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Ezekiel 4:9-12 **New American Bible.**

9 Then take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them into a single pot and make them into bread. Eat it for as many days as you lie upon your side, three hundred and ninety days. 10 The food you eat shall be twenty shekels a day by weight; each day you shall eat it. 11 And the water you drink shall be the sixth of a hin by measure; each day you shall drink it. 12 And the barley cake you eat you must bake on human excrement in the sight of all.

Ezekiel's Poo Bread.

When I was a boy, we would have a good time finding salacious and gross verses in the Bible and talking about them during recess. It became quite a game, with all of us kids scouring the Bible to find good stuff. We would try to see who could come up with the most revolting passages in the Bible. There is a Psalm where God appears to approve of dashing babies against rocks. There's the scene in 2 Kings where Elisha is teased by some boys for being bald, so he causes some bears to maul 42 of them. It was tough to discover the good stuff. Remember that there was no Google back then: we couldn't simply search for "disgusting stuff in the Bible". We are going to look at my favorite one today, and no, it was not me who found this one - in Ezekiel. It was a buddy of mine, and we'll call him Jerry. This one was so out there that we didn't fully believe him until we got back

from recess and looked it up in Sister Catherine's Bible. Here is the best biblical discovery ever, from Ezekiel Chapter 4.

9 Then take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them into a single pot and make them into bread. Eat it for as many days as you lie upon your side, three hundred and ninety days. 10 The food you eat shall be twenty shekels a day by weight; each day you shall eat it. 11 And the water you drink shall be the sixth of a hin by measure; each day you shall drink it. 12 And the barley cake you eat you must bake on human excrement in the sight of all.

There it is. God is speaking here, through the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel, telling the Israelites that they are to make bread from barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt, and then cook it over human poo. No way around it. That's what it says. I am going to go ahead and break the suspense and let you know how this little story ends. Here are the next three verses from Ezekiel:

13 The LORD said: Thus the Israelites shall eat their food, unclean, among the nations where I drive them. 14 "Oh no, Lord GOD," I protested. "Never have I defiled myself nor have I eaten carrion flesh or flesh torn by wild beasts, nor from my youth till now has any unclean meat entered my mouth." 15 Very well, he replied, I will let you use cow manure in place of human dung. You can bake your bread on that.

So, we see that when Ezekiel protests to God, saying that he has never defiled himself, God relents and says, okay, you can use cow poo instead.

I do want to acknowledge that the title of my message is a bit sensationalized: the poo is fuel for the fire, not an ingredient in the bread. But let's look more carefully at this passage. Here is the context. The author, Ezekiel,

and his name means "*God strengthens*", was both a prophet and apparently a priest in the Temple. The book is in first person and is more tightly written and focused than most other prophetic works. While it does appear that the book did go through some editorial passes, it very much feels like it was written almost entirely by a single person, presumably the prophet. We believe that Ezekiel served as a prophet during the reign of King Jehoiachin. King Jehoiachin was banished to Babylon in 597 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar, about ten years before the somewhat more talked about wave of exiles was sent out of Israel, when the Temple was destroyed. Ezekiel was exiled with Jehoiachin, and so the Prophet served in exile, not in Israel. Ezekiel's wife went with him to Babylon. They lived a humble life there. She died at one point, leaving him grieving and numb. The Book of Ezekiel is typically broken into two parts. The first is longer and presents visions and oracles of judgement, proclaiming God's anger at the people of Israel, and explaining why the Babylonians were allowed to overpower them. The second part is more optimistic: it speaks of hope and the possibility of the people of Israel being restored. We need to keep in mind that the first-person voice of Ezekiel is for the most part the voice of God.

Here is the specific context of our passage. Ezekiel is predicting that the People of God are going to go through very hard times at the hands of the

Babylonians. This is why the bread has such a long list of ingredients: they are to use whatever bits of grain and protein they have so they can get enough to eat; this includes wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt. This is a survival bread. Why is God commanding his people to eat it for 390 days on their side? 390 was seen as the number of years in which Israel had been sinning and not living by God's will. They are being told precisely how much water they will need to survive – and they must conserve water. Why are they to cook the bread over human poo? They are living in a besieged city, with the Babylonians not yet having entered the city to destroy it. They are reduced to using the most grotesque fuel possible, a sign of how far down they have fallen. God is impressing upon his people the horrific results of having turned away from God.

But Ezekiel says: *"Never have I defiled myself nor have I eaten carrion flesh or flesh torn by wild beasts, nor from my youth till now has any unclean meat entered my mouth."* God relents, showing mercy, saying okay, you can use cow manure instead. Remember that Ezekiel was a priest. Living in a holy way was his identity. It was his job to show the people of Israel how to follow to the ritualistic laws of the Hebrew Scriptures. Using human poo would have violated the laws of purity. However, using cow dung mixed with something like straw was very common and perfectly acceptable, if not desirable.

There is another level to this little story. By having to scrounge together many, diverse ingredients to make some bread to eat and to be ordered to cook it over human dung, God was making it clear that the people of Israel were about to enter a period of intense deprivation under the Babylonians. They are being warned that in Babylon, they will be forced to eat the unclean food of their pagan captors. Ezekiel having to beg God to be allowed to use cow dung was just a hint of the humiliation that the wayward People of God were about to suffer. We are told in Jeremiah Chapter 19 that the people who remained in Jerusalem resorted to cannibalism, and that many people starved to death. From Ezekiel's perspective, eating the unclean food of his captors was no different than cannibalism. Consider the following from from the Torah, Deuteronomy Chapter 23:

12 "You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. 13 And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. 14 Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

If the purity laws of the Israelites specified this sort of detail about pooping, you can just imagine what they would think of cooking their food with human poo.

