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PRAYING BEFORE MEALS

What is the purpose of our prayer before a meal? Are we to ask for a blessing on the food we are about to eat? Or are we to give thanks for the food we are about to eat? What is the correct thing to do: to ask for a blessing or to give thanks? Does it even make a difference whether we give thanks or whether we ask for a blessing?

CUSTOMS AND EXPECTATIONS

Praying at meals is a fairly common custom. It is variously referred to as "saying grace" and as "giving thanks" and as "asking a blessing on the food". Each of these expressions reveals a different focus, though most people are unaware of these differences. In most cases this prayer is said before the meal, though the Catholic custom is to pray twice, before and also after the meal. The Catholic custom in fact combines the two major focal points. BEFORE the meal they ask for a blessing, and AFTER the meal they give thanks. They clearly intend to have both bases covered.

But what is the right way to do this, from a biblical point of view?

Before we look at the biblical guidelines and instructions, it might be helpful to examine our own expectations. When we pray before a meal do we actually have specific expectations for something from God, or are there no expectations on our part?

If we "**give thanks**", then our position regarding expectations is pretty clear: we are expressing gratitude to God for the food He has made available to us. No further expectations are involved or implied. We are thanking God for food that is ALREADY there before us; that is all.

When it comes to "**blessing**" food, there are two possible options. EITHER we GIVE a blessing FOR the food God has provided for us, OR we ASK for a blessing ON the food that God has already provided for us. These two options are not the same thing.

If we give a blessing FOR the food God has already provided for us, that is just another way of saying that we "give thanks", and no further expectations for something from God are involved or implied. (In this situation the word "bless" is typically not even used. It is the content of our words that identifies that we are giving a blessing FOR the food before us, not the use of the word "bless", as will become evident when we examine the Greek word for "bless" more closely.)

But if we ask God for a blessing ON the food He has already provided for us, THEN this clearly implies that we have certain expectations of some further actions by God. So the question is:

EXACTLY WHAT DO PEOPLE, WHO ASK GOD FOR A BLESSING ON THE FOOD THAT IS ALREADY BEFORE THEM, ACTUALLY EXPECT GOD TO DO?

To be quite clear: If we do not have any clear expectations of some action by God, then it is frivolous for us to ask God for a blessing on the food before us. The words we pray to Almighty God MUST have a very clear meaning to us ourselves, because if they don't have a specific meaning to us, then they also don't have any meaning to God. And in that case our prayer would only be on the level of the vain

repetitions that are used by people in the world, who think that God will listen to them because of "their much speaking" (see Matthew 6:7).

Praying before a meal is not a game or a ritual! It is not obligatory conformity to a custom that has been imposed on us! Every prayer, including those before a meal, is a way of speaking directly to God Almighty, and we should only say things we really mean and things we ourselves clearly understand.

So once again: exactly what do the people, who ask God for a blessing on the food before them, actually expect God to do? Asking God for a blessing is a request for something. What are they requesting?

THE MOST COMMON REQUEST

One of the most commonly used expressions at mealtime prayers in the churches of God today goes something like this:

"Please BLESS this food to the nourishment of our bodies."

This phrase has been used to such a large extent (and I myself have also used it in the past) that it is doubtful whether anyone even gives it any thought at all one minute after the "amen"? As we survey the food table barely minutes after the "amen", does this request about "bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies" influence our selection of vegetables and meats and breads and desserts and beverages? No, we have forgotten that statement completely; and it certainly has nothing to do with what food items we personally may then select to eat and drink. (I am speaking about a situation that does not involve any unclean foods.)

Our selections of food items are going to be overwhelmingly determined by our own personal preferences, and "to the nourishment of our bodies" takes a far distant second place for most of us. One easy proof for this statement is, for example, our selection of coffee as a beverage; a drink that does anything but "nourish our bodies". This is not an "anti-coffee" article; this is simply a ready illustration that "to the nourishment of our bodies" is frequently nothing more than an empty phrase in this request for a blessing. Other equally clear examples, that "to the nourishment of our bodies" in this blessing request is a very minor consideration in our selection of foods to consume, could also be cited. We are, after all, the age that has coined the expression "junk foods", which many of us consume anywhere from occasionally to fairly regularly.

