

Anyone for Rock Badger?

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[0 : 00] Please be seated and you may like to open the Bibles back to the Deuteronomy reading on page 150 and we're continuing a sermon series on the middle section of the book of Deuteronomy in these Sunday mornings for the next few weeks.

And let's pray. God our Father speak to us from your word we pray that we may as your chosen people holy and beloved of you live holy and righteous lives in your sight and for your glory.

Amen. Well I quite like eating out and I think a reason for that is it's much better than the food that I get served at home. And I've got a theory that you can tell how posh a restaurant is by how many words on the menu you don't know and have never heard before.

I figure that the best restaurants of all and I went to quite a good one a few weeks ago there was virtually nothing in the main courses that had every word I knew.

I think actually restaurant menu writers must have a degree in neology to do this to make up words that sound posh. And I'm sure that you could probably find a really good restaurant that gives you something completely incomprehensible and all it actually is is a meat pie.

[1 : 24] Well imagine you went to a posh restaurant and there on the menu were these sorts of things. Coney cordon bleu. Or hoopoe tarim. Or what about beer battered bat and chips?

I can see you're all salivating at the thought. Your breakfast this morning wasn't sufficient for you. And the thought of beer battered bat or an ostrich omelette or something like that, ostrich egg omelette, is getting you going.

You're thinking, wow, you know, I'm looking forward to lunch already. Well, would you order any of those things? If you did order it, would you eat them? A coney is another name for the rock badger.

Some people think the rock badger's cute. They're a little animal with a tail and they run around the mountainside, around Mount Carmel in Israel. And something they're cute. I think they're just an oversized rat, to be honest.

A hoopoe is a bird. We all know what bats are. They're the things that have been evicted from the botanical gardens and sent to Ivanhoe or somewhere else. All of those are forbidden for Israelites to eat in the passage in Deuteronomy chapter 4 and also in Leviticus 11 earlier in the Old Testament.

[2 : 40] So if you were in a restaurant and were offered rock badger, would you eat it? I remember I was at a restaurant in the city about 25 years ago, I think, when I worked in the city with a friend who's Jewish.

And we all ordered our meals and along they came. And my Jewish friend had ordered chicken. It was probably one of these posh restaurants that had words that you didn't understand because from what was on the menu he had no idea that the chicken came stuffed with prawns.

And being Jewish he wouldn't and couldn't eat it and in a sense sent it back and asked for something else. And I felt very embarrassed for him. He was quite a good friend and all of us knew each other well. So at one level we knew that he was Jewish and so on and that's why he wasn't eating.

But it meant that we all ate and then his food came and then he ate. Which was a bit awkward for a meal, obviously. You see, for these food laws for Jewish people, in a sense every meal they eat underscores their difference from the rest of the world.

For them there's no popping into a McDonald's and getting a cheeseburger. No lasagna. No pizza. Well, you can have some pizzas but it wouldn't have had cheese and meat and so on on the same pizza.

[3 : 56] They couldn't have spaghetti with parmesan cheese on the top. No bacon and eggs for breakfast. And certainly no beer-battered bat and chips. No ham and avocado sandwiches.

And no coney cordon bleu either. In Deuteronomy 14 there's a list from verse 3 onwards of categories and lists of names of animals or creatures that are to be eaten or could be eaten and are not to be eaten.

In verses 3 to 8 they're the creatures that live on the earth. And the distinction there, the criteria is, if an animal both has or has both chewing the cud and a split hoof, it's clean to eat.

If it has one of those things, chewing the cud or a split hoof, or neither of those two, then you can't eat it. And then some examples are given.

In verses 9 and 10, simply the criteria is given, not a list. Here, that for water creatures, if it has both fins and scales, then you can eat.

[5 : 06] But if it has either or neither, then you can't. And following the order in Genesis 1 of creation of the animals that are on the earth and in the water and the creatures of the air, verses 11 to 20 gives us a long list of the creatures that can or in particular can't be eaten that fly in the air.

There are no specific criteria here, just these ones are unclean and you cannot eat them. Why these laws? Why such odd laws? What's wrong with not chewing the cud?

What's wrong with having a hoof that is not cloven? And what's wrong with a pig? Or like a bit of bacon? Or ham? Why did these laws matter?

And matter so much. They're there at length in Leviticus 11. They're here in Deuteronomy 14. And for us who are Christians, why do we actually pay attention to this passage at all, given that Jesus declared all foods clean, as we saw in the passage in Matthew 15, and there's corresponding passages in, say, Matthew 7 and so on as well.

So why bother with this at all? Why not just tear it out of our Bibles and put it to one side? People have tried to fathom what's behind the rules about what makes something clean and unclean.

