

What's My Spiritual Junk Food?

A complimentary resource from *Soul Satisfaction: For Women Who Long for More* by Debra Evans

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

—Psalm 63:1

The great danger facing all of us is not that we shall make an absolute failure of life, nor that we shall fall into outright viciousness, nor that we shall be terribly unhappy, nor that we shall feel that life has no meaning at all—not these things. The danger is that we may fail to perceive life's greatest meaning, fall short of its highest good, miss its deepest and most abiding happiness, be unable to render the most needed service, be unconscious of life ablaze with the light of the Presence of God—and be content to have it so—that is the danger. That some day we may wake up and find that always we have been busy with the husks and trappings of life—and have really missed life itself.ⁱ

—Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)

Unhappiness on earth cultivates a hunger for heaven. By gracing us with a deep dissatisfaction, God holds our attention.ⁱⁱ

—Max Lucado

I can't help but wonder: Is the hunger we continually feel for *something more* in so many areas of our lives in truth God's gift to us, a potent earthly reminder of the spiritual nature of our soul's hunger?

Soul satisfaction begins at the place where we risk surrendering our lives to Someone we know by heart but can't touch, feel, or see with our eyes on this side of heaven. Slowing down long enough to savor our Shepherd's loving provision requires our receptive awareness to His leading. For it's only when we slow down, stop, and allow ourselves to feel the silent ache of our souls' appetite, when we choose not to dull our senses or deaden the impact of this nagging inner hunger, when we refuse to turn away from God and instead offer ourselves to His Son for help and healing and wholeness, that our deepest longings for *something more* become transformed.

Why is it sometimes so difficult for us to do this? Developing a healthy respect for the various kinds of cravings we experience, identifying the types of spiritual junk food we eat, and making comparisons between soul and body hunger can help us recognize the importance of obtaining the spiritual food with which He feeds and fuels our whole being.

As you may have already discovered, spiritual junk food comes in all shapes, textures, colors, and sizes. It can be spicy or mild, smooth or crunchy, sweet or sour, bland or salty. We're ultimately our own producers of the spiritual junk food we eat because it is the fruit of our own thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Fortunately, we aren't satisfied by spiritual substitutes for long. Our God-given nature creates a persistent hunger inside our souls for the Bread of Life—for the delightful sustenance we receive when we "sit down at the table" with Christ and take time to enjoy, savor, and feast upon His presence. Over the course of our lives, God helps us to keep turning toward Him alone for

satisfaction, teaching us why, how, and where to look for the one kind of food that really matters.

But to become aware of our inner need for this good food and to live with the anticipation of receiving *something more* as God's gift, we must, by God's mercy, offer our very selves to him: "a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart" (Rom. 12:1 NEB). In increasingly surrendering our lives to Christ and desiring His sweet companionship above everything and everyone else, our souls are nourished and revived. What a far cry this is from the wow-this-sure-tastes-good-now-but-just-wait-until-later kind of nourishment we feed our souls when we try to meet our innermost cravings with spiritual junk food!

"Jesus promised to fill those who hunger and thirst after righteousness," contemporary theologian Dr. R. C. Sproul points out. "He made no promise to fill those who are not hungry."⁶ Is this why our soul's hunger cannot be filled? Why our repeated attempts to relieve our inner discontent through self-help cures never really work? Clearly, our soul's ongoing hunger is one of the ways God providentially points us in His direction, and we find in the Bible no shortage of references to physical hunger and satisfaction as a means of teaching us about the vital spiritual sustenance we can receive only from the Lord.

"What we find in the lives and writings of the great saints is the elusive 'something more' often promised by lesser preachers, but rarely found by casual observers," says Dr. Sproul. "Is there really something more?" he asks. "Is there a level of Christian faith and devotion higher than the commonplace? Is there a state of the soul that involves more rest than restlessness? The answer to all these questions is an emphatic *yes!*"ⁱⁱⁱ

Bernard of Clairvaux was one of those astonishing saints whose writing reveals his tender yearning for the elusive *something more*, a faith and devotion higher than the commonplace, the state of a soul that involved more rest than

restlessness. In his classic treatise titled *The Love of God*, Bernard poignantly pronounces:

Every rational person naturally desires to be always satisfied with what it esteems preferable. It is never satisfied with something that lacks the qualities it desires to have. So if a man has chosen a wife because of her beauty, then he will look out with a roving eye for more beautiful women. Or if he is desirous of being well dressed, he will look out for even more expensive clothes. No matter how rich he is, if wealth is his desire, he will envy those who are richer than he is. . . . men in high places are drawn on by insatiable ambitions to climb higher and higher still. Indeed, there is no end to all this, because unsatisfied desires have no final satisfaction if they cannot be defined as absolutely the best or the highest.

Need we wonder then that a man cannot find contentment with what is less or worse since he seeks peace and satisfaction in what is highest and best? So how stupid and mad it is to seek to find peace or satisfaction in that which cannot fulfill these needs. So no matter how many things one may possess, he will always be lusting for what is perceived to be still missing. Discontented, he will spend himself in restlessness and futility. Thus the restless heart runs to and fro looking for the pleasures of this life in weariness of the evanescent and the unreal. He is like a starving man who thinks anything he can stuff down his throat is not enough, for his eyes are still looking at what he has not eaten. Thus man craves continually for what is still lacking, with more anxiety in his preoccupation with what he lacks rather than having any joy or contentment in what he has already got. . . .

