

FOOD, FARMING & WASTE – A BIBLE STUDY

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This downloadable bible study is designed for groups, and is an expanded version of a short bible-study article in the October 2010 A Rocha UK Magazine.

1. Introduction

“Give us today our daily bread.” It sounds simple, but for most of us our ‘daily bread’ involves a complex globalised, industrialised process with major economic and ecological implications. Being spiritual about food needs to affect our shopping and eating habits, our attitude to land and farming, and our politics. This is a huge subject and a single bible study can only touch on a few basic issues and principles. A Rocha UK plans to produce a fuller Environment Resource Pack on Food in 2011.

2. Eat Together

For a bible study on food, it makes sense to enjoy eating together. Ideally get various members to bring dishes that they have made themselves. Encourage them wherever possible to use LOAF ingredients, and to bring the packaging from food they used so that the sourcing of ingredients can be discussed:

- L = Local – home-grown, allotment, farmer’s market, local farms
- O = Organic – Soil Association approved, or from local farms using sustainable methods
- A = Animal friendly – any meat should be organic, free-range, ‘Freedom Food’ or at least outdoor-reared
- F = Fair Trade – products that carry the Fair Trade foundation logo, including bananas, tea and coffee, sugar, wine etc.

3. Make a Food Map

If you have time, using a large world map (or a map projected onto a large piece of paper), place pins for countries where the food ingredients came from, and work out the total approximate food mileage of the meal you’ve eaten. Don’t take too long over this – it should be a fun activity rather than an exact science!

4. Fascinating Facts and Outlandish Opinions

Print out the following facts, opinions and questions, and cut them up into separate short pieces of paper. Scatter the pieces of paper around the room, and ask people to sort them into three piles – facts and opinions which are respectively about **food**, **farming**, and **waste**. Give each pile to a group of people, and in turn read them out.

After reading out the questions about food, spend a few minutes discussing the questions on food ... and then the same for farming and for waste. Don’t worry about having all the answers – the aim is more to get people to reflect on questions they may not have thought about ... or certainly may not have discussed in a Christian context.

Food

- “This is a society that doesn’t value food.” Professor Tim Lang, City University London.
- “Don’t buy anything from the supermarket,” Chris Goodall in “How to Live a Low-Carbon Life”
- The number of obese people in the UK tripled in 20 years up to 2001, leading to 30,000 premature deaths in 1998 alone, and costing the NHS at least £500, a year. (Tackling Obesity in England, National Audit Office, 2001). By 2010, 62% of Britons were overweight or obese (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8646677.stm).
- People in the UK are Europe's biggest fast food consumers. In 2007 UK consumers spent £82 per head in fast food restaurants and burger chains (not including Chinese, Indian or Pizza). More than 2.5 million people in the UK are said to visit McDonald's every day. Research in the US followed 3000 people aged 18-30 for 15 years – those who ate fast food more than twice a week gained 4–5 kg, compared to those who ate fast food once a week or less, and became twice as insulin resistant. (www.fastfoodnation.co.uk)

Farming

- 70% of Britain is agricultural land.
- HEALTHY SOIL - The soils of natural oak forests in the UK contain around 10% organic matter. In most British agricultural land this has been reduced to 3.5% and in some intensively farmed arable land to just 1%. (*Climate Friendly Farming*, Mukti Mitchell, www.resurgence.org)
- THE WHITE STUFF? Dairy farms in England and Wales have reduced from 28,000 to 11,000. Each week, nine dairy farmers in Britain are forced to sell up. In 2007 Britain was self-sufficient in milk. Now we import 1.5 million litres a day. (*Daily Telegraph*, 6th June 2010)
- GO ORGANIC? "Although organic agriculture is not a panacea and has its own limits in addressing challenges posed by modern lifestyle, its external environmental costs are much lower than those of conventional agriculture and, in some areas, it can reverse problems of natural degradation. Moreover, non-certified organic systems increase food availability and access exactly in those locations where poverty and hunger are most severe." (*UN Food & Agriculture Organisation*, 2007 <ftp://ftp.fao.org/paia/organicag/ofs/OFS-2007-5.pdf>)

Waste

- Britain throws away half of all the food produced on farms – (Lord Haskins, former head of Northern Foods, *Independent on Sunday*, 2nd March 2008)
- In a UK Government survey, only 10% of people admitted to throwing away a 'substantial' amount of food. (*WRAP survey of 1800 people*)
- Nearly 1/3 of the food we buy in the UK is thrown out as waste. Some of this is inedible but compostable (bones, tea-bags) but 80% of it is perfectly good (*Household Food & Drink Waste in the UK, WRAP – Waste & Resources Action Programme*, October 2009)
- Every person in the UK generated on average 300 kg of household wastes in 1980 but more than 500 kg in 2005. (*The Bread we Waste*, www.foodethicscouncil.org)
- UK homes waste 8.3 million tonnes of food per year (*Household Food & Drink Waste in the UK, WRAP, October 2009*)
- Tesco has not produced figures for how much waste it sends to landfill since 2004. (*The Independent*, 2nd March 2008)