Yet the statement "please bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies" does imply AN EXPECTATION of some action by God. So what actions do people expect God to perform in response to this request? And would people in biblical times have had the same expectations when they prayed before a meal, as do the people who today ask God "to bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies"?

So what are the expectations of people who pray with these words?

THE FACTS ABOUT OUR FOODS TODAY

Most of us know quite well that many of our foods today are polluted and they are frequently of inferior quality. Our foods may contain fungicides and herbicides and pesticides and food coloring and carcinogenic substances and chemical stabilizers and artificial sweeteners and heavy metal deposits and chemical preservatives and artificial flavoring agents and synthetic growth hormones, etc. They may be loaded with fats and with sugar and with salt and with chemicals to stimulate our appetite. They may even have been exposed to some radiation. And what about genetic engineering? The majority of all processed foods come with a list of ingredients that require a degree in bio-chemistry to even pronounce

correctly, let alone being able to know what impact those chemicals will have from a health perspective.

We all know that our foods have been grossly tampered with. And we also realize that this vast collective chemical cocktail contained in all those items on our supermarket shelves isn't really good for us. We wish we could avoid exposure to most of that junk. But we also feel like helpless victims of the powers that control and manipulate the production of our food stuffs. Most of us are simply not in a position to grow and to produce our own foods.

Enter "the blessing of the food".

Some people apparently feel that when they ask God to "bless the food" they are about to eat, then God will remove all the manmade toxins that have been added to those foods. They believe, or at least wishfully hope, that God's blessing will somehow make those foods "more healthy" than they would be without God's blessing.

So these people do have an expectation of some action by God in response to their asking for a blessing ON the food they are about to eat. They are expecting, or hoping for, some MIRACULOUS intervention by God on the food that lies before them. And they expect, or hope for, this miraculous intervention on a repeated daily basis.

To be clear:

Whenever anyone asks God for a blessing ON the food that he is about to eat, then that person is actually asking God to perform some kind of miracle on the food that is already on the table before him.

BUT IS THAT WHAT A PRAYER BEFORE A MEAL IS SUPPOSED TO BE ... A REQUEST FOR A MIRACLE FROM GOD?

Is that why people in biblical times prayed before a meal ... to request a miracle from God?

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES AND GUIDELINES

There are two recorded occasions when Jesus Christ performed a miracle with food. (I am not including the incident of turning water into wine in this discussion.)

1) The first miracle was the occasion when Jesus Christ fed a multitude of "about 5000 men besides women and children" (Matthew 14:21) by using five loaves and two fishes. This is recorded in all four gospel accounts. Matthew 14:19 and Mark 6:41 and Luke 9:16 say that Jesus Christ "BLESSED" this food. However, John 6:11 says that Jesus Christ "GAVE THANKS" for this food. Is there a difference between these expressions?

2) The second miracle was the occasion when Jesus Christ fed a multitude of "4000 men besides women and children" (Matthew 15:38) by using seven loaves and a few little fishes. This is only recorded by Matthew and Mark. Matthew 15:36 and Mark 8:6 are agreed that here Jesus Christ "GAVE THANKS" for this food. While this involved a miracle just like the previous occasion, here neither writer says anything about Jesus Christ "blessing" anything, or asking for a blessing on anything.

[COMMENT: Both of these miracles are discussed at length in my article "The Significance of the Feeding of the 5000 and the 4000", listed under the Key Words "Feeding of 5000" in the General Articles directory of my website www.franknelte.net.]

Irrespective of which term is used to describe these two events, it is very clear that when we today pray before a meal, we are certainly not expecting God to multiply the food that lies before us one hundred fold or more. So even if someone may attach a special significance to the word "bless" in the one context here, that is not really a precedent for us to apply when we pray before a meal. Christ intended to perform a miracle in multiplying the quantity of food that was available; He was not performing a miracle of somehow "cleansing" the food or of somehow making that food "more healthy" by blessing it. "Cleansing" the food did not enter the picture in any way. His miracle multiplied the quantity of food available, that's all.

[COMMENT: The miracle in Elisha's time (2 Kings 4:42-44) did not involve a request for a blessing. It was an act of faith that God would multiply the food involved. We need not consider this example here.]

