

Welcome

[This is the song](#) “Jessie’s Girl 2”, which was released last year by Coheed & Cambria. It’s a direct sequel to the 80s hit “Jessie’s Girl” by Rick Springfield. If you’re not familiar with that song, it’s about a guy who fantasizes about his friend Jessie’s girlfriend. The original song is incredibly catchy, but it’s also pretty messed up.

When I heard that one of my favorite bands had put out a sequel, I was intrigued. What could this possibly be?

It turns out, it’s a sorrowful look backwards, and a warning against getting what you want. The singer got the girl he wanted, and his life has been miserable ever since. The best he can do is reflect on what could have been “if he’d left that monster in the 80s”.

We’ve all heard the adage, “Be careful what you wish for.” “Jessie’s Girl 2” illustrates the deep truth of that warning: we’re not wise enough to want well.

Another way to say that might be, “Our natural, human cravings are limited and finite. When faced with a craving, we don’t often consider the long-term implications.

We’re going to explore our cravings today, and we’ll see that our cravings can point us back to God if we are attentive and present to them.

Message

Welcome to the season of Lent. Lent is our six week journey toward celebrating Jesus’ resurrection at Easter. We prepare by walking with Jesus toward the cross - Lent is a season of introspection, confession and repentance. We root out sin in our spirits, our families, our church and our world. We confess them to God and ask for God’s help to live lives of justice and flourishing for everyone.

This year, our Lent series is “Bad Deal”. We’re exploring the nature of sin and temptation. Our English translations use a couple of different words for the same idea: testing and tempting. We think of temptation as always bad, but in the Bible, the idea of temptation is more neutral, like the word test (I know, I know - you folks in school still think of testing as bad). But tests are not in and of themselves bad. Would you want to drive a car that hadn’t been thoroughly safety tested? Or eat food that hadn’t been tested for health?

No, we understand that the purpose of testing is to reveal the state of the person or thing being tested. A safety test on a car tells us whether it will keep you safe when you’re in it. The FDA had to test the COVID vaccines before they were rushed out to be sure the cure wasn’t worse than the disease!

So temptations - tests - reveal the state of our lives. They're an opportunity for us to see the truth of our lives. Do we really trust God? Or are we trusting something or someone else? We're going to begin with the most basic of temptations (or tests): natural cravings. To be human is to have desires. Some of them are pretty fundamental: we want food. We want physical pleasure. We want connection with other people. We want to feel good.

We all know how those desires can be twisted - we can overeat or eat foods that hurt our bodies. Our desire for physical pleasure can hurt us and other people. Our desire for connection can lead us to tolerate abuse and manipulation. In our desire to feel good, we can ignore pain, either in ourselves or in others around us.

Our desires can be beautiful and they can be poison. How do we know which is which? That's our big question today.

Turn with us to Genesis 3.

We touched briefly on this part of the creation story in our last series. If you were with us, you may remember that creation is an invitation from God into a flourishing relationship. Evil, on the other hand, seeks to invite us out of that relationship, to follow a different path.

One of the big themes in the creation story in Genesis 2-3 is that humans are God's creations (which sounds like a no-brainer, I know). But the creation story emphasizes our creatureliness. We depend on God for our very breath.

As we read this story, pay special attention to the woman's desire - and how it interacts with her identity as a created being.

Genesis 3:1-7 NLT

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day he asked the woman, "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?"

"Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden," the woman replied. "It's only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.'"

"You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil."

The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were

opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.

The woman starts off well-aware of her relationship to God. God made her and the garden, and God has given guidelines for life in the garden - don't eat from that one tree.

The serpent, in testing the woman, doesn't appeal to her grumbling stomach, but to her sense of independence. The serpent insists that the fruit won't kill her, but will make her like God. And the woman was convinced. She wanted the fruit - both for its taste and for the independence from her creator. Rather than submit to God's way, the woman could determine good and evil for herself.

Even this simple desire - for a piece of fruit - was, at its heart, a question of faithfulness. Do I trust that God says I don't need this thing (that from my perspective looks good and useful and delicious)?

