from heaven, as they crossed the wilderness.⁷

As good as bread from heaven may sound, the people got tired of it pretty quickly. "Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving... 'Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing...but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'"⁸

So God gave them meat. Lots and lots of meat. "Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the LORD who is among you."⁹

Was God just being spiteful? After all, He had led them into the wilderness for two years, and all they had to eat was manna. Sure, manna was great, but every day, day after day, the same thing over and over again? I'm sure Israel asked the same question, and Moses had an answer ready for them:

God has led you...in the wilderness, that He might humble

you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you hunger...that...you [may] know that man does not live by bread alone, but...by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.¹⁰

Israel's hunger seems to have led them, not to every word that comes from the mouth of God, but to a desire for Egypt, the very place of bondage God had just delivered them from. But I think their cravings were for more than meat. I think they wanted to leave behind the hard task of following God and to return to the known comfort of slavery. That happens sometimes, doesn't it? The security of bondage can often seem easier than the anxiety of freedom.

Before we think God was unfair for testing Israel the way He did, we should recognize that He put His Son through the same kind of testing. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. And He hungered as they did, fasting for the entire 40 days, His body probably ending up much like Yun's. But when Satan came to tempt Him and appealed to His hunger, telling Him to "command this stone to become bread," Jesus answered him by quoting Moses' answer to Israel's questions: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'"¹¹

I think Jesus was telling Satan and Israel and us something very important about our cravings. In our cravings, God means to test our hearts, to see whether we will depend on Him the way Jesus did, and to see whether we will hunger for bread or sex or significance or religion, or if we will hunger for God's words. Our hunger pangs become a test of sorts, showing us what we want most when we feel worst, revealing what we think will satisfy us.

This thought of hungering reminded me of one of the Beatitudes. I have always been puzzled by some of these sayings because some of them

seem to have been said just for the sake of metaphor. For example, when Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied," I always thought it was just a nice word picture.¹²

But perhaps He meant what He said.

The apostle John gives us some clues about this kind of hungering and thirsting. In John's Gospel, Jesus said, "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you."¹³ Interestingly, He said this in Capernaum to some of the crowd of 5000 whom He had miraculously fed the day before with nothing more than five loaves and two fish. In response, the crowd started asking Him for a sign—um, remember yesterday?—and brought up the whole "manna from heaven" thing their forefathers had miraculously received while wandering in the wilderness. The hunger pangs of this crowd revealed what they believed would satisfy them. They wanted food that perishes, not the kind that endures to eternal life.

But Jesus was smart. He saw past their stomach-level desires and focused on their spiritual needs. "It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven...I am the bread of life."¹⁴ The crowd feigned interest in Jesus' bread, asking Him to give it to them. But Jesus went back to the health of their spirits.

He told them, "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Drawing on their request for a sign, He went on to say, "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died...[but] I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."¹⁵

He was on a roll with this bread metaphor, but the ending is a little jarring. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have



no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.”¹⁶

Whoa there! Did He really just say that? And did He really mean it? John later tells us some of His disciples called these “hard sayings,” and many of them turned away from Jesus and stopped following Him. I can see why—these *are* hard sayings.

Before we turn away as well, I suppose we should hear Jesus out. “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”¹⁷ He started out by talking about their hunger, using the bread their stomachs desired to show them the Bread their spirits needed. But then He explained what it means to hunger after righteousness. It means hungering after the flesh and blood of Jesus, taking Him in spiritually in the same way we take bread in physically. When we do so, our hunger is satisfied as we abide in Him.

This sounds like something we’ve heard before.

You probably remember another one of Jesus’ metaphors we’ve already discussed: the vine and the branches. Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit...if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.”¹⁸ We can begin to see a connection between feeding on Jesus’ flesh and keeping His commandments, between drinking His blood and abiding in Him.

At this point, I don’t know if all of this makes you happy or confused or bored, but Jesus meant for it to make you happy. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”¹⁹

This is the connection back to the beatitude about hungering after righteousness, and to the bondage of Egypt Israel longed for instead of the freedom of following God. It helps us understand why Jesus, in drilling the blind

Pharisees for their filthiness, may have chosen the cup as a metaphor for their lives, and why God is the only one who can open our blind eyes to see the true state of spiritual health.

I wonder if the story of the Exodus was more than a story of God's deliverance of His people *from* bondage. That would be like God emptying our cups of those things that hold us in bondage as well, but our cups would still be empty. I think the story of the Exodus was also a story of deliverance *to* blessing, to a "good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."²⁰ God means to not only empty our cups but also to fill them with blessing. After all, Jesus told His disciples that He said what He said so their joy would be full. When we abide in His love, hungering with childlike faith and simple obedience, He fills our cups to the brim with joy.

If we want our cups to be filled with joy, maybe we need to start by examining our hunger pangs. When God gives us manna, and we hunger for meat, we're choosing slavery over freedom. Or to put it more practically, when God gives us Jesus, and we hunger for food, sex, significance, or religion, we're choosing to have empty, filthy cups rather than full, clean ones. In Romans 6, Paul tells us we are either slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness, and being a slave to righteousness leads to eternal life. So when God removes the chains of sin from our hands and feet, and we begin to fast from the fillings of this world, a deeper kind of hunger will growl within us, a craving for the spiritual filling of righteousness.

Which is Jesus.

To observe our spiritual health, we start with Jesus. God is the one who opens our eyes; otherwise, we may be withered beyond recognition (like Yun) but not know it (like Cal). Cleaning out our cups also starts with Jesus. We can scrub all we like or paint over the mold as many times as we can, but nothing cleans quite like the righteousness of Jesus. And the filling of

our cups with blessing starts with Jesus too. Our hunger will lead us to something else or to Him, to a place of loathing or to the fullness of joy.

It's all about Jesus. My ridiculously skinny spirit could use so much more of Him. I think Jesus would give me vitality and life again, maybe so much so that I could be spiritually ripped and maybe even smell a little like sawdust.

I would love to give you a formula for getting more of Jesus in this way, but if there is one, I don't know it myself. Maybe we should just start by figuring out whether we are blind, and what we hunger for, and what we're filling our cups with. If our hunger is for the things of this world, we're not going to be filled with more of Jesus. And even if our cravings are for all the blessings of heaven apart from Jesus, they won't fill us with more of Him.

But if our cravings are for Jesus, and our souls hunger to know Him, to be known by Him, and to treasure Him above all else, I think we'll find our satisfaction. Unlike my first meal after CST, when my hunger was satisfied with the smallest amount of food, Jesus will increase our appetites for more of Him, and He will continue to satisfy them. And all of the things we've wrestled with about love and abiding and childlike faith and simple obedience will develop from that growing place of satisfaction. Maybe then the nice word pictures will take real form, and we can actually believe and say with confidence, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."