Questions about Food:

- *Do you agree with Tim Land & Chris Goodall?*
- *How can we change the culture of eating food in the UK? Are there other countries we can learn from?*
- *What difference does it make to how we see food, when we've grown it, or know the place it was grown and the people it was grown by?*

Questions about Farming:

- *Why do you think we import so much food? Are there some types of food we will always need to import?*
- *Do you think 'food security' means that we should use more British land for food production? What if that meant higher prices?*
- *Organic matter is vital for the long-term health of soil – without it, farming is increasingly dependent on artificial inputs – such as nitrogen-based fertilisers derived from oil. Is this sustainable long-term? What are the alternatives?*

Questions about Waste:

- *Why is our society so wasteful today? Has it always been this way, and if not, what changed?*
- *Do you think these statistics are true of you?*
- *What does our wastage say about our relationship with God?*

5. Bible Discussion

If your group are used to looking up Bible passages, give out the following bible references that go with the questions. If they are less confident finding their way around the Bible, print out the references for them (you can use sites like www.biblegateway.com and www.biblija.net to copy and paste the texts).

Read – Genesis 2:4–9, 15–17 and 3:17–19

Questions:

- *According to Genesis 2, what did God use to make the first human beings?*
- *What does this say about our relationship with the land and with farming? Are our lives so distanced from the soil that we tend to forget our earthiness?*
- *In these verses, what is the task of human beings within God's creation?*
- *Is there a sense in which the way we treat land reflects our deepest values?*

Read - Jeremiah 29:4–7

- *The context in Jeremiah 29 is of people in exile who don't want to put down roots, and would rather be somewhere else. How does this relate to our context today?*
- *In these verses, what advice can you find about living sustainably – in economic, ecological, social and spiritual terms?*
- *How literally do you think we should take God's words about planting gardens and eating what they produce? What are the benefits of doing so?*
- *What does this passage suggest about God's priorities for human well-being and happiness?*

Read - Deuteronomy 14:28–29, 22:6–7, 24:19–22

- *What do these verses teach us about the economics of farming and food-production?*
- *According to Deuteronomy, what does the success of future harvests depend upon?*
- *If 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it' (Psalm 24:1), and God cares for the poor, and for wildlife, how should that affect the way we farm and the way we think about waste food?*

Read – Leviticus 25:1–24

- *Which of the following 'food values' can you find in this passage, and the others we have looked at today?*
 - *God's ownership of all land*
 - *Restraint*
 - *Rest for land, animals and people*
 - *Thankfulness and celebration*
 - *Sharing with others – especially the poor*
 - *Caring for the earth*
- *How can we make our production and use of food today reflect these principles more? Try and make your answers as practical as possible – are there things as a group that you can do together, or changes you can make in your household?*

6. Final reflection

Read these words, and then spend some time in prayer.

"In Leviticus 19.9-10, we find these words: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God."

Moderation is the important principle here. In the past sixty years, all over the world, there has been huge pressure on farming land to be more productive. This has been achieved through artificial fertilisers and pesticides, by improved crop varieties, and by squeezing results from every marginal corner of farmland. Sometimes farmers have been guilty of greed, but more often they have been the victims of pressures from government policies, supermarkets or global economic forces.

This passage shows us that land-use should not be about productivity alone. The size of our harvests and our profits is not the only thing that matters to God. Leaving the 'gleanings' – the grain that has fallen or has grown at the margins – provides for the poor, the foreigner and, of course, for wildlife. Super-sized monoculture fields with no hedges or margins may make big profits, but they are disastrous for wildlife and ultimately dishonour God.

These instructions about leaving enough for the needy are not simply social or even ecological. They are also spiritual, for 'I am the Lord your God'. These last six words of Leviticus 19:10 should be inscribed in the consciousness of every one of us as consumers. It's God's world, and he will ask us to give account of our stewardship of its resources.

("Planetwise", Dave Bookless pp. 53-54)

A final handout to give people:

TEN TOP TIPS TO REDUCE FOOD-WASTE AT HOME

1. Buy less if you don't think you can eat it: smaller joints, loose vegetables rather than pre-packed bags that are too big – and try not to fall for quite so many buy-one-get-one-free offers.
2. Use your imagination with leftovers: that half a roast-chicken would make a perfect pie, sandwich filling or form the basis for a salad.
3. Don't let vegetables rot in the bottom of the fridge: even older vegetables make decent soups, casseroles or curries.
4. Remember to cancel that vegetable box if you're going to be dining out a lot that week.
5. Don't over-order in restaurants; if you do, go American and ask for a doggy bag.
6. Use common sense rather than use-by dates when deciding what to throw away.
7. Become friends with your freezer: Make your own frozen ready-meals with last night's leftovers or any food that you have overbought.
8. Whiz up older fruit into a smoothie or bake it in a pudding.
9. Look out for the new 'plastic' bags that give your vegetables a longer lease of life in your fridge.
10. Try and shop more frequently so that you buy what you need, rather than rely on one major shopping trip.

With thanks to 'The Independent on Sunday'