

Rebuilding Lives: Fit Out

The Kitchen: Your Soul's Nutrition Zone

Paul B. Bailey

I must say at the very beginning of this message to the writings and thoughts of Eugene Peterson, especially in his book published in 2006, *Eat This Book: A Conversation on The Art of Spiritual Reading*, published in the UK by Hodder and Stoughton.

If you are considering buying property there are a few rooms that are deal-makers, many rooms, features, fixtures etc. can be deal-breakers, but only one or two rooms are deal-makers. The kitchen and bathroom are deal-makers. A really good, modern well-presented kitchen can add as much as £10,000.00. The kitchen is also important because it is a food preparation area; it is the place where nourishment is supposed to take place. Using the word picture of construction and the theme of fit out, we are using the image of a kitchen as the place where your soul and your life is nourished. It is the place where you receive spiritual energy and soul food to help you grow and move forward in the God-life.

The food preparation area of the soul is your heart and mind. God's word is food for the soul. Years ago as God's people were liberated from Egyptian slavery and they were making the physical and psychological journey from slavery to being people who were in charge of their destinies, Moses, the man God used to orchestrate their liberation said these words:

"Be careful to obey all the commands I am giving you today. Then you will live and multiply, and you will enter and occupy the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors. ² Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would really obey his commands. ³ Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people need more than bread for their life; real life comes by feeding on every word of the LORD." Deuteronomy 8.1-3, NLT,

Notice that God wants to "to teach you that people need more than bread for their life; real life comes by feeding on every word of the LORD."

In fact, throughout the Bible, God's word is referred to as food for our souls

1 Peter 2.2 tell us "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious." NKJV, we should have an eager appetite for God's word, drinking deep of God's pure kindness. So that we'll grow up mature and whole in God.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews informs us that "Everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." Hebrews 5.13-14 The idea here is that we grow in maturity as we develop 'skillfulness' in the practice of applying God's word to concrete situations and are able to make judgements about what is good and what is evil.

Rebuilding Lives: Fit Out

The Kitchen: Your Soul's Nutrition Zone

Paul B. Bailey

God's word is food for our souls. So in this message I want to help us prepare our hearts minds (our kitchen or food storage and food preparation area). Today I want to talk about how to prepare the soul food of God's Word in the food preparation area of your soul. I want to do this by exploring three really important questions: What is the Bible?, Why read the Bible? Then, How to read the Bible?

Firstly, what is the Bible?

The Bible is not a textbook, nor is it an owners' manual, the Bible is a story it is God's and it is our story it is, in the words of Brian McLaren, 'The Story We Find Ourselves In'. Whenever you refer to the Bible as a story, there is a temptation to feel that the Bible as story lessens the inspiration and authority of scripture. That somehow the concept of story is somehow incompatible with divine revelation.

Allow me to suggest that that the Bible as a story, or more accurately as a series inter-connecting stories told through historical narrative, poetry, philosophical dialogue, hymns, letters and fantastic apocalyptic, is a more accurate and dynamic description of what the Bible is.

Think of the best stories you have read. I am an avid and enthusiastic reader. I read quite broadly but there is nothing like a good novel. One of my favourite books is *Shogun* by James Clavell. It is set in feudal Japan somewhere around the year 1600 and gives a highly fictionalized account of the rise of Tokugawa Ieyasu to the Shogunate. As I read this book I found myself transported from 21st Century Britain into feudal Japan, I was immersed in the culture, the theology, politics, the intrigue, the adventure and the romance. It engaged my heart (emotions), my mind (intellect) and my spirit (my deeper hopes). That you see is the power of a story. One of my favourite authors is Raymond E. Feist. I particularly love the *Daughter of the Empire*, the *Servant of the Empire* and the *Mistress of the Empire* series. I was transported from earth to another space and time into another world and culture. You lived with Mara and the Acoma as she struggled to survive the intrigues of her enemies.

The point here is not that Bible is a great work of fiction, but the fact that stories are powerful. They draw you in. You cannot read or listen to a good story and remain indifferent or impartial; you are forced to enter the story and to get involved.