Christ's last observance of the Passover included changing the emblems to the bread and wine. This is recorded in the three synoptic gospels.

Matthew 26:26 says that Christ "BLESSED" the bread; and verse 27 says that He "GAVE THANKS" for the wine.

Mark 14:22 says that Christ "BLESSED" the bread; and verse 23 says that He "GAVE THANKS" for the wine.

Luke 22:19 says that Christ "GAVE THANKS" for the bread; and verse 17 says that He "GAVE THANKS" for the wine.

Again, the way Jesus Christ sanctified the bread and the wine, to symbolically represent His broken body and His shed blood, is not a precedent regarding how we are to pray before any of our daily meals. So these verses also do not tell us what is the right thing for us to do: do we give thanks or do we ask for a blessing?

[COMMENT: As far as the Passover observance is concerned, we should probably follow the example recorded by Matthew and by Mark. We should ask for A BLESSING on the bread (Christ's body broken for our healing), and we should GIVE THANKS for the wine (Christ's blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins). The second prayer at the Passover has a different focus from the first prayer in that it is not a request for a blessing. That difference between these two prayers is revealed by the statements recorded by Matthew and by Mark.]

The above are the only examples we have from Jesus Christ Himself regarding praying for or over food. We do, however, have an instruction to the Church concerning praying over food. That instruction was recorded by Paul, who wrote in 1 Timothy 4:3:

Forbidding to marry, *and commanding* to abstain from MEATS (i.e. FOODS), which God hath created TO BE RECEIVED WITH THANKSGIVING of them which believe and know the truth.

In a more general vein Paul also wrote in Ephesians 5:20:

GIVING THANKS ALWAYS FOR ALL THINGS unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;

While this last statement is not directed at praying before meals, when viewed together with 1 Timothy 4:3 it should be clear that by "all things" the Apostle Paul certainly intended this to include us "giving

thanks" for the food God has provided for us. So we have two statements that apply to giving thanks for food.

Next, instead of asking God for "a blessing on our food", Jesus Christ very clearly instructed us to ask God in prayer: GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD (see Matthew 6:11). Once that request has been fulfilled, when we are standing before a table filled with "our daily bread", THEN there is no point in asking God for a further blessing on this food He has already provided for us.

So here is what we find in the Bible on this topic of praying over food:

- 1) There is NO INSTRUCTION ANYWHERE "to ask for a blessing on food".
- 2) Rather, there is a clear instruction for us to ask God for our daily food needs.
- 3) There is also a clear instruction that we are to GIVE THANKS for the food God has made available to us.
- 4) The process is as follows: A) First we are to pray for our food needs. B) Once those food needs have been provided in the form of food standing before us, then that is evidence of a blessing from God. C) Therefore at that point we are to give thanks for that food. It is not that at that point in time we make some FURTHER REQUESTS to God. D) God has done His part in providing food for us, and our appropriate response should be an expression of gratitude towards God.
- 5) When Jesus Christ in one instance performed A MIRACLE, then Matthew, Mark and Luke say that He "blessed" that food before the miracle took place. The Apostle John with a clearer and deeper understanding (the benefit of living 30 years longer) wrote about 30 years later that here Christ also only "gave thanks" for this food before the miracle took place.

It is almost as if, had we confronted John about this "blessed vs giving thanks" issue, John would have said:

"Hey, what's the big deal? Don't you understand that there is no difference between these two statements? What's your problem? Oh, I get it; YOU attach a completely wrong expectation to the word "bless". Well, let me tell you that the word "bless" in this context doesn't inherently imply any miracles, as you seem to think. The fact that in this situation we are discussing here Jesus Christ did perform a mighty miracle has nothing to do with whether He "blessed" the food or whether He "gave thanks" for the food. I know very well that Jesus Christ performed a miracle here, I was there, remember? But that doesn't change the fact that I remember that before that miracle He simply "gave thanks" for that food. And Matthew and Mark agree that with the feeding of the 4000 Christ likewise only gave thanks. So in this context don't attach any special meaning to the word bless to supposedly differ in a major way from giving thanks."

- 6) As far as the last Passover is concerned, Matthew and Mark state that Jesus Christ "blessed" the bread and "gave thanks" for the wine. Luke says that Jesus Christ "gave thanks" for both, the bread and the wine. Probably Matthew and Mark have recorded this more appropriately.

