CHAPTER 31: FOOD

1. Has the character of food anything to do with the health and vigour of children?

Most certainly. A proper supply of suitable food lies at the foundation, not only of health and vigour, but of life itself.

2. What is meant by a proper supply of food?

The food should be suitable in kind, sufficient in quantity, and taken with regularity.

3. What is meant by the food being suitable in kind?

It must be that which seems most natural to the age, condition, and health of the child at the time. For instance, nothing can possibly be so suitable for an infant as the mother’s own milk. Nature herself enjoins this, and, unless the health of the mother or circumstances unavoidable in themselves, prevent the mother nursing the child, no excuse will be satisfactory for withholding the food which God has ordained and prepared for it. If, however, this is impossible, then let the mother prepare for it the best substitute.

Animal food should always be withheld until the teeth are sufficiently grown to properly masticate it. And even then there need be no hurry. Our first four children were five years of age before they partook of it as a regular article of diet. Up to that time they lived chiefly on bread-and-butter, milk puddings, and rice – any quantity of the latter, and an excellent article of food it proved to be. Up to that age they had excellent health and comparative immunity from disease. Since then, at different periods of their lives, we have again proved the great value of an exclusively vegetable and milk diet. When most seriously threatened with heart disease, my eldest son, of his own accord, for over three years abstained from animal food, and we considered at the time, and think still, that this abstention not only preserved his life, but enabled him to outgrow the tendency to the terrible malady with which he was
threatened.

All the way through, it will be found useful occasionally to give the children a change
from an animal to a vegetable diet, but as a rule, milk puddings, eggs, rice, and other
farinaceous articles of food, with plenty of good, fresh vegetables, will be found the
most nourishing and health-promoting for children. We may add, also, the cheapest.

Accustom your children from infancy to take such kinds of food as you consider will be
best for them. If you allow them to pick and choose according to their fancy at the
time, their likes and dislikes will grow and multiply until you will have a trouble to get
them fed at all.

4. What is the second thing to be attended to in the right feeding of children?

Let the children always have a suitable quantity of food, that is, where and when it is to
be had. Growing children require a good deal of sup
port. No fact is more clearly
recognized amongst working people than this. Still, there is a danger of its being
overlooked, and from motives of economy, or niggardliness, or silly gentility, children
are sometimes – perhaps oftener than we imagine – kept short of sufficient food to
meet the requirements of their growth. Don't fall into this mistake. Better pay a big
baker's bill than a doctor's. Let their food be as plain as you like, so that it is
wholesome, and then let them have sufficient, and praise God for their good
appetites and for giving you the means to supply them. Then, if you don't find
pleasure in your own food, you can at least have a feast in seeing how the children
enjoy theirs.

We say the food should be plain; but there is an exception to all rules, and when the
children are delicate and ailing you should let them have little extras to tempt them to
eat sufficient to maintain their strength.

But while we insist that children should have sufficient food, we also caution parents
against what may be called cramming. Don't let them "stuff" and gormandise and
make a god of their bellies. To do this will make them into little sensualists, and help
to dull, if not destroy, the relish they would otherwise have for mental and spiritual
pleasures. As has already been remarked, the mind and body are very closely connected, and you cannot pamper and over feed the one without injuring the other. Still, as has also been said, a plain diet will reduce this danger. If you keep off the dainties and luxuries the children will not be in much danger of going to this extreme. Anyway, watch over the children in this respect, and strive that the prayer of Agur shall be answered in them — "Feed me with food convenient for me, lest I be full and deny Thee, and say, Who is the Lord? " Parents have an illustration appropriate to this subject in the case of Daniel. His simple vegetarian diet and teetotalism, we know, led to perfect health and beauty.

5. What is the third rule of importance with regard to the food of children?

(1.) Let it be given at regular times. Three good substantial meals per day are not only sufficient, but the best, for all children in health. Nothing, perhaps, is more injurious than for the children to be always "biting" between meals. We believe it quite possible to act upon this system of having set times for being fed for even the baby at the breast, and we are quite sure, excepting where children are very delicate, or recovering from sickness and so needing extra support, it can be acted upon with the regularity of clockwork. And not only will a vigorous appetite be maintained, but the children will come only to care about their food at the times appointed for taking it.

(2.) Teach and encourage your children in the practice of food manners in eating. It has been said that manners form a kind of self-government which operates to keep the body under and hold the sensualising tendency of the food in check. Teach the children at their meals to respect the wants of superiors and strangers and all else at the table, before their own; to eat slowly, without noise, commotion, or greediness; to refuse those kinds of food, if any there be offered to them, which, however pleasant, they know are not good for them, or which they have heard their parents say they ought not to take. By such behaviour, the very feeding of their bodies will all the time be assisting the children in gaining the more perfect mastery over them, and preparing them for that complete keeping of them under, which is a condition and a result of that perfect liberty in the Lord which you calculate upon them enjoying, and into the experience of which you want to bring them.
It is not necessary to say to Salvation Soldiers, or to any who will have gone thus far with us in this volume, that there should always be a blessing asked and thanks given with every meal. With every good gift of our dear Lord, whether of food or raiment, or anything else, there should be at least an acknowledgment. Parents should teach the children this by their example. Do it solemnly; not at too great length, lest it be wearisome, and not gabbled through or gasped out as a mere meaningless ceremony, without feeling and without faith — "a blessing" only in name.

Our custom of praying every day after meals will be of great help to our Soldiers' families.