[6 : 22] And so, for example, in the last 50 years or so, some doctors have written little articles in theological journals saying that the unclean things tend to have higher levels of toxicity in their meat.

And therefore there's an element of hygiene and health that actually is behind all these laws. Birds of prey often, of course, feed on carcasses, and that would make them perhaps less healthy to eat them when they've eaten from dead carcasses of animals, etc.

But hygiene's not the answer in the end. I mean, there may be some synergy at that level, but a clean animal's not necessarily a safe or healthy one.

The idea of clean-unclean is a distinction of ritual rather than a distinction of health. And later on in this passage, in verse 21, the things that are unclean can be given to the resident aliens or people who are immigrants into your country, into Israel, and they can be sold to the foreigner.

Now, given the way that Deuteronomy in particular exercises great care and love for the immigrant into your country, it seems very counter if now they're suddenly being told you can give it to them as poison to eat if they're unclean or unhealthy.

[7 : 40] That doesn't seem to be the logic behind the laws. Other people suggest that it's connections with other religions, and there's probably a little bit of truth in this as well. The pig was sacred in Canaan and in Syria and Babylon.

The fish was sacred in Egypt. The small pig was important for the Hittites. The snake in Canaan and Egypt. But the bull, which is clean for Israel to eat, was very sacred in many of the ancient Near Eastern cultures around about.

So the logic doesn't hold all the way. Some say there's a connection with death. The animals that chew the cud rarely eat meat. Animals that eat meat and therefore presumably don't chew the cud are in a sense living off the death of some animal.

And birds of prey feed on carcasses. So somehow there's this connection with death and life. But again, I think it doesn't work substantially, and especially because earlier in the Old Testament, it's allowable and permissible for the people of God to eat meat, which is themselves eating something that has been killed for their food.

The logic doesn't work all the way. So often in medieval times in particular, but even in modern times sometimes, people think, well, there must be a symbolism here.

[9 : 02] So chewing the cud is a bit like, reminds us of meditating on the word of God day and night, that we mull it over in our minds. And a sheep is clean.

We can eat that because the Lord's the shepherd. And the birds of prey, they're the Gentiles who feed on blood. But again, that sort of symbolic association is a bit arbitrary.

Why doesn't chewing the cud remind us of being procrastinators, for example, and therefore a bad thing, not a good thing? There's no control over the sort of symbolic approach of how we connect these ideas.

The passage itself gives us sufficient clues, though, to work out what's behind these laws. And that's a fundamental point of interpretation. The Bible often has embedded within it the clues and the guides to how we interpret it.

We've just got to look in the right place. And the right place is obviously in the text itself, and especially here in the surrounds of the text, the beginning of chapter 14, and in verse 21, at the end of the list of laws.

[10 : 06] So here are some clues to what's going on in these laws. In verse 2 of chapter 14, we read, For you are a people holy to the Lord your God.

And the same expression occurs at the end of the passage, in the middle of verse 21, you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Now we think of something being holy as being moral and righteous and very good.

That's a fair enough association, but the word itself basically means being set apart for something or belonging to something. And because it's God to whom we belong, or Israel belongs in this case, and God is holy and perfect and moral, that's why we have the holy, perfect, moral sort of connotations with the word holy.

But this is strictly a holy table. It's not because it's morally good. It's because it's set apart for a particular purpose in the worship of Almighty God. So Israel is holy, meaning it's set apart for God.

It belongs to God. And therefore it's distinctive amongst the other nations of the world that are not set apart for God. In the same verse 2, it goes on to say, The Lord has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

[11 : 27] Words of some intimacy and value, privilege really, that are being spoken there. Israel is chosen out of all the other nations.

Not that God condemns all the other nations. In fact, Deuteronomy makes it clear, as does the Old Testament as a whole, that God chooses one group, Israel, for the sake of the rest of the nations, an argument that Paul uses in the letter to the Romans as well.

But Israel has a special place then in God's economy, in God's working in the world. And Israel is to be distinct. It's different from the other nations of the world, different in a way that will attract the other nations to God, but different certainly.

And that's the point that verse 2 is making. You are holy, you are chosen, you're a treasured possession. Verse 21 backs it up. You are a people holy to the Lord. You belong to the Lord.

And therefore, the implication is you're different from the other nations. Your behavior will be different. Israel is to be different.

[12 : 38] That's also picked up in verse 1. You are children of the Lord your God. Now, we're used to the idea of being children of the Lord God. It's a very common New Testament idea. It's very rare in the old.

Very rare indeed. But here it is. It's a statement of extraordinary privilege that Israel, the chosen people of God, are his children. And the other nations, therefore, are not.