"Giving thanks" for the broken bread at the Passover (i.e. Luke's account) would be an expression of gratitude for Jesus Christ being willing to take this suffering upon Himself in order to make possible divine healing of our diseases. "Blessing the bread" at the Passover (i.e. Matthew's and Mark's accounts) goes one step further and also actively asks for divine healing of our present diseases. In this regard "giving thanks" looks to the past, and "blessing the bread" also looks to yet future healings. So we

should correctly ask for a blessing on the bread at the Passover.

For the wine, on the other hand, all accounts are agreed that we are "to give thanks", expressing gratitude for Christ being willing to die so that we can have our sins forgiven. Romans 3:25 makes quite clear that the shed blood of Christ always applies to "the remission of sins that are past". So we are not really instructed to "ask for a blessing on the wine" in any biblical account, because we are not asking for any further miracles in this regard. Rather, we are very clearly instructed "to give thanks" for the wine, because we are to express OUR GRATITUDE for Jesus Christ having died so that our sins "that are past" can be forgiven.

We would do well to heed this distinction in our observances of the Passover: ask for a blessing on the bread, and then give thanks for the wine.

Now let's look at the Greek words that are involved in this question.

THE GREEK WORDS

1) THE WORD "BLESS" is a translation of the Greek word "eulogeo". This is formed from "eu", meaning "good", and "logos", meaning "a word" (the verb "lego", means "to speak"). So the Greek word that is translated as "bless" literally means "TO SAY GOOD WORDS" or "TO SPEAK WELL OF SOMETHING". That's all that "bless" means. Can saying such "good words" involve miracles? Yes, certainly it can, when God is the One who "speaks well of something". But does saying such "good words" AUTOMATICALLY involve miracles? Certainly not!

When we say "good words" to people, then we are "blessing" them. Blessing people is an expression of our good wishes. And when we give a blessing FOR food that has been provided for us, then we are likewise simply saying good words for the food that has been provided. No miracle is involved in us saying such good words; in this case the good words are nothing more than an expression of our pleasure and gratitude for the food available to us.

2) THE EXPRESSION "TO GIVE THANKS" is a translation of the Greek word "eucharisteo" (the noun used in 1 Timothy 4:3 is "eucharistia"). This is formed from "eu", meaning "good", and "charizomai", meaning "to freely give" or "to do something pleasant". So the Greek word translated as the expression "to give thanks" literally means "GRATITUDE FOR GOOD THINGS THAT ARE FREELY GIVEN". Now can this gratitude for good things freely given involve miracles? Yes, if God is the One who has given those good things. But does this expression of gratitude for good things that are freely given AUTOMATICALLY involve miracles? No, because we human beings should express such gratitude for ALL good things (Ephesians 5:20), whether or not miracles are involved. And God can also give us good things without a miracle having to be involved in that giving.

The point is that neither of these two Greek words automatically involves a miracle. The problem is not the Greek words that are used in this context. The problem really is THE EXPECTATION that some people attach to the word for "bless" in this context.

Where Matthew, Mark and Luke used the word "eulogeo" to describe Jesus Christ's action at the feeding of the 5000, John used the word "eucharisteo" to describe that same incident. In the eyes of those four authors both of these Greek words were suitable to describe what happened. John states that Jesus Christ "gave thanks for the good things God was going to give" (i.e. "eucharisteo"), and Matthew, Mark and Luke described this process of giving thanks by Jesus Christ as Christ "saying good words" (i.e. "eulogeo"). Both descriptions are correct and appropriate. There is no conflict here.

Matthew and Mark then both used the word "eucharisteo" to describe Christ's action at the feeding of the

4000. And Paul used the noun "eucharistia" in his instruction for the Church in 1 Timothy 4:3. THIS is the Scripture which tells us what we today are to do.

3) There is another Greek word in the NT which is translated as "blessed" just as often as the word "eulogeo", and that is the Greek adjective "makarios". It means "blessed" in the sense of being "fully satisfied". This is the word that is used throughout the beatitudes in Matthew 5 ("blessed are the poor in spirit ...", etc.). Again, this word "blessed" also does not inherently require any miracles to be involved in this process of being "blessed". And we need not consider this word in this discussion.

