**Growling Over Ministry**  
By Harold Shank  
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In Isaiah 28-33 the prophet addresses people who face a problem. He assures them of the reliability of God in the midst of their crisis. To do so, the prophet describes God’s reliability with two unusual metaphors. First, God is a bird that hovers over Jerusalem (Isa 31:5). He flies over the city protecting it with his wings. Second, God is a lion who has captured a lamb and retreated to a solitary spot to enjoy his supper (Isa 31:4). Despite the attempts of the shepherds to distract him, the young lion concentrates on his meal. God likewise focuses on Jerusalem.

God as a young lion “growls” (RSV) over his prey. The Hebrew word for growl is hagah (accent on the second syllable: ha-GAH) which means to chew on, groan over, concentrate on, mutter over or meditate on.

Strikingly the Bible uses the same word to describe human activity for God. Moses tells Joshua that his key duties before God include taking the word of God to hagah over it (Josh 1:8), that he should chew on it like the lion growls over dinner. The Psalms begin with the grand description of righteous living: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffer.” After describing what not to do, the Psalm gives clear instruction: Delight in the words God gives and hagah over them day and night. The image conjures up mealtime. Savor the Word of God. Linger over a dinner of Gospels. Take seconds on the Psalms. Indulge in the Pauline epistles.

To extend the figure, training in Biblical studies amounts to kitchen work. Survey classes compare to cooking. Taking Greek and Hebrew means learning the recipes. Text classes set the table. But once in ministry, preachers spend a lifetime growling over the Word of God. We hagah over what he sets before us.

Claus Westermann championed Old Testament studies a generation ago, but began life as a preacher. Drafted into World War II, Westermann entered military service with his New Testament and Psalms in his pocket. He reports that it sustained him in combat like nothing else. Westermann ended up in a Russian P.O.W camp. Westermann would sit on a block of wood, a board on his lap, writing his thoughts from reading his Bible. Despite the deprivations of the camp, Westermann would sometimes trade a piece of bread for a piece of paper so he could continue his study. He learned to growl over the Word of God.

E. H. Ijams mentored me as a young preacher. President of Lipscomb, author of nine books, Ijams lived to be 96 years old of which he spent 75 years in ministry. He could never get over the reality that thoughts that once flowed through the mind of God, through Scripture, could flow through his mind. He learned to growl over the Word of God.

Let me share two thoughts about the menu of those who minister. First, Churches must eat the full Word of God. It must get on the inside. Too many congregations exist on fast food: they eat Gospel Lite, partake of diet discipleship, consume junk spirituality, and devour pizza every Sunday. God calls for consumption of the seven food groups: Law, prophets, writings, Gospels, history, epistles, and Revelation. Churches will not growl over the word unless the preacher has growled over the word. Eat a balanced diet and serve complete meals.

Second, growling over God’s word should be more like a banquet than grabbing a sandwich on the run. Hagah over it: Meditate, chew, groan, growl over it. The Word of God is not a hamburger and a Coke one gulps down, but a multiple course feast that is savored, chewed, and pondered.

The menus are prepared. The ovens are hot. The table is set. You are invited to a banquet. The main course is the Word of God. Enjoy your dinner.