

# Q 4.4. Why in Deuteronomy 12 and Numbers 11 does God say to eat as much meat as you desire?

Israel was not satisfied with God's provisions because they craved animal flesh. So God handed them over to their evil desires. Upon eating the flesh, many were struck with a plague and died in the '*grave of craving*.' God thereafter gave them a choice between death and life, encouraging them to choose life. Instead of serving the desires of the flesh, God wants His children to rule over these desires and to be content with the diet He says is best for us to eat, a vegan diet of fruit and vegetation.

## Permission to Eat Animal Flesh?

In Deuteronomy 12:20 it says: "*When the LORD your God enlarges your border as He has promised you, and you say, 'Let me eat meat,' because you long to eat meat, you may eat as much meat as your heart desires*" (Deuteronomy 12:20, NKJV). Earlier, in Numbers 11, as the Israelites were journeying toward the promised land, God told Moses: "*And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you will eat meat, because you have cried out in the hearing of the LORD, saying: 'Who will feed us meat? For we were better off in Egypt! Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat*" (Numbers 11:18, BSB). Some take these passages as definitive proof that God had no problem with the Israelites eating animal flesh and therefore also has no problem with His followers today eating animal flesh. A closer look at the context of these

passages, however, tells a very different story about God's attitude toward the desire to consume animal flesh.

### **Learning from Previous Mistakes**

The context of Deuteronomy 12:20 is the Israelites journeying away from their bondage in Egypt toward the land God promised them.<sup>1</sup> God promised that as long as they worship God alone and stay away from idolatry and worshiping other gods,<sup>2</sup> and as long as they listen to God and follow His instructions, then God would bless them abundantly<sup>3</sup> and no one would be able to displace them from their land.<sup>4</sup> Upon entering the land, they were instructed to rid the land of all forms of worship of other gods.<sup>5</sup> If they would commit themselves to God in this way, then the land would be a place of joy for everyone: *“And there rejoice before the LORD your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns”* (Deuteronomy 12:12, NIV). All these commands were given to the second generation Israelites, instructing them not to

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<sup>1</sup> “But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the LORD your God cares for. The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year” (Deuteronomy 11:11-12, ESV).

<sup>2</sup> “Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them” (Deuteronomy 11:16, NKJV).

<sup>3</sup> “And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the LORD your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil” (Deuteronomy 11:13-14, NKJV).

<sup>4</sup> “No man shall be able to stand against you; the LORD your God will put the dread of you and the fear of you upon all the land where you tread, just as He has said to you” (Deuteronomy 11:25, NKJV).

<sup>5</sup> “And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things” (Deuteronomy 12:3-4, NKJV).

make the same idolatrous mistakes<sup>6</sup> that the previous generation made at the beginning of their Exodus out of Egypt.

### **The Grave of Craving**

God already knew from an earlier episode along the journey in Numbers 11 that Israel struggled with craving meat and not being content with the diet that God provided for them. Israel had complained about the manna God gave them to eat because they craved meat, so God told them to eat meat, “*until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you*” (Numbers 11:20, NKJV). When they did so, it says, “*while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the LORD burned against the people, and the LORD struck them with a severe plague*” (Numbers 11:33, BSB). Those partaking immediately died and the place was called *Kibroth Hattaavah* which means ‘grave of craving’, “*So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving*” (Numbers 11:34, NKJV).

### **Choosing Good over Evil**

As this account in Numbers 11 demonstrates, there are certainly still consequences to serving the desires of the flesh, even when God at first glance appears to be offering permission. The Bible later refers to this episode of craving meat as an evil thing and an example not to follow, “*Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did*” (1 Corinthians 10:5-6, NIV). God nevertheless is merciful and is a keeper of promises. So despite Israel still struggling to overcome inclinations

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<sup>6</sup> “He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’” (Exodus 32:4, NIV).

toward evil desires and disobedience, God fulfilled His promise of leading Israel into the promised land of joy and abundance. He nevertheless gave them a choice between abundant life and the grave of craving, *“Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!”* (Deuteronomy 30:19, NLT).