However, we do need to recognize that there is a major difference between giving thanks for food and asking for a blessing on food. These two things may seem to be deceptively similar. But they are in fact quite different. And only one of them is a biblical tradition; the other is a twisting of the original practice.

THE GREATER PICTURE

Let's consider the broader picture. Here is what we have:

The biblical instruction is that WE ARE TO GIVE THANKS to God for the food He provides for us. But long ago, long before the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church hijacked this instruction. They changed the focus of this instruction from "giving thanks" to one of "asking for a blessing". Thus the Catholic prayer before a meal goes as follows:

"BLESS US, O LORD, AND THESE YOUR GIFTS, which we are about to receive from Your bounty ..."

THIS IS NOT THE EXAMPLE WE FIND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT! THIS REPRESENTS A SUBTLE TWISTING OF THE ACTUAL BIBLICAL INSTRUCTIONS!

The Catholics then placed the original instruction to give thanks AFTER the meal. The Catholic prayer after a meal goes as follows:

"WE GIVE YOU THANKS, O Almighty God, for these Your benefits which we have received from Your bounty ..."

In this way they removed the element of faith from the action of giving thanks. They don't give thanks until after they have eaten the food God provided. We might say that they are just "playing it safe" in not giving thanks too soon. But obviously, this is not the example we are to follow.

By the time of the Protestant Reformation this custom of asking for a blessing before a meal was well established, and it was retained by the reformers in the new churches that were formed.

This twisting of the original instructions, away from giving thanks for something God has already provided, and towards the very noble-sounding, albeit unbiblical, request for a blessing, lies at the heart and core of our problem today. It is from the Catholic Church that we have accepted the idea of "asking for a blessing on the food". We need to recognize the origin of this request for a blessing.

Our modern Church of God request of "please bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies" is an outgrowth of the Catholic tradition. It is in fact far closer to the Catholic pre-meal prayer than it is to the NT instruction to receive our foods "with thanksgiving". Like the Catholic prayer, this request is focused on asking for something more after the food has already been provided and is lying on a table before us.

Since most of us have not really been aware of the origin of this custom to "ask for a blessing on the food before us", therefore we have tried to find a reasonable justification for this request. So we try to find reasons for WHY we could possibly ask for a blessing on food that God has already provided for us. The idea that God will make the food "more healthy" after it has been blessed is just one of those attempts to justify this practice. Another attempt is the common Protestant explanation for why food should be blessed, which is that after being blessed it is consecrated for a divine use, which is nonsense when applied to our everyday meals.

When we understand this correctly, we should be able to see a distinct parallel between "asking a blessing on the food" and the Protestant defenses for Sunday worship.

Sunday worship was instituted by the Catholic Church, something the Protestant churches are unwilling to admit. Therefore the Protestant churches seek very desperately to find some biblical justifications for Sunday worship. They cannot acknowledge the real source of Sunday worship because such an acknowledgment would threaten their independence from the Catholic Church. Likewise, ignorance of the Catholic origin of the custom to "ask for a blessing on the food" forces the people who accept this custom to seek a biblical or at least rational justification for this custom. Here it is more a case of being ignorant of the true source of this custom, rather than trying to deny the real authors of this custom. But the result is basically the same: AN UNBIBLICAL CATHOLIC CUSTOM IS ACCEPTED BASED ON FLAWED PREMISES.

So to spell this out in very plain terms:

THE BIBLICAL CUSTOM is to GIVE THANKS for the food God has provided.

THE CATHOLIC CUSTOM is to ASK FOR A BLESSING on the food God has provided.

The actual differences in wording may seem to be quite small. But the consequences of the differences are very profound. We are to approach the food God has provided for us with a sense of gratitude and appreciation. We are not to come before God with additional requests before we even acknowledge the food He has already provided for us.

SO HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO PRAY?

I understand that most of us don't really think very much about the words that are said before a meal. Most people, in giving this prayer before a meal, say the same things, or at least similar things to what they have heard other people say. And there is nothing wrong with using the same expressions that other people use, providing we copy statements that are right and appropriate.

Where a problem enters the picture is when we copy WRONG expressions from the prayers said by other people, when we ask for a blessing instead of expressing our gratitude for food already provided.

