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Know That Calories Aren't the Enemy

Early in my food journey, I had resigned myself to a lifetime of yo-yo diets, guilt, deprivation, shame, and defeat.

“I guess this is my thorn in the flesh.” I sighed as I approached the dessert table at a baby shower.

I envied the women around me who apparently had high metabolisms because they ate more than I did and still looked like skinny teenagers. But even more I envied those who weren't swayed by cravings. They would look at the dessert offerings, see nothing they wanted, and walk away without a second thought.

I, on the other hand, felt a magnetic pull toward decadent sweets whether I wanted them or not because, well, *hello, sugar rush!* It was as if another person inhabited my body for those five to ten minutes it would take me to wolf down a plate loaded

with treats—a person who lacked self-control, long-term vision, and common sense. And glancing around the room at my friends, I knew I wasn't the only one having this out-of-body experience. Many of them looked just as ashamed and disappointed as I felt.



A week later, while sitting across from one of those women unfazed by a chocolate éclair, I confessed to her my struggle with food. And her response shocked me.

“Asheritah,” she began, taking my hands in hers and gazing deeply into my eyes to the very bottom of my soul, right there in the middle of the coffee shop, “it doesn't have to be this way. You don't have to struggle for the rest of your life. Jesus can set you free from your struggle with food. He has for me.”

I was shocked.

It had never occurred to me that my struggle with food was something that could be broken by Jesus. I never thought this was a spiritual issue. Sure, I had prayed before that God would help me lose the baby weight or that He'd forgive me for blowing my healthy eating plan yet again, but I had never asked Him to break the chains of my fixation and set me free.

My friend's words echoed in my mind during the days that followed. I realized that my problem wasn't the ten pounds I'd lose and gain year after year. The real problem was that the enemy had gained a corner of my life—my eating—and was using it to taunt me, distract me, and keep me living in bondage.

I saw that he had lured me with cookies and chips, promising immediate gratification to keep me from running to my Father. He was using my cravings to keep me chained to the

desires of my flesh so I wouldn't let the Spirit take complete control of me.

I was mad at the enemy, broken over my ignorance, and yet hopeful as I clung to Jesus' promise to set me free.

And, friends, as I will share with you throughout this book, He *has* set me free, not all at once but through a gradual awakening to His surpassing sweetness. No comfort food can match the comfort I've found in Jesus.

Not Just a "Fat Girl" Problem

I've always been, as one writer put it, on the round side of average. Sometimes, especially in the winter, I'm on the fluffier end of that spectrum, while other times I'm on the more slender end. I enjoy good food, but I'm not the type of person most would peg as someone who has an eating problem.

In fact, it took that disastrous chocolate cake episode to make me acknowledge that I indeed did have an eating problem, and I needed to get help. In the months that followed, I began to open up to my close friends, sharing with them that I thought I was addicted to food.

Too many adults in the United States are trapped in a cycle of dieting, binge eating, and guilt tripping, only to gain back more weight than they lost. But it's not just overweight people who may struggle with an inordinate preoccupation with thoughts and longings for food. Whether it's skinny lattes, French fries, or Oreos, many Christian women feel powerless over their food fixation.

To my surprise, nearly every woman I talked with confessed that she, too, felt she had a food addiction, even when

she knew she would suffer negative consequences, whether snigger jeans, bellyaches, migraines, or even health complications down the road. Rather than experience shame and condemnation as I had expected, there was a sense of camaraderie, a shared suffering that many of us felt but few of us spoke of honestly.

Even some of my skinny friends confessed that all day they thought about food. Some of them counted calories with every bite and performed mental gymnastics in determining whether or not they could have a bite of dessert. Others were converts of a popular eating program that was almost religious in its restrictions and influence, but they were constantly extolling the virtues of the newest power food.

Still others were committed to eating a healthy diet, locally sourced and certified organic, but they obsessed over the nutrients and origin of every ingredient they purchased to the point that a simple shopping trip drained them of all energy. Food fixation seemed to equally affect women of all ages, sizes, and religions; brownie lovers and kale lovers alike; underweight and obese; my Christian friends and I just as desperate in this issue as the atheist next door.