To us, this fear of being defiled or unclean seems neurotic. But there was a spiritual reason for these detailed, numerous laws about food, clothing, and everyday life. These rules and the discipline it took to follow them kept God

foremost in their minds every day, all day. Remember that they were surrounded by pagans and were constantly tempted to abandon their faith and worship wood and stone idols. Their intricate laws forced then to focus on their God. The purity laws also engendered in them a powerful sense of holiness. Their God was holy and they were to mimic God in this regard. The purity laws also taught them to prepare themselves to be in the presence of God in the Temple. Many of the purity laws taught specific spiritual truths. Strict rules about killing animals and handling blood taught them that life was precious and that all life belonged to God. These laws also taught self-control, an important personal trait in a world of temptation and violence. They taught disease prevention, and how to live hygienically, how to ensure proper sanitation in a pre-science living environment. God had commanded them to have children and build a society: God wanted that society to be safe.

But what about us today? Consider this from Paul's first letter to the believers in Corinth. This is from a long passage about living in a moral fashion:

19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Perhaps the biggest thing that the intricate purity laws taught the people of the Old Testament and of Jesus' time was that they were to make themselves presentable to God at all times. Every minute of every day they were to live in a

way that would honor their God. For us, the lesson is even stronger. We don't have a physical Temple built by the Israelites after the return from the Babylonian exile. We don't believe that God lives in our church. God lives within us in the form of the Holy Spirit. We are personally, in a very literal sense, Temples. Perhaps we could use some daily practices that remind us of this. At times, our beliefs can look just as wild and crazy as those of the Israelites. We scatter human ashes on mountainsides. Here is another passage from 1 Corinthians, from Chapter 3:

16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

This is part of a passage about Christians helping each other protect and build their faith. These two verses are powerful: if we harm the Temple embodied in another believer, God will destroy us – spiritually, at least. Because when we damage another Temple, we our harming our own home of God.

Here is something from the first Chapter of 1 Peter. This is a letter written to believers in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. The letter tells believers how to survive persecution and how to thrive while surrounded by an alien, pagan culture.

13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

Notice that the author, who was probably a follower of Peter and not Peter himself, is telling us that to be holy, we must we holy in all that we do. This is very reminiscent of the motivation behind the purity laws we find in the Torah.

Jesus himself made a call for us to be pure. These are his words from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 7. Jesus is confronting the religious leaders of his day, arguing that now there is a higher standard for purity, one that comes from within, not from the outside. Under the New Covenant, making yourself a proper home for God is controlled by what is in your mind, not by the laws of the Torah:

14 *And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand:* ***15*** *There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."*

There is a deeper way to look at this quote of Jesus', however, and it reveals, as is often the case, that Jesus is speaking on multiple levels. Remember that Jesus was a Jew. Although we repeatedly see him challenging the Jewish authorities of his day, he is almost always going after them for being hypocritical – not because Jesus thinks that Jewish laws are wrong. Jesus lived by the laws of his people. He preached in the Temple. He quoted the Old Testament – Jewish Scripture – extensively. The deeper point that Jesus is making in his remark about people being defiled from what is within not what is without, is that there is a huge difference between spiritual purity and ritualistic purity. The Jewish laws were meant as a

way of encouraging spiritual purity by keeping people in contact with God and by making them understand that God is the creator of everything. They were meant to inspire humility and discipline and a powerful sense of community. Right after making this remark, Jesus goes on to say:

*"What comes out of a person is what defiles him. **21** For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, **22** coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. **23** All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."*

Jesus is saying that inner moral issues are what matter, not merely following the outer demands of Jewish law. It is more important to be non-violent, to honor the property rights of others, to honor your marriage, to avoid lying, slandering, and being prideful than it is to eat the right kind of food. The ritualistic aspects of the law are meant to encourage spiritual purity, rather than ritual purity being our *raison d'être*.

You are probably wondering what kind of award my playground friend won for coming up with the best, grossest story from the Bible. He was a good buddy of mine, an A student who had more discipline than me in searching the Bible for good stuff. We didn't normally award a trophy or a certificate or a cash prize to the kid who could woo us with something salacious from the Bible. In this case, though, this was a particularly powerful contribution to our recess discussions. It stopped

a kickball game. Jerry did a great job finding the poo bread passage – and we did figure out a reward for him. I will get back to this in a moment, of course.

So, what does it mean for us to be pure today? The first lesson is that eating poo bread isn't the point. You do what you need to do to survive, as long as your soul isn't killed in the process. We live with trust in God, and we try our best to trust other people. We study the lessons of Jesus for their advice on how to develop a relationship with God. We pray constantly. We admit our faults and seek forgiveness – and we are determined to not repeat our errors. We serve other people, flee temptation, and understand that the things of this world are radically less important than the things of God' Kingdom. But we do acknowledge that worldly things are not necessarily evil at all. We leave the moral judging of people to God. We are optimistic about the future of humanity. We remember that we are likely to be heavily influenced by the people around us, so we try to choose our companions carefully. There is a pattern here. These are all things that Jesus taught, that we read about in the various books of the New Testament. These are things we learn in the Old Testament. So perhaps the bottom line is that we read the Bible for spiritual and moral content – and we pay attention to what we read.

So, Jerry? You might think we all chipped in and bought him a new Bible or asked the school to give him one. Naw, we bought him a Spiderman comic book.