Israel's difference is being emphasized. That then follows on in the second point in verse 3. The beginning of the food laws, you shall not eat any abhorrent thing.

Now, that doesn't mean you don't have to eat anything that you turn your nose up. You know, broad beans or, you know, marzipan or something like that. Ugh, that's abhorrent.

I'm not going to eat that. That's not what's meant here. Abhorrent, or in some translations, abominable, is almost a technical word in the Old Testament for something especially associated with other gods and the worship of other gods and idolatry.

[13 : 43] So that again gives us a clue. Israel is not to associate in the practices of other nations, especially with nations that are worshipping other gods and practicing idolatry. Israel is to be different.

And because it belongs to the Lord, it's not to do anything or eat anything or practice anything that is associated with pagan nations and their worship and their idolatry and false gods.

Now, that's then backed up as well at the end of verse 1. You must not lacerate yourselves or shave your forelocks for the dead.

Now, I must confess, I've not noticed many of you guilty of this, infringing this law. When I've conducted funerals here, I've not noticed all that many people who've come with cuts across their face and lacerated their chest or back or dripping with blood.

You know, occasionally we men, we slip and don't cut ourselves when we shave. But I'm not sure that we're doing that deliberately when we go to a funeral or for the sake of the dead. And I've not noticed people sort of cutting off their forelocks for funerals either.

[14 : 50] Why such an odd law? Well, it seems that from texts that have been found in recent times, in the last century, in a place called Ugarit in Syria, for example, on the Mediterranean coast, or the name is Rajshamra today, that in the ancient times there were professional mourners.

People would be paid to mourn the dead and go to funerals and things like that. And one of the Ugarit texts is, he cuts cheek and chin, he plows his chest like a garden, like a valley he lacerates his back.

Well, I'm glad I'm not a professional mourner, let me tell you, though I go to lots of funerals. And probably the association there is with some sort of magic superstition, some sort of invoking the gods to look favourably on the person who's died, that sort of idea.

Completely alien to the God of the Old Testament, the God of Israel. That is, don't associate with practices of other religions, other gods and idolatry. Now, that law is not to do with eating food, but it's there at the beginning of the section of eating food.

And its context is, don't have anything to do with other gods, other worship and idolatry. And so, therefore, it adds to that context of why these food laws are as they are.

[16 : 11] Same sort of thing at the end of the passage, at the end of verse 21, you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. Now, here is a law that, again, relates to food. It comes outside the food laws of what's clean and unclean, but is clearly part of this passage, because the next verse goes on into a completely different topic.

This law is also found twice in the book of Exodus, so it's there three times in the Old Testament, so it's hardly unimportant, even though it looks odd. You shall not boil a kid, a young goat, or young animal, in its mother's milk.

Well, what's wrong with that, if, indeed, you wanted to actually do that? Well, again, in Ugaritic text, it seems that that was a practice of magic, somehow invoking the gods in some way to produce fertility, probably.

Here, it's prohibited, because it's an anti-association with other gods. In one sense, there may not be anything inherently wrong with doing that, but because of the danger of association with other gods and other idols and other nations' practices of their religion, Israel is not to do it.

And that's certainly part of the flow of Deuteronomy 12 to 16. Which prohibits all sorts of things, as we saw last week, indeed, that might drag people or entice people to the worship of other gods.

[17 : 34] The complete demolition of all the paraphernalia of the worship of the Canaanites, for example, in chapter 12. So that theme, it seems, is continuing on here. Israel is to be different from the other nations, and that difference will spill over into their menus and to their diet.

Indeed, that law in verse 21, you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk, is actually the law that forms the basis of the main Jewish kosher food laws to this day.

And so, for example, in Jerusalem, if you went to McDavid's, rather than McDonald's, you wouldn't get a cheeseburger, because meat and milk products wouldn't be cooked together.

You won't eat meat and cheese. You won't have cheese on your spaghetti or in your lasagna and all that sort of stuff. Because how will we know that the animal from which the milk product that brought the cheese is not the mother of the animal that brought the meat?

We don't know. And so the Jews, which is typical of what they've done with Old Testament laws, and typically in some sense of what we might sometimes do with laws, is it says, don't do that, boil a kid in its mother's milk.

[18 : 41] How will we know we won't know? So therefore, we'll draw a great big line all the way around the law, and we'll keep so far away that we won't mix any meat and cheese products or milk products at all in our cooking. Well, what are all these clues pointing to?

The key thing is Israel is to be different from other nations, and in particular, a difference that reflects their allegiance to Almighty God, rather than to the pagan gods, the fertility gods of the Canaanites and other nations around about them.