Food fixation is oppressive, enslaving us with thoughts and habits that torment and overpower us: “What will I eat next? How much do I weigh today? What do others think of me? Why can’t I get free of this? Why can’t I be like others?’ The same questions fill our thoughts over and over as we agonize day after day, looking for answers.”¹

What Is Food Fixation, Anyway?

You might not have heard of the term *food fixation* before, but I'm sure you've heard of its close cousin—*gluttony*.

I don't know what you picture when you hear the word *glutton*, but for me it conjures images of stout men in a dark, eighteenth-century inn, sitting at a long wooden table, mugs sloshing with beer while chomping into a chicken thigh and singing raunchy lyrics. I guess it's just not a word I've connected with personally before, but it's one that appears in the Bible several times, so it helps to pay attention to it.

Biblically, the word *glutton* means a person who is debased and excessive in his or her eating habits. But it's more than just overeating—in its association with drunkenness in Scripture, it describes a life given to excess.³ So while we tend to consider gluttony an action, we need to focus on the internal process that happens before, during, and after a gluttonous incident. For our purposes, let's define food fixation as *the inordinate preoccupation with thoughts and longings for food*.

Let's define food fixation as "the inordinate preoccupation with thoughts and longings for food."

Though we might not like to think of that extra serving of mac and cheese as a sin, God looks at the heart, and when we are controlled by something other than the Spirit of God, that is sin. Peter puts it this way in his letter to first-century believers: "People are slaves to whatever has mastered them" (2 Peter 2:19). Notice that the issue is not enjoying good food. After all, God

is the one who created both our taste buds and the delicious ingredients used to make creative and delectable concoctions. The sin lies in seeking satisfaction in a sugar rush or endorphin high—that is, something other than God.

Think about it: whether we're controlled by pride, greed, alcohol, lust, or gluttony, the sin is not first in the action but rather in the influence; what needs to be rooted out is whatever controls us in our hearts, and only then will our outer actions change. In other words, until we deal with the heart issue of seeking fullness in food instead of God, our eating habits will never change.

As one writer explains, "Eating habits become sinful when the habitual practice of them places us in bondage again—a bondage to sin from which Christ died to free us." This bondage may be physical, like a sugar addiction, or it may be mental, such as investing excessive mental energy into planning healthy meals. We need to plead with the Spirit to reveal to us and convict us of any sin in our lives, including gluttony, idolatry, addiction, and anything else.

When we eat and eat and eat, unaware of what's going into our mouths, unable to taste, enjoy, or relish the food but just stuffing down one mouthful after another until it makes us sick—that's being enslaved to our appetites.

We can also allow pride to drive even commendable eating habits because again, the problem is in those root issues of the heart more than in our external actions. For example, scores of women today are trapped by their "healthy eating" plan. This type of gluttony may not be self-evident, because it's common to keep such tight control of what and how much is eaten; but it is precisely in the need to control every bite that this type of

gluttony is also an enslavement to food and appetites.

When one insists on eating only organic, only natural, only homemade, only whatever, to the exasperation of friends and family and hostesses, that woman is controlled by her food choices, not vice versa. This, too, is a form of food fixation.

So while the Bible does not speak of *food fixation* specifically, we will soon see that it has much to say about its various manifestations in our lives.

Answer the Invitation

After a hard day of work, a bowl of ice cream seems to be the perfect answer to my problems—for about five minutes. After the sugar rush wears off, I'm left feeling just as tired, worn out, and empty as before, but now there's guilt and disillusionment piled on top! Might as well have another bowl, right?

The truth is I only compound my misery when I take my brokenness to the fridge. Food cannot fix anything—God is the only one who can satisfy us because He created us to find our satisfaction in Him.

Our journey from food fixation to lasting fullness begins with an invitation issued thousands of years ago:

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. (Isaiah 55:1–2)

In the context of this passage, the nation of Israel had spent her time and energy on idols that promised to fill the void but left the people empty and broken. Yet God responded not with disappointment, anger, or vengeance but with a loving invitation. He longed for the Israelites to return to Him, just as He longs for us to return and find true satisfaction in Him.