There's something about our base desires - food, sex, pleasure. They're like a scalpel that cuts to the core of our spirits and reveals who we are. It's not just true here in Genesis 3.

Turn with us to Exodus 16.

This isn't long after God has rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. They have crossed the Red Sea and are heading toward Mt. Sinai, through the desert. Again, the question of food comes up, and again, I want you to pay attention to how the people's desires for food impacts them.

Exodus 16:1-5 NLT

Then the whole community of Israel set out from Elim and journeyed into the wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Mount Sinai. They arrived there on the fifteenth day of the second month, one month after leaving the land of Egypt. There, too, the whole community of Israel complained about Moses and Aaron.

"If only the Lord had killed us back in Egypt," they moaned. "There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Look, I'm going to rain down food from heaven for you. Each day the people can go out and pick up as much food as they need for that day. I will test them in this to see whether or not they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they will gather food, and when they prepare it, there will be twice as much as usual."

"I wish we would have never left Egypt. At least there we had food."

Can you believe that? When push came to shove, the people preferred slavery to freedom, if it meant they had a guaranteed meal.

But look at what God does: God understands this isn't really about food - it's about whether or not they trust God. After all, this was literally a month after God had parted the Red Sea for them.

And now, apparently, they've decided God went through all that trouble - 10 plagues and the Red Sea and all that - just to let them die in the desert. Like God is the worst prank show host imaginable.

Their real problem isn't a lack of food (as illustrated in the text). It's a lack of faith. In fact, that is exactly why God answers their problem with manna. It's a daily gift - they can't store it overnight. And it's got that weird hitch where on Fridays they gather twice as much so they can rest on the Sabbath.

That is a complex solution to the food problem - God could have just given them all a million twinkies because you know those never go bad. Instead, God designed a food solution that required them to trust God. To learn faith.

Do we trust God to provide our needs? Do we trust that following God is the way? Or do we strike out on our own? Or maybe follow someone else who promises a better path to flourishing?

Our desires, our cravings, our urges are a test. They remind us we are created - we need food. We need pleasure. We need connection. These are good things we were designed to want. But do these urges connect us to our creaturiness? Or do they make us crave independence? Do they remind us we have (and therefore need) a creator? Or do they convince us we can provide for and take care of ourselves?

Do we rule our desires or do our desires rule us?

Turn with us to 1 Corinthians 9.

This is the question Paul takes up in 1 Corinthians 9. In this section of the letter, he's been addressing a massive issue in the Corinthian churches - whether it's okay or not to eat meat that has been sacrificed to the Greek and Roman gods. One camp holds that eating that meat is essentially worshiping those false gods. The other group says, "Calm down. It's just a steak. Quit being silly."

This whole section of the letter is fascinating because Paul definitely takes a side - he's pro-steak. But he goes on to say that what matters more than eating what you want is how we live together.

Did you get that? Paul insists that when our cravings hurt our relationships, they're toxic - to our church and to ourselves. He insists on the novel idea that we don't need steak to live, so why would we choose to satisfy a craving over caring for a person we love?

Paul concludes his reflection with an athletic metaphor I find particularly poignant. He asks us to take seriously that our cravings are physical realities of our bodies. If that's true (and it is), then we ought to be masters over our desires, not the other way around:

1 Corinthians 9:24–27 NLT

Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.

Fasting is one of the best spiritual practices the church has for disciplining our desires. By fasting, we create a desire - for food, for companionship, for something good - so that we learn we don't need it in that moment. Just because our body is clamoring for food doesn't mean we need the food.

[Invitation to Lenten Fast]

Friends, we're beginning this journey to the cross at a basic, primal place: our core desires, our basic needs. We'll see next week that so much of our life is built on these basic cravings that it really matters that we take them seriously.

Communion + Examen

Jesus sets a table for us as a promise to provide for us.

1. When in the last week have my cravings pointed me to God?
2. When in the last week have my cravings led me away from God?
3. What cravings this week might test my trust in God?
4. How can I choose to discipline my desires this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Lenten Fast