The difference is a difference between an Israelite and a Gentile. And there's a sense in which in God's eyes, Israel is to be clean. It doesn't mean perfect and pure. It's ritually clean, acceptable to him.

And the Gentiles are unclean. And so in a sense, God chooses Israel out of the nations, not the Gentiles. And God chooses for Israel some foods, but not other foods.

And the Old Testament, the Bible as a whole, Deuteronomy in particular, makes it clear that there's a sense in which the choice of Israel to be God's people is actually pretty arbitrary.

[19 : 44] There's nothing about Israel that warrants God's choice. It's not because they were morally better than other nations, because they were clean or perfect, or because they chose God in the first place, or because God knew that they would be particularly brilliant people or anything like that.

God simply chose them. He chose Abram and therefore the descendants that came from Abram. For no reason other than he decided to choose and love Abram and his descendants.

It's an arbitrary choice. That's God's free, sovereign election. Same for you and me. We're chosen, in a sense, arbitrarily by God. Not because we're religious or good or pious.

He just chooses us. And that arbitrary nature of God's election then spills over into, is to be reflected in eating. So Israel is to eat some foods but not others, and in the end, that choice looks to be relatively arbitrary.

But as Israel is chosen out of all the nations, what they eat is chosen out of all the possible foods around. That is, there may not be a logic behind the different foods at every point.

[20 : 51] It's a reflection that Israel belongs to God as a special chosen holy people to God. The obligation of Israel to eat these foods and not eat others is grounded in God's work for them.

So the opening verses about you've been a chosen people, holy to the Lord, echoes and reminds them of God's saving act in bringing them out of Egypt. That is, God has established them by his grace and now obedience to his law flows from being God's people.

It's not an attempt to become God's people, of course. These laws also reflect the total exclusive relationship that a person of God is to have with God.

God doesn't want to share his honour with other gods and idols. And so every part of our life, as Deuteronomy in particular, 12 to 26, that we'll look at some chapters in these weeks to come, shows us that all our life is to be an expression of an exclusive worship of God.

Here, it's to do with what we eat and don't eat. That exclusive relationship with God means that Israel is to keep clear of idolatry and the worship of other gods, the practices of the people's roundabout.

[22 : 10] They are to be different, distinctive, and every meal will remind them of that. But another issue perhaps raises itself here.

It's the relationship between obedience to God's law and understanding God's law. You've probably asked, your children or grandchildren have probably asked, why do I have to eat that?

Usually talking about beans or peas in my experience. My sister, who's 40-something, still says the same sort of thing about peas. And sometimes you might give them an answer, well, they're good for you, but sometimes the answer might be from a parent, because I say so.

At one level, that's a sufficient answer. It's especially sufficient if it's God's answer. Why do I have to do this? I mean, God is perfect in his knowledge of law, so he knows perfectly what is right and good for us, even more than our parents do, let me tell you.

And so when God says, because I tell you, that's enough reason. The danger is sometimes we try to work out why a law is there.

[23 : 24] That is, we try to justify it or rationalise some reason. So we think, oh, it might be to do with health, or they might be to do with other religions. But in the end, the trouble is with this list of animals and birds and fish and so on, is that no logic applies at every single case that we know.

At one level, it's relatively arbitrary. But that actually undergirds the reasoning behind it that I think the text is pointing us to. God's choice of Israel is arbitrary.

It's an act of his grace. And so to reflect that, his choice of what is clean and unclean, is also relatively arbitrary. If an Israelite were to say, why can't I have a ham sandwich?

God might say, because I say so. And that's sufficient to obey. Now that's actually a very important issue, I think.

Because sometimes I think we are tempted to rationalise away some of God's laws. And say, well, that law, it's a bit old, or it doesn't really apply anymore, it's not really my situation.

[24 : 30] And so we tend to sort of sidle them off. So that we can escape obedience. But actually what we're worshipping then is our own rational capacity, our reason, rather than exercising faith in the authority of God's word.

There is a place, of course, to grapple with it and to understand it as best we can. But if in the end there's no logical answer, we obey because, God says, do this and don't do that.

Think of the Garden of Eden. Well, there's a very interesting parallel with this. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden had all the fruit trees and everything they could eat except one. Why that one? We're not really told.

In one sense, it doesn't really matter. Yes, it seems that they're not to eat the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that they become like God. But in the end, it could have just been an arbitrary choice.

Don't eat that tree. Eat everything else. It actually becomes an exercise of faith. Adam and Eve don't need to know why not that tree just as Israel doesn't need to know why not this food and why that food.