How interesting that God would use food imagery to communicate His desire that we find comfort and satisfaction in Him alone. And not just any food—He invites His people to feast on a veritable banquet: wine and milk—symbols of abundance, enjoyment, and nourishment.

God isn't a cosmic killjoy. In fact, delicious food and working taste buds were His idea in the first place. He's not out to ruin our pleasure in good food. Rather, He wants us to abandon our self-constructed salvation projects and turn to Him instead, urging us to listen to Him and "eat" and find delight in the best this world has to offer: God Himself.

But anyone who has ever tried to change her eating habits will readily attest that it's not easy. Changing behaviors we've spent years practicing takes more than a freshly printed eating plan and a fridge full of fruits and veggies. No, overcoming food fixation will require more than we've ever imagined, and it will reward us with more than we ever dreamed possible.

What is at stake is not just the extra pounds we've accumulated year by year. It's not our health or our vitality or our energy levels. It's not fitting into that swimsuit in time for our summer vacation or finally feeling comfortable in our skin. What's at stake is much more valuable than that, and it's of eternal significance. This is a battle of epic proportions. Food will never satisfy us because it was never meant to. God created

food for many reasons, but providing emotional comfort was never one of them.



Looking to the Israelites back then and to us now with affection, God lovingly uses imagery He knows we will relate to—food—as a metaphor for the spiritual refreshment He wants us to discover in Him. And the life He offers isn't merely survival—that would just be bread and water. No, He offers us an abundance of spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus, all we could ever want and more!

Quite simply, we face a choice: we can continue to stuff ourselves with food, hoping that one more meal will fill us, or we can recognize that we were never made to live on food alone. Our souls were created to crave God, and as St. Augustine confessed so long ago, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in You.”

If you're ready to get off the hamster wheel of diets and try-harder plans, I invite you to join me at the table of God's presence. He is the only one who can satisfy, and He's happy to do so.

Find Real Comfort and Satisfaction

We all seek comfort and satisfaction in one place or another. Some of us turn to relationships, TV shows, shopping, or alcohol. Others of us turn to food. In and of themselves, none of these things are bad, but each of these good gifts can quickly become idols, taking on importance and influence that should only belong to God.

At its core, food fixation is an issue of idolatry, just like any other addiction, because it doesn't just affect our health, our

relationships, and our lives, but it hinders our relationship with God.

For many of us, it's easier to ignore our food struggles than admit we have a problem. We tell ourselves, "Oh, it's just an extra bite," or "I'm not hurting anyone," as we plunge into the sleeve of cookies. Year after year, diet after diet, we continue to delude ourselves. We're not sure what we will find if we allow God to shine His light of truth into our hearts. We're afraid we won't like what we see, that we won't have the strength to face the years of hurt we've stuffed down inside, that God will call us to a yoke that is too heavy for us to bear.

If the idea of food as an idol seems strange to you, ask yourself if any of these statements are true of you:⁴

I could never give up my favorite food.

I spend more time and energy thinking about food than I do growing in my relationship with Christ.

I find more delight and happiness in food than in my relationship with Christ.

If you answered yes to any of the statements above, chances are you're turning to food as an idol, seeking comfort in a fleeting bite rather than in God.

What's your favorite food? The one you eat to forget about a bad day at work or to celebrate a big accomplishment? Picture yourself sitting down with a generous serving. Imagine how great it tastes, how it hits the spot, how even the thought of indulging in it brings anticipation and excitement. Whether it's homemade lasagna, luscious apple pie, avocado slathered on

toast, or an ice-cold cola, these foods provide only temporary satisfaction. Shortly after we've left the table, we've already forgotten the deliciousness of the meal as the day's problems and worries invade our mind.

These comfort foods provide us a glimmer of the satisfaction God wants to offer us if we let Him. And if anyone knew what it was like to need lasting comfort and satisfaction, it was the apostle Paul. After becoming the leading missionary to the Gentiles, Paul experienced extreme persecution, pain, and suffering. But in the midst of it all, he was filled to the measure with the comfort of God.