For the record I do not believe that the Bible is a work of fiction. I believe in the truth of the Bible. However, God chose to communicate to us through stories involving characters, places, events and circumstances. As such the Bible is not simply a collection of directives and propositions. It is a powerful life-changing, life-giving story. In an interview, Eugene Peterson, the creative force behind the message Bible said, "God has a story. The scriptures are given to us in the shape of a story."¹

In his book on the art of spiritual reading, called 'Eat This Book' Eugene Peterson writes, in a chapter called *Scripture as Script*, "We enter the world of the text, the world in which God is subject, in order to

¹ Michael J. Cusick, *A Conversation with Eugene Peterson*, Mars Hill Review

Rebuilding Lives: Fit Out

The Kitchen: Your Soul's Nutrition Zone

Paul B. Bailey

become participants in the text. We have our part to play in this text, a part that is given to us by the Holy Spirit. As we play our part we become *part-icipants*.²

Peterson goes on to say, "We are given this book so that we can imaginatively and believingly enter the world of the text and follow Jesus."³ When we respond to God's Word in faith and obedience we enter the text. Peterson says "If we have not entered this text as participants we aren't going to understand what is going on. This text cannot be understood by watching from the bleachers..."⁴

In the Bible God is offering himself to us in his own Words. Peterson says, "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God. The revelation comes by Word. And all these words are personal, there is no abstract word. God is himself incarnating himself by word. Words, language is the way in which we reveal ourselves to one another. It's the primary means of deepening and continuing intimacy. The minute language becomes functionalized there is sacrilege going on."⁵

This is the power of a story, which is why God has given his Word to us in the shape of a story.

This leads me to my second question, 'why read the Bible?'

In many ways this is the most difficult question to answer; firstly because for centuries people have used the Bible to judge, condemn subjugate and exploit countless millions. The Bible has also been used to justify racism, slavery, sexism, homophobia, so when a person hears 'the Bible' they hear oppression. Related to this there is a false familiarity that breeds contempt which prevents people entering the text.

However, having wrestled with this question for a bit the answer or answers came flooding in.

Here's what I think, we read the Bible because we are called and seduced by God to want to know him. I have met hundreds of people from all sorts of walks of life, from local politicians to convicted criminals who came to a point in their lives when they felt they wanted to get to know God and in trying to scratch this itch, people are compelled to read the Bible. Now this itch can manifest itself in a critical desire to disprove the Bible or in an attempt to find answers.

We also read the Bible because human beings are in search of meaning and purpose and there is something about God's story that gives us meaning and calls us to a purpose that is deep enough to fill our hearts and has an arm long enough to touch our world. The Bible is full of this kind of thing, from Moses and Israel's liberation from Egypt to David and his fight with Goliath. From Joseph and his struggle to become the person of his dreams to Esther the pampered princess with a call on her life. The Bible is a book of purpose that calls us to purpose.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading*, p.69, Hodder & Stoughton 2006

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading*, p.69, Hodder & Stoughton 2006

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading*, p.69, Hodder & Stoughton 2006

⁵ Mars Hill Review, A Conversation with Eugene Peterson, By Michael J. Cusick

Rebuilding Lives: Fit Out

The Kitchen: Your Soul's Nutrition Zone

Paul B. Bailey

We read the Bible to understand what life is like and how it is to be lived. The Bible tells us about life and how it is to be lived by allowing us to walk with others who have walked the God-trail and lived the God-kind of life.

This leads me to my final question: How to read the Bible?

We ought to read the Bible, according to the words of Isaiah 31:4, "As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey ... " (Isa. 31:4). The Hebrew word here translated as "growl" (*hagah*) but usually translated as "meditate," as in the Psalm 1 phrase describing the blessed man or woman whose "delight is in the law of the LORD," on which "he meditates day and night" (v. 2). Or in Psalm 63: "When I think of thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the watches of the night" (v 6). But Isaiah uses this word to refer to a lion growling over his prey the way a dog might obsessively chew and gnaw at his favorite bone.