The purpose of a prayer before a meal is simple. It is not an opportunity to wax eloquent about God's plan and purposes, and the multitude of His blessings on our nations and on us. It is not the time to expound on a profound analysis of God's dealings with the nations of this world. It is not the time to give a mini-sermon.

The purpose of the prayer we give before a meal is to express simple, heart-felt gratitude to God for providing our "daily bread". That's all.

Don't allow yourself to get caught up in trying to be more eloquent than the last man who gave this prayer. Don't try to make this prayer unduly long, by using all kinds of "filler material". Remember Jesus

Christ's admonition that God is not impressed by "much speaking" (see Matthew 6:7). Solomon's advice to "let your words be few" (see Ecclesiastes 5:2) is extremely relevant in the context of praying before a meal. So is also Jesus Christ's instruction in Matthew 5:37.

But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for WHATSOEVER IS MORE THAN THESE COMETH OF EVIL (from the evil one).

So keep the prayer before a meal brief. There are only so many different ways we can say "thank you" for the food God has provided. And there is no need to continually come up with new ways to say "thank you".

Consider also the difference between the following two statements:

WRONG: "Please bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies." This is wrong because it implies that God still needs to do something before the food on the table before us will provide nourishment for our bodies. This is a request for something. And it goes back to the Catholic prayer before a meal.

RIGHT: "Thank you for providing this food to nourish our bodies." This statement is right because it acknowledges that the food on the table before us is already capable of providing nourishment for us, without God having to do anything further. No further blessing is required or expected in this context. This is an expression of gratitude without being a request for anything else.

The two statements can sound fairly similar and yet be miles apart in their ramifications. Sometimes there may be a fine dividing line between a right statement and a wrong statement. The inclusion of the request "to bless" can drastically alter the focus of such a statement. And the prayer before a meal should be focused on giving thanks. That's what Paul told Timothy.

It is perfectly acceptable for this prayer to consist of only two or three sentences. This is not to imply that a longer prayer is somehow wrong. It is not wrong. But neither is a longer prayer somehow better than another one, which took only about ten seconds to say. It is the sincere expression of gratitude towards God that is important, not the length or the originality of the prayer.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE POISONS IN OUR FOODS?

Okay, so it is a Catholic custom and not a biblical custom to ask for a blessing on food that is already on the table before us. But what about all those chemicals and other toxins in our foods? Can't we ask God to just remove them for us on a daily basis (since we also eat on a daily basis)? Isn't that a good reason for asking for a blessing on the food?

I would love to be able to know that God has miraculously removed all of the manmade toxins from the foods that I choose to eat. But it doesn't work that way for a number of reasons.

Probably one of the most important principles that govern our Christian lives is personal responsibility and personal accountability for all our actions and conduct. I am responsible for the things I say and do and think. In addition I also become responsible for whatever knowledge I may acquire. And that responsibility includes that I am responsible for what I eat and drink. The same is true for you.

One of the most important things to understand about sins is that in this present age, in addition to the sinner himself, SINS ALWAYS, ALWAYS AFFECT OTHER PEOPLE! Sins always cause unfair suffering for some innocent people. The effects of sins are never limited to the sinner alone. In this age when some people sin, it is unavoidable that some other people will also suffer as a result.

That is why in the kingdom of God outward sinful actions will be nipped in the bud, so to speak. God will intervene instantly before any innocent people can be adversely affected by such sinful actions. As Isaiah 30:21 says:

And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This *is* the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.

This verse will be applied when Jesus Christ rules. Then innocent people will not suffer, because the sinful actions of other people will be stopped in their tracks. But this verse does not apply to the present age. In this present age many people do turn to the right hand and to the left, and vast numbers of innocent people suffer as a result. This is also true for the production and manufacture of our food supplies. We suffer adverse health consequences precisely because food producers have turned away from doing things the right way.

It is the same thing when God brings a drought upon the land because of human sins. Everyone, including the people who were not involved in the sins that brought on the drought, suffers during that drought. In this age the righteous are exposed to some of the consequences of the sins of the wicked. Food production is no exception to this.