Rest in God alone. Man experiences no real peace in this world, but he has no restlessness to disturb him in the eternal state with God. Thus the soul

can say with confidence, “It is good for me to draw near to God. . . . Whom have I in heaven but Thee; and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. . . . God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:28, 25, 26). Therefore, as I have said, even coming by this way of trying out all lesser goods one after the other, this may eventually drive us to realize that it is God alone who can truly satisfy.^{iv}

Will we “learn sense” as Solomon advised and thereby resist consuming the abundant empty calories daily offered us? Taking enough time to satisfy our hunger for Living Bread—whether this means going alone to our preferred quiet place, or praying in bed when we lie awake in the middle of the night, or sitting in solitude at the kitchen table when the room is no longer noisy—supplies us with hidden sustenance for the hours ahead.

“Taste and see that the LORD is good,” David’s psalm invites us. “Oh, the joys of those who trust in him!” (Psalm 34:8 NLT). We don’t have to wait until tomorrow to seek and find the source of our soul’s satisfaction. When we want to learn how to taste the Lord’s goodness, we don’t need to develop a special diet plan, enroll in a complicated nutritional program, read dozens of cookbooks, or pay a hefty fee. We can begin right here, with what we have on hand, as we sit quietly before the Lord with open hearts, waiting to receive His perfect provision. We can start educating our soul’s palate today, one meal at a time, as we dine at our Savior’s table, desiring to fully taste and see that the Lord indeed is *good*.

Focus/Discussion Points

Given the reality of our spiritual makeup and the amount of stress, strain, and soul-deadening diversions daily confronting us, we need ample amounts of spiritual food.

Our spiritual health is promoted when we choose to live wisely, by paying attention to the way God has designed us.

Desiring Christ above everything and everyone else is neither effortless nor automatic.

Exercises

- ❖ Using the following list of fifty forms of spiritual junk food, select any that appeal to you when you're feeling emotionally, physically, socially, and/or spiritually spent:

Spiritual Junk Food List

1. Depending on someone or something other than God for one's sense of identity, value, and emotional security
2. Using substitutes for love
3. Giving in when it is time to say no
4. Feeling a false sense of accomplishment, i.e., pride, when it is really by God's grace one has said no. Or yes
5. Ignoring/turning away from/neglecting/discounting God's Word
6. Worrying
7. Loving money
8. Judging others
9. Refusing to forgive
10. Being "good" in order to earn God's approval
11. Acting hypocritical
12. Feeding anger

13. Surrendering one's heart to bitterness
14. Overdoing
15. Nurturing self-pity
16. Engaging in sex (in fantasy or reality) outside marriage
17. Avoiding responsibility
18. Practicing perfectionism
19. Dishonoring parents
20. Overspending
21. Reading for escape: Novels, newspapers, and/or
gossip/entertainment/fashion/women's/decorating/cooking magazines.
22. Shopping. A lot
23. Focusing on one's appearance, position, accomplishments, etc.
24. Hating someone. Anyone
25. Engaging in gossip
26. Getting drunk or high, legally or illegally
27. Overeating
28. Watching too much TV/too many movies
29. Watching TV shows and movies that increase one's appetite for spiritual
junk food
30. Breaking the law, *including* the speed limit
31. Going into debt
32. Choosing criticism over kindness
33. Lying
34. Refusing to serve others
35. Smoking. Anything
36. Boasting
37. Over-controlling
38. Talking incessantly; not listening
39. Envy
40. Overworking; getting too little rest and relaxation

41. Acting cool instead of staying Christ-centered in an effort to impress, persuade, or please others
42. Gambling
43. Choosing to temporarily self-destruct
44. Using pagan, polytheistic, and/or pantheistic mind-body techniques to promote self-understanding and healing
45. Playing music all (or most of) the time
46. Over-exercising
47. Sinking into cynicism
48. Believing what the advertisers say
49. Forgetting to pray
50. Forgetting that God's love never fails

- ❖ Next time you feel parched, spend a few moments studying your body's response to a glass of cool water. Notice what happens as you place the water to your lips and drink it. Write a crystal-clear description of this thirst-quenching experience. Then read and reflect on John 4:7-15 and 7:37-44.
- ❖ Pay attention to your body's hunger signals for a week and record your responses, noting how your responses to physical hunger might possibly influence, connect with, or reveal the way you respond to spiritual hunger.
- ❖ Monitor the mood shifts you experience over the next three days and think about how your emotions reflect any stress, hunger, fatigue, rest, or satisfaction you are feeling. How did you respond?
- ❖ Bake or buy a loaf of fresh bread. Slice off an ample piece and warm it up. Use honey, jam, or butter, if you like. When you take the first bite, chew

slowly and deliberately, as if you had never tasted fresh bread before.
What do you notice?