Eugene Peterson writes, "There is a certain kind of writing that invites this kind of reading, soft purrs and low growls as we taste and savor, anticipate and take in the sweet and spicy, mouth-watering and soul-energizing morsel words — "O taste and see that the LORD is good!" (Ps. 34:8). Isaiah uses the same word (*hagah*) a few pages later for the cooing of a dove (38:14). One careful reader of this text caught the spirit of the word when he said that *hagah* means that a person "is lost in his religion," which is exactly what my dog was in his bone. Baron Friedrich von Hugel compared this way of reading to "letting a very slowly dissolving lozenge melt imperceptibly in your mouth."⁶

What Peterson is saying is that the way the Bible should be read is in the same way connoisseur savours a gourmet meal: slowly enjoying every mouth-watering morsel. We are supposed to read the Bible slowly and meditatively so that the word metabolises in our souls and it becomes part of us and we become part of it.

Peterson writes, "There is only one way of reading that is congruent with our Holy Scriptures, writing that trusts in the power of words to penetrate our lives and create truth and beauty and goodness, writing that requires a reader who, in the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, "does not always remain bent over his pages; he often leans back and closes his eyes over a line he has been reading again, and its meaning spreads through his blood." This is the kind of reading named by our ancestors as *lectio divina*, often translated "spiritual reading," reading that enters our souls as food enters our stomachs, spreads through our blood, and becomes holiness and love and wisdom"⁷

He continues, "The most striking biblical metaphor for reading was St. John eating a book:

⁶ ***Meditating Like a Dog*** Eugene Peterson on the discipline of spiritual reading. Eugene Peterson, from Eat This Book | posted 5/31/2007 , Christianity Today, May (Web-only) 2007, Vol. 51

⁷ ***Meditating Like a Dog*** Eugene Peterson on the discipline of spiritual reading. Eugene Peterson, from Eat This Book | posted 5/31/2007 , Christianity Today, May (Web-only) 2007, Vol. 51

Rebuilding Lives: Fit Out

The Kitchen: Your Soul's Nutrition Zone

Paul B. Bailey

I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. (Rev. 10:9-10)

Jeremiah and Ezekiel before him had also eaten books — a good diet, it would seem, for anyone who cares about reading words rightly.

St. John, this endlessly fascinating early-church apostle and pastor and writer, walks up to the angel and says, "Give me the book." The angel hands it over, "Here it is; eat it, eat the book." And John does. He eats the book — not *just* reads it — he got it into his nerve endings, his reflexes, his imagination. The book he ate was Holy Scripture. Assimilated into his worship and prayer, his imagining and writing, the book he ate was metabolized into the book he wrote, the first great poem in the Christian tradition and the concluding book of the Bible, the Revelation."⁸

"Words spoken or written to us under the metaphor of eating, words to be freely taken in, tasted, chewed, savoured, swallowed, and digested, have a very different effect on us from those that come at us from the outside, whether in the form of propaganda or information. Propaganda works another person's will upon us, attempting to manipulate us to an action or a belief. Insofar as we are moved by it, we become less, the puppet of a puppeteer writer/speaker. There is no dignity, no soul, in a puppet. And information reduces words to the condition of commodities that we can use however we will. Words are removed from their originating context in the moral universe and from personal relationships so that they can be used as tools or weapons. Such commodification of language reduces both those who speak it and those who listen to it also to commodities."⁹

Finally, like all great meals the Bible should be enjoyed in community. Not only should we be like Isaiah's lone lion, growling (Hagah) or meditating under the shade of our favourite tree. We should also be a family of connoisseurs, purring and growling with pleasure as we eat the book and drink deeply of its meaning and together are souls are renewed, revived and re-commissioned to be the change we want in the world.

Let's pray...

⁸ *Meditating Like a Dog* Eugene Peterson on the discipline of spiritual reading. Eugene Peterson, from Eat This Book | posted 5/31/2007 , Christianity Today, May (Web-only) 2007, Vol. 51

⁹ *Meditating Like a Dog* Eugene Peterson on the discipline of spiritual reading. Eugene Peterson, from Eat This Book | posted 5/31/2007 , Christianity Today, May (Web-only) 2007, Vol. 51