When I was in College Mr. Armstrong frequently made the following statement regarding the foods we should eat: "Eat only those things that CAN spoil (when exposed to air at room temperature), and eat them BEFORE THEY DO SPOIL". That's one good principle to follow as much as possible. It eliminates many manmade foods from our diets.

When we know that certain foods are not really good for us (i.e. they are "junk foods"), then obviously we become personally responsible if we eat and drink those foods. And when we knowingly eat and drink some things that are not good for us, then it doesn't make sense for God to somehow miraculously remove unhealthy ingredients from other foods we may also eat. We have a responsibility, as far as we are able to do so, to avoid ingesting things we know are unhealthy for us. That is covered by the principle of 1 Corinthians 6:20, which says that we are to "glorify God" in our bodies, i.e. by the conscientious way in which we look after the health God has given us.

Personal responsibility means that I am responsible for what I eat and drink. I cannot (and nor can you) get around this responsibility by praying to God: "Please remove all the poisons from the foods I am about to eat and drink". Asking God to remove unhealthy ingredients from foods BEFORE we even eat those foods is a bit like asking for an indulgence.

The Catholic Church offered indulgences for sale just prior to the start of the Protestant Reformation. In Catholic theology an indulgence is the forgiveness of punishment that is due for a sin even after the actual guilt has been forgiven. In the Middle Ages people could buy such indulgences from agents of the Catholic Church. Today Catholics can still earn such indulgences. For example, I have a Catholic New Testament that is translated from the Latin Vulgate, and which was printed in 1964. The Preface contains the following statement:

"To encourage the reading of the Scriptures the Sovereign Pontiff, Leo XIII, of happy memory, granted on Dec. 13th 1898 to all the faithful, who devoutly read the Scriptures for at least a quarter of an hour, AN INDULGENCE OF 300 DAYS to be gained ONCE A DAY, provided that the edition of the Gospel has been approved by legitimate authority."

In other words, a faithful Catholic who reads the Bible for 15 minutes every day for a full 20 years can

knock a full 6000 YEARS off his time in purgatory. That seems like a pretty good deal for 15 minutes a day, don't you think? That might come in very handy should he ever get into trouble over some other issues (like adultery or stealing?). The point is that an indulgence can (theoretically, not in reality) provide the removal of a penalty even before a transgression has been committed. It is a blank check for forgiveness of punishment.

Asking God to remove toxins from the foods before us, even before we eat those foods, is a bit like that. If we are really so concerned about the unhealthy substances in the foods before us, then we probably should not eat those foods. We may indeed be the innocent victims of greedy food processing companies, but that innocent victims status cannot procure us immunity to the consequences of their greedy ways. Like the innocent people living in a drought area, we are equally exposed to the consequences of those greedy ways as is everybody else.

Consider also the situation of Daniel and his three friends in Babylon. The king had appointed that these Jewish captives would be given a portion of all the foods, including wine, that were prepared for the royal table, a rather generous arrangement. Now while this very likely included many foods that were unclean (see Leviticus 11), it also undoubtedly included a range of foods which were perfectly acceptable to eat (fruits, vegetables, breads, venison, etc.). It was very likely somewhat like many of our modern buffets: there are some unclean items and there are some clean items on display. It is usually fairly easy to selectively choose a good range of perfectly acceptable foods from such a buffet. But Daniel didn't do that.

Notice what we are told in Daniel 1:8.

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

Whatever criteria Daniel used in determining that "he would not defile himself", it certainly went beyond the strict requirements of Leviticus 11. Daniel must have applied a far stricter criterion than a simple "is it clean or is it unclean?" question, because the king's wine would not have been unclean. And the king's table also SURELY included SOME foods that would have passed the Leviticus 11 test.

The point is: at this stage ALL of the king's foods (including his fruits and breads and vegetables) and ALL his wines were something that Daniel found unacceptable. So he requested a very plain diet of some simple vegetables and plain water, items that were very specifically not intended for the royal table. Perhaps all of the foods on the king's table had been dedicated to the pagan deity of Babylon, and for that reason Daniel decided to avoid all of it?