Take a look at this beautiful passage: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

The word "comfort" appears four times in just these two verses. Paul says that the God of *comfort comforts* us so that we may *comfort* others with the *comfort* we've received from God. Paul writes from personal experience, as God poured His comfort into Paul's heart.

In *Looking for Lovely*, Annie Downs describes the night she discovered she had a food problem. Sitting on the couch, eating popcorn and watching a reality TV show featuring a cocaine addict, Annie came face to face with the gravity of her food struggle:

I had an addiction. For over twenty years I had taken all the pain and hurt and pushed it straight down my throat. For as much as I read the Bible, sat in Sunday

school, and made the church my second home, I wish I'd understood, "His ears are open for their cries for help" (Ps. 34:15). Instead of feeling any of the suffering, instead of pressing through the pain and taking it to God, trusting that He heard me, I escaped to anywhere that would feed me, and I stuffed my emotions down by covering them in layers of food. What if I had found cocaine instead of candy? What if I had drunk beer instead of a milkshake? . . . I have the same propensity as any other addict; it's just my drug of choice is food.⁵

What a sobering thought, that many of us turn to food as an alcoholic turns to brandy, or a drug addict turns to heroin. Somehow, we can trick ourselves into thinking our food fixation isn't that big of a deal when we're simply munching on a cookie. But at the heart of the issue, we're all doing the same thing. Wouldn't you rather experience the fullness of God's comfort than the emptiness of a sugar-induced guilt trip the next time you reach for the Oreos?

Food Is Not the Enemy

A National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that over 60 percent of women in the United States are overweight and 40 percent of women are obese.⁶ These numbers are alarming, especially since obesity is linked to high blood pressure, heart disease, and many other illnesses. And of course, the food we eat affects our health and our weight; most of us have been on at least one diet in an effort to curb our growing waistlines, even while our culture idolizes skinny bodies.

So we've come to hate our appearance, fear our appetites, and view food as the enemy.

But food is not the enemy. Food is a good gift from a good God given to direct our hearts in worship to the Father. In fact, Jesus enjoyed food while He lived on this earth; He knew both how to feast and to fast. Here are just a few of the scenes in which Jesus relates to food that we glimpse in the Bible:

Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness in preparation for His public ministry (Matthew 4:1–4).

Jesus taught His disciples to not worry about food and drink because God will take care of them (Matthew 6:25–26).

Jesus dined with tax collectors and sinners, while the Pharisees called Him a “glutton and a drunkard” (Matthew 11:19).

Jesus gave instructions regarding who to invite to dinner parties (Luke 14:12–14).

Jesus had compassion on the crowds who were following Him without enough food for dinner, so He miraculously provided food for all (Matthew 14:15–21).

Jesus defended His disciples' lack of fasting during His lifetime, explaining that they will fast when He's gone (Mark 2:20).

Jesus made careful preparations to eat the Passover meal with His disciples before the crucifixion (Luke 22:7–13).

Jesus chose bread and wine as symbols His followers would use to remember His sacrifice (Luke 22:14–20).

Jesus thanked God for meals and broke bread before and after His resurrection (Luke 24:28–31).

Jesus asked the disciples if they had food to eat after His resurrection (Luke 24:41–43).

Jesus made breakfast for His disciples after His resurrection (John 21:9–13).

Jesus used dinner parties and wedding banquets as pictures of the future kingdom of God (Matthew 22:2; Luke 14:16–24).

What do these vignettes tell us about the way Jesus related to food? He didn't ignore His appetite, but He wasn't controlled by it either. He was able to both fast and feast, and He often gathered people around the table to fellowship at a deeper level. We could spend an entire chapter unpacking each of these passages and learning so much more just from Jesus' example in His relationship with food. But the overarching theme here is that Jesus ate food while on earth and also indicated that food would be a reality in the coming kingdom of God. Food is not a bad thing, but food fixation can easily become a stronghold in our lives if we're not careful.