[25 : 36] And the same for us on other laws of obedience to God as well. Well, back to the restaurant. You're plowing through the strange vocabulary *conic cordon bleu*, battered bat and chips, *hoopou terine*.

Do we eat it or not? After all, it's here in the Bible that it's unclean. Do we eat it in the 21st century or not? Well, if we know our New Testaments, we could well say, and rightly so, well, I'm going to eat this because Jesus declares all foods clean.

In Mark 7 and in the second reading today, Matthew 15, parallel accounts of Jesus saying, it's not what goes into you that makes you unclean, declaring that really all foods are clean. The context in which Jesus does that in both Matthew and Mark is associated with Jesus speaking with a Canaanite woman, a pagan woman, a Gentile woman, a non-Israelite.

Very rare, actually, for Jesus to do that. About the only time, really, outside the Samaritan woman in John 4, I think. And so it's probably significant that Jesus declares all foods clean in the context of showing a ministry that goes to Gentiles.

And it backs up exactly what this passage is teaching us as the surrounds of it I've tried to explain. The food laws are there to show the distinctiveness of Israel in God's sight over and against the Gentiles.

[27 : 10] But when Jesus comes and now the gospel begins to go to non-Israelites, to the Gentiles, to a Canaanite woman in the area of Tyre and Sidon and so on in Matthew 15, Mark 7, now that border's being broken down by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, the food laws no longer apply. Now, that distinctiveness of Israel over against the other nations, that's part of the old covenant. no longer in the new as the gospel is to go to all the nations.

And Jesus, of course, makes it clear that what makes you clean is what comes out of your heart, not what you put into your mouth and eat. And so, if obedience to the laws comes out of your hearts, then that's what makes you clean rather than what you eat.

The same issue is found, of course, in the Acts of the Apostles. Where gradually after the day of Pentecost and Jesus has now ascended into heaven, the disciples or apostles are now sent out with the gospel and Peter starts preaching and others.

When we get to Acts 10, the big bridge comes. The bridge of preaching the gospel to Gentiles. And the issue with Peter and Cornelius and Peter has a vision of unclean animals and so on and he realizes that what's being explained to him is now the gospel goes to non-Israelites.

[28 : 32] not even just to Samaritans, now to Gentiles and the vision he's given with the unclean animals and taking it all away and realizing that now he can eat anything because the gospel is for all.

It's exactly the same point Jesus made in Matthew 15, Mark 7 and it's exactly the same point that this passage in Deuteronomy 14 is showing us. These laws are about the distinctiveness of Israel but now in the New Testament the gospel is for all and therefore now the food laws of Deuteronomy and Leviticus are in a sense made redundant.

The question though is that we're still to be distinctive not by what we eat but by what flows out of our hearts. That is the people who belong to God Christians of any nation and every nation we are to be different from the world not by our diets and menus but by lives of holiness and righteousness by our allegiance to God and our refusal to embrace any of the pagan and idolatrous practices of our world.

Of course there are limits our freedom doesn't come without the exercise of love and so for example in 1 Corinthians 8 when Paul writes to the Corinthians he deals with the issue of meat offered to idols in a sense all meat's safe we can eat what we like but for the sake of others as an act of love we may well restrain what we eat so that we don't put a stumbling block in the paths of others and on that level I think this passage also is still speaking to us raises what are we prepared to give up or abstain from for the sake of others for the sake of ministry to them that if we have Jewish friends for example and we want to still witness to them and befriend them then we're prepared to give up eating our bacon and eggs or our lasagna if we're in their midst by way of an act of love to have hospitality with them or fellowship with them or witness to them so these laws are not totally in a sense redundant by way of let's throw them out all food is clean the principles in these laws still apply we are still to be a distinctive people in the world the New Testament underscores that indeed deepens our distinction from people in the world but this passage in a sense in a preliminary way leads us to Jesus' words and to the vision that Peter has and reminds us now that thankfully by God's grace the gospel is for people of all nations and that you and I though not racially descended from Abraham

I suspect most of us are not are nonetheless the chosen people of God holy to him a special and treasured possession of him and we are to live holy lives with just the same degree if not deeper degree of obligation as ancient Israel was but with a freedom to eat that ancient Israel didn't have because now the gospel is for all earlier in Deuteronomy in chapter 8 God through Moses reminded the people of Israel that we do not live on bread alone on food alone but we live on everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord and so we are to obey God's laws as we understand them through the Lord Jesus Christ and through the New Testament whether or not we actually completely understand why I should do this or not do that but we are to obey it because we live on what comes out of the mouth of the Lord Amen what is going escrib and this or not do the Lord in what comes we do together and now the

[32 : 07] Lord we are to forgive me and to who even mayurt the Lord and to meet