### **Abstain from Blood**

Instead of allowing the second generation Israelites to be destroyed because of their unholiness for meat, like He did many of the first generation Israelites in Numbers 11, this time He showed them unmerited grace and reminded them of His instruction<sup>7</sup> to abstain from blood, *“Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for the blood is the life; you may not eat the life with the meat”* (Deuteronomy 12:23, NKJV). Since flesh cannot be fully separated from blood, it is impossible to eat flesh without also consuming blood. It therefore wouldn't be physically possible to eat flesh without simultaneously disobeying the qualification about not consuming blood. As author Geoffrey Rudd puts it, *“Kosher killing, with ceremonial throat cutting and blood-letting is the merest sophistry to circumvent these instructions, for not all the blood of an animal can be drained from its arteries and the use of only the fore and hind quarters does not avoid the fat.”*<sup>8</sup>

### **The Rebellious Desires of the Flesh**

To understand why this instruction was given, it is necessary to consider that it was given to rebellious Israel who struggled even to commit to the first step of

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<sup>7</sup> “This is a permanent statute for the generations to come, wherever you live: You must not eat any fat or any blood” (Leviticus 3:17, BSB). See also Genesis 9:4.

<sup>8</sup> Rudd, Geoffrey L. *Why Kill for Food?* Wilmslow, Cheshire: The Vegetarian Society, 1956, p.80.

obedience, which is to trust in and worship God alone.<sup>9</sup> The instruction to abstain from blood was originally given at a time when “*every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time*” (Genesis 6:5, NIV). God therefore instructed, “*you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood*” (Genesis 9:4, NKJV). In each case, the instruction was given as a reminder that serving the bloodthirsty cravings of the flesh is incompatible with serving the Spirit of God: “*For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want*” (Galatians 5:17, NIV).

### **Gluttonous Eating of Flesh**

It would also be inaccurate to read this passage in Deuteronomy 12:20 as contradicting the warnings elsewhere in Scripture against gluttonously serving one’s appetite. The first of the Ten Commandments says not to serve other gods, “*You must not have any other god but me*” (Exodus 20:3, NLT).<sup>10</sup> Prioritizing earthly appetite over the heavenly will of God violates this command. The Bible describes such shameful people who do this as those, “*whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who have their minds on earthly things*” (Philippians 3:19, NASB). Gluttonous eating of flesh is not only disobedient but is a severe enough form of disobedience that believers are instructed not even to associate with people who do it: “*Do not associate with heavy drinkers of wine, Or with gluttonous eaters of meat*” (Proverbs 23:20,

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<sup>9</sup> “And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (Exodus 32:7-8, ESV).

<sup>10</sup> See also Deuteronomy 11:16 in a previous footnote.

AMP).<sup>11</sup> It would therefore not be reasonable to interpret Deuteronomy 12 and Numbers 11 as suggesting that serving the gluttonous appetite is acceptable just because someone's heart desires to eat animal flesh.

### **God Shows us what is Good**

The key parts of the passages in Numbers 11 and Deuteronomy 12 are 'crave meat' and 'as much as you want.' If someone loves mercy more than satisfying the cravings of the flesh, then 'as much as you want' will be none. The person would rather show mercy to animals instead of slaughtering them to be turned into meat, "*He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?*" (Micah 6:8, BSB). The takeaway then should be to desire the good will of God rather than satisfying the evil bloodlust of the flesh, "*I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh*" (Galatians 5:16, NKJV).

### **Crucify the Desire to Eat Flesh**

God wants us to desire mercy, "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:36, NIV). The only diet that shows mercy to animals is the one God declared good<sup>12</sup> from the beginning, "*And God said, 'See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food.'*" (Genesis 1:29, NKJV). In contrast, the flesh wants violence and bloodshed toward animals for the sake of gluttony, despite God's warning, "*Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his*

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<sup>11</sup> The word translated 'meat' in this passage is 'basar', which means 'flesh'. It does not simply mean 'food', but in every instance in the Bible, the word specifically refers to flesh.

<sup>12</sup> "Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed *it was very good*" (Genesis 1:31, NKJV).

ways" (Proverbs 3:31, ESV). Giving in to this craving for meat not only fails to show mercy to animals but is also correlated with chronic disease and premature death—a grave of craving.<sup>13</sup> Instead of serving the harmful desires of the flesh, it would be wiser to avoid the grave of craving by exercising self-control over such desires, "*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*" (Galatians 5:24, NIV).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fayth L Miles, Jan Irene C Lloren, Ella Haddad, Karen Jaceldo-Siegl, Synnove Knutsen, Joan Sabate, Gary E Fraser. "Plasma, Urine, and Adipose Tissue Biomarkers of Dietary Intake Differ Between Vegetarian and Non-Vegetarian Diet Groups in the Adventist Health Study-2," *The Journal of Nutrition*, Volume 149, Issue 4, April 2019, Pages 667–675.

<sup>14</sup> Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23, NIV).