A Spiritual Battle

When God created us, He purposefully placed our souls and spirits inside bodies. He set in place the digestive system to

process food and convert it into energy, and then He developed our brain chemistry to link foods to emotions and memories. Finally, He used food to illustrate truths about our spirits that we could not fathom otherwise. In so many ways, food is a delectable gift given to us by a Father who delights in us.

But like any good gift, our appetites have been targeted by the enemy in an effort to thwart God's plan. It's become common to blame our national health crisis in America on food corporations and greedy executives. Obesity rates are through the roof; diabetes, heart disease, and cancer have become household guests that refuse to leave; and more than half of American adults depend on at least two daily medications.⁷ Scientists have linked many of our illnesses to increased artificial ingredients in our diets, so our anger toward the food industry is justifiable. But it is misplaced.

Corporations are not our enemy. Behind the suits, the bank accounts, and the fake food lobbyists there stands a demonic force. I'm not being melodramatic here. Jesus Himself said that Satan and his minions have come to steal, kill, and destroy, and that's exactly what they're doing through the food and diet industries. But we have become so fixated with our protein shakes and diet plans that we fail to realize our food problem is, at its core, a spiritual one.

Satan will use whatever tool he can to distract people from seeking satisfaction in God, and if money, sex, or power don't hold any sway over you, then French fries or skinny chocolate lattes just might.

Paul affirms Jesus' words when he identifies our chief enemy as being Satan and the spiritual powers of darkness: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Let's not be fooled into thinking that the health crisis facing us today is coincidental. Satan will use whatever tool he can to distract people from seeking satisfaction in God, and if money, sex, or power don't hold any sway over you, then French fries or skinny chocolate lattes just might. He doesn't care what our favorite drug is as long as it keeps us running away from God.

Friends, this battle we're fighting to break free from food fixation is not as simple as throwing out the junk food and skipping dessert. While those steps may be needed, we cannot ignore the role our souls and spirits play in this battle for satisfaction. This is a spiritual war that has seen many committed Christians captured as POWs or MIA. It is in brushing it off as no big deal or "just a few pounds a diet will take care of" that the enemy steals our will to fight. Why engage in warfare when I can kick back with another bowl of ice cream?

Why do we keep turning to food to give us something it was never made to do? If we've experienced the disappointment that follows a food binge, why do we continue to seek comfort in food?

The most obvious answer is our sinful nature; we will turn to anything and everything besides God to fill that void inside of us. Starting back in the garden of Eden, humans have been trying to be self-sufficient and autonomous but have failed miserably every time, because trying to mask our need for

God with food is like trying to pound a nail in the wall with an orange; we'll only end up frustrated and hurt.

But another reason we keep turning to food, even after it's failed us, is because for many of us, food fixation has become a stronghold in our lives.

Demolishing Strongholds

A stronghold is a place that has been fortified so as to protect it against attack. Imagine a fortress whose walls have been reinforced, fenced in with barbed wire, and surrounded by a moat. As an abstract concept, strongholds are anything that have a "strong hold" on us, making us feel powerless. Applied to our spiritual lives, a stronghold is any thought, fear, behavior, or belief that gains a place in our lives in bigger-than-life proportions. Anger, bitterness, unforgiveness are common ones. And food fixation can be a stronghold.

When this happens, food fixation steals our attention and our focus, making us feel controlled and mastered. As Beth Moore explains, "It consumes so much of our emotional and mental energy that abundant life is strangled—our callings remain largely unfulfilled and our believing lives are virtually ineffective," which is exactly what the enemy wants.⁸

For those of us who have identified the stronghold of food fixation, we can probably relate to that definition. Food fixation is a constant presence that taints every other aspect of our lives and leaves us feeling discouraged and hopeless.

And most of us have probably tried using the world's weapons to fight it: we've been on countless diets, read lots of books, tried low-fat recipes, bought fad miracle-foods, and spent an

embarrassing number of hours dreaming of what life will be like once we're finally free from this struggle.

But that hasn't worked.

We're still struggling. And the reason we're struggling is because we're trying to fight a spiritual battle with worldly weapons. I don't mean to go all wonky on you here, but I firmly believe that the food struggles many of us face are part of Satan's master plan to keep us away from God. If you believe that Satan exists, then you better believe he and his minions are fighting as hard as they can to keep you looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places.