At any rate, since eating certain foods (including clean foods) bothered Daniel's conscience, therefore he determined not to eat any of it, and he looked for an alternative option for his "daily bread". IF Daniel's concern was that all of the king's foods had been "offered unto idols", then we should consider the Apostle Paul's explanation that "we know that an idol is nothing" (1 Cor 8:4). And even though "there is not in every man that knowledge (that an idol is nothing)" (1 Cor 8:7), surely the prophet Daniel (just like Elijah, see 1 Kings 18:21, 27) knew full well that an idol is nothing. So there was no reason why some pagan hocus-pocus should have prevented Daniel from eating some of the breads and vegetables from the king's table. But Daniel, who was renowned for wisdom, didn't do that. He determined not to eat anything from the king's table. And Daniel didn't pray for a miracle to somehow make the king's foods acceptable.

The lesson from Daniel and his three friends is that if some food item really bothers us, then we shouldn't

eat it. But it is not a case of prayer somehow making an unacceptable food item acceptable. (I am not speaking about an item that unbeknown to us may be inherently poisonous, as for example in 2 Kings 4:39 - 41. That is a completely different situation.)

Being realistic, I believe that today it is impossible for the overwhelming number of people, including me, to completely avoid ingesting anything that may have an adverse effect on our health. All we can do is try our best to avoid ingesting such harmful substances. We have to live IN the world, and we cannot completely escape some of the penalties man's sinful ways have brought upon humanity.

But we should also see this matter in the proper perspective.

While all these chemicals in our foods are unquestionably bad for us, they don't prevent most people from still living for 60 years or 70 years or even longer. That is still the same lifespan as for people like God's servant King David. Many of God's servants after the time of David also didn't live much beyond "threescore and ten years", and many didn't even live to age 70 years. So while these toxins in our foods adversely affect the quality of our lives, they don't necessarily result in a shorter lifespan when compared to the lifespan of God's servants over the past three thousand years. They simply cause us some unnecessary suffering.

But unnecessary suffering is something that all of man's other ways also produce. Man's governments cause suffering. Man's ways in every area of endeavor cause suffering. Man's industries and inventions cause suffering. Man's systems of education cause problems. Man's ways of polluting the soil and the water and the air cause suffering. That's the lesson God wants us to learn: that **ALL OF MAN'S WAYS CAUSE SUFFERING!**

There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof *are* the ways of death.
(Proverbs 14:12; 16:25)

This statement includes man's ways of producing foods in our modern age.

Now while none of us can completely avoid ingesting some harmful substances, if we are reasonably careful in this matter, we can avoid a large part of that chemical cocktail which the rest of society around us constantly consumes. By being careful we can get to the point of "suffering less" from these things than many other people suffer. And it should be one more motivation to make us pray: "please let Your kingdom come". Also, fasting is an effective way to eliminate at least some of these toxins from our bodies, thereby minimizing their impact on our health. Evasive action, as far as possible, is our best defense against this chemical onslaught in our modern foods.

There is one more point we should consider in this expectation of some people that God will miraculously remove manmade toxins from the foods they are about to eat. And that is this: people who have these expectations never think this through to its conclusion. Many of the processed foods before us have their color and looks and taste and texture precisely because of the manmade chemical substances that have been added to them in the manufacturing process.

IF God really were to miraculously remove all of these chemicals, THEN the color would change (for those foods that contain artificial coloring) and the taste would change (for those foods that contain chemical flavor enhancers and artificial flavoring) and the texture would change (for those foods that contain chemicals to achieve or maintain a certain texture), etc. In plain language, if God really did miraculously remove all the manmade chemicals from the foods we are about to eat, then in many cases those foods would immediately look and feel and taste different from the way they were before God's intervention. And we could not avoid noticing those differences immediately. But that has not happened.

Avoiding foods that we know are not good for us is a part of the answer in dealing with harmful chemicals that have been added to our foods. But asking for a blessing on foods that contain harmful substances, in the hope that those harmful substances will then be miraculously removed, is not a part of the answer.

In conclusion, there is a major difference between giving thanks for the food God has provided for us, and in asking for a blessing on the food God has provided. We need to recognize that the biblical instructions in this regard are quite clear. We are to give thanks for the food God has provided. This instruction was perverted by the false church into the practice of asking for a blessing instead. And many churches have copied this error, to the point that it has also affected us in the churches of God. This is one of the many ways Satan has used to deceive the whole world (see Revelation 12:9).

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