- ❖ Prepare your favorite meal, or bring it home as a carryout order. Set the table in advance with a place setting of your best dishes, flatware, stemware, and linens. Remember to bring flowers! Before you sit down, light some candles and turn off all nonessential electronic sounds—TV, radio, stereo, computer, etc. Sit down and relax, thanking the Lord as He leads you in prayer. Take time to enjoy each bite, every swallow, as you eat and drink in silence without distractions; see if you notice anything new or different. Observe what your senses tell you about your food and how you eat it, about your hunger and when it is satisfied. Spend time writing in your journal about what this experience tells you about your soul's desire to "taste and see" God's goodness.

Nourishment from God's Word

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 8:3 NLT

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.... Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

—John 6:28-35, 49-51

The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
forbearing, and constant in his love.

The LORD is good to all men,
and his tender care rests upon all his creatures.

All thy creatures praise thee, LORD, and thy servants bless thee.

They talk of the glory of thy kingdom and tell of thy might,
they proclaim to their fellows how mighty are thy deeds,
how glorious the majesty of thy kingdom.

Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and thy dominion stands for all generations.

In all his promises the LORD keeps faith,
he is unchanging in all his works;

the LORD holds up those who stumble
and straightens backs which are bent.

The eyes of all are lifted to thee in hope,
and thou givest them their food when it is due;
with open and bountiful hand

thou givest what they desire to every living creature.
The LORD is righteous in all his ways, unchanging in all he does;
very near is the LORD to those who call to him,
who call to him in singleness of heart.
He fulfills their desire if only they fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.
The LORD watches over all who love him
but sends the wicked to their doom.
My tongue shall speak out the praises of the LORD,
and all thy creatures shall bless his holy name for ever and ever.
—Psalm 145:8-21 NEB

Reflection Points

1. Believing God cares about and understands every aspect of who I am—my entire physical, emotional, and spiritual makeup—helps me see why....
2. When I'm tired, hungry, and emotionally drained, I'm more likely to....
3. The warning signs indicating my life is veering out of balance are....
4. My current daily eating patterns can best be described as....
5. I'm most likely to heed my need to live sensibly when....
6. Hearing Jesus say, "I am the bread of life," encourages me to....
7. I can tell when I've taken time to sit down quietly with the Lord and savor the good food He provides because

Closing Prayer

O Thou full of compassion, I commit and commend myself unto Thee, in whom I am, and live, and know. Be Thou the Goal of my pilgrimage, and my Rest by the way. Let my soul take refuge from the crowding turmoil of worldly thoughts beneath the shadow of Thy wings; let my heart, this sea of restless waves, find

peace in Thee, O God. Thou bounteous Giver of all good gifts, give to her who is weary refreshing food; gather our distracted thoughts and powers into harmony again; and set the prisoner free. See, she stands at Thy door and knocks; be it opened up to her, that she may enter with a free step, and be quickened by Thee. For Thou art the Well-spring of Life, the Light of eternal Brightness, wherein the just live who love Thee. Be it unto me according to Thy word — Amen.^v

—St. Augustine

Closing Hymn

*Jesus, Thou Joy of loving hearts,
Thou Fount of life, Thou Light of men,
From the best bliss that earth imparts,
We turn unfilled to Thee again.*

*Thy truth unchanged has ever stood,
Thou savest those that on Thee call;
To them that seek Thee, Thou are good,
To them that find Thee, all in all.*

*We taste Thee, O Thou Living Bread,
And long to feast upon Thee still;
We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead,
And thirst our souls from Thee to fill.*

*Our restless spirits long for Thee,
Where'er our changeful lot is cast;
Glad when Thy gracious smile we see,
Blest when our faith can hold Thee fast.*

O Jesus, ever with us stay,
Make all our moments calm and bright;
Chase the dark night of sin away,
Shed o'er the world Thy holy light.
—Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153)

For Further Study

—*MEDITATE ON* Psalms 16; 34; 62; 73; 105.

—*READ ABOUT* God's life-giving provision during two mealtime scenes described in the Old and New Testaments:

Abigail, Nabal's perceptive wife and David's future bride—a multitalented desert doyenne, in 1 Samuel 25

Mary, Jesus' attentive friend from Bethany, in Luke 10:38-42.

—*STUDY* Psalm 104:14-35; Proverbs 4:20-27; Ecclesiastes 5:10-20; Matthew 4:1-4; Luke 22:7-20; Luke 24:13-35; John 21:1-14.

—*MEMORIZE* Psalm 104:14-15; Proverbs 30:8; Matthew 6:11; Matthew 7:9, 11; Luke 22:19; Philippians 4:12-13.

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ⁱ Phillips Brooks, quoted in *Disciplines for the Inner Life*, Bob Benson and Michael W. Benson, ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 286.

ⁱⁱ Max Lucado, *Grace for the Moment* (Nashville: J. Countryman, 2000), 25.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. C. Sproul, *The Soul's Quest for God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1992), 6.

^{iv} Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Love of God*, ed. James M. Houston (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1983), 149-151.

^v St. Augustine, quoted in *Prayers: Ancient and Modern*, comp. Mary Wilder Tileston (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1897), 142. Feminine pronouns have been added.