There is an enemy and he is after something in your life and it is the truth. And I fear that we do not take [this] seriously enough. . . . If I were your enemy, I would make you numb and distract you from God's story. I would use technology, social media, Netflix, travel, food, wine, comfort. And I wouldn't tempt you with notably bad things or you would get suspicious. I would distract you with everyday comforts that slowly feed you a different story and make you forget God. Then you would dismiss the Spirit's leading in you, loving you and comforting you, then you would love comfort more than surrender, obedience, and the saving of souls.⁹

The truth is that there is an enemy and he's out to destroy us. And if he can't destroy us because we're eternally secure in the arms of God, then he will seek to debilitate us, rendering us useless for God's kingdom work here on earth. This is a real battle, and it's raging all around us even in this moment.

So let's put down the weapons of this world: the diets, the fads, the positive thinking, and take up God's weapons: prayer, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God.

The apostle Paul knew all about the realities of the spiritual world. If he were sitting down with us over a meal (try tilapia, flat bread, hummus, and pomegranates), I'm convinced he'd tell us we need to get more serious about spiritual warfare and eternity. Take a look at what he says about spiritual battles: "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

Paul speaks into our struggle, reassuring us that victory can be ours, but it won't come by using the same weapons nonbelievers use. Overcoming food fixation isn't simply about making a few substitutions and exercising self-control. This battle is fought primarily in the spiritual realm, and the battlefield is our minds.

But before we start, I need to warn you that we have an unfair advantage: our weapons have divine power to demolish strongholds. *Divine power.* We don't need to feel pressured to win this battle because it's already won! What we're about to embark on is a journey of learning to rely on God's power to do for us what we can't on our own: annihilate the bigger-than-life struggle that has haunted us for so long. And He *delights* in fighting this battle for us because it brings us closer to Him.

Please don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that if you simply follow a spiritual formula, all your health problems will disappear. That's not what Scripture tells us. What I *am* saying is that God created us as three-personed beings, with bodies,

souls, and spirits, and we will experience victory in our food struggles when we recognize the spiritual component of this battle for satisfaction.

You won't find diet advice in this book, but that doesn't mean you should ignore common-sense nutritional and exercise advice. Find a healthy eating plan that works for you (body), and then delve into this book to learn how to transform your thoughts and feelings about food (soul), and satisfy your hunger for God in His presence (spirit). When we address all three components together, we will be wise to our enemy's plans and finally discover the fullness of life we've been searching for all along.

As we pick up these spiritual weapons and engage in the battle of our lives, we will experience God mightily working in us to break the power of anything that has a hold on us and command it to bend the knee to the authority of Jesus Christ. Overcoming food fixation will be a challenge. It will require full dedication, spiritual preparation, and divine intervention.

But we don't have to fight this battle for lasting satisfaction on our own. God Himself promises to empower us, strengthen us, change us, and carry us day by day, as our souls gradually awaken to the satisfying sweetness of His presence, transforming us into the likeness of His Son until we finally reach heaven.

Are you ready?

Digest the Truth

(for individual or group response)

1. What does the term *food fixation* mean to you? Do you think it's possible to become obsessive in think-

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ing about food, eating, clipping recipes, talking about diets, food fads, etc.? Have you known someone who was overly fascinated with food, even if they weren't necessarily physically overweight? Have you experienced it? What was the result?

2. Why do you want to overcome food fixation? What's your primary motivation?
3. Do you believe food fixation is a spiritual battle? Why or why not? How does your response change your approach to losing weight, eating healthy, or whatever your food goal is?
4. What does your ideal relationship with food look like? Describe how you'd feel about it, how you would eat, what you would think, and how you would act in this ideal lifestyle. What's your goal on this journey?
5. What relationship do you notice in your own life between physical, mental, and spiritual fullness (or emptiness) and food fixation? What habits do you need to develop to live life to the full?
6. Which of the scenes in which Jesus relates to food struck you the most? What can we learn from each of those passages?