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The Hungry Theologian (with Ralph Roberts)

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Alastair Roberts

Ralph Roberts of the YouTube channel The Hungry Theologian (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQNK_Y9aRWuRerQXSzQz2QA/) joins me for a wide-ranging conversation about food, cooking, meals, and eating and their relationship to Christian faith.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. Today I'm joined by my friend and not relative, Ralph Roberts, to discuss some of his work that he's been doing recently. He started recently a new project, and I've been enjoying following it myself, and I wanted to share it with some of you.

So first of all, Ralph, I'd love to hear something about you and maybe introduce the project that started. Yeah, yeah. So earlier this year, I started a YouTube channel making videos about theology and food, or theology and cooking rather.

And it started just out of being in sort of an in-between time with my family and trying to figure out what exactly was next. And I had a little bit of margin in my life that was unusual, and I could spend time working on something that I've been thinking about in the background for a few years now. So that's kind of how things got started.

And as it's gone on, I think it's, you know, been maybe four or five months now that I've been creating these videos. I've had many more ideas about things that I could talk about and think about and trying to connect these worlds of theology and food and cooking. So what is your work more generally, and how has that played into this particular project? Yeah, yeah.

So for the past two years, I've been engaged in church ministry and before that in campus ministry. And then last year, both graduated from seminary and also decided to step away from pursuing pastoral ministry, deciding that that wasn't the right thing, at least for this point in time. And then along with that, my wife and I decided to move across the country, and she's still in a graduate program right now.

So yeah, that's what kind of gave me the unique margin to be able to pursue this. And one way I've thought about what I'm doing is that I learned a lot going to seminary, especially about how to study the Bible well, much more than I was able to get in just Sunday sermons. But I sort of think about it as there's this big paywall in front of a lot of knowledge that you can get through the academy.

And one thing that I'm trying to do through this project is bring some of that stuff out from behind the paywall for people. And yeah, yeah. So try to provide a little more access to biblical and theological knowledge to help people just get to know God better and grow in their faith through that.

That's wonderful. And in many ways, it's one of the reasons I've appreciated your works ties in very much with something I'm trying to do in my own work. That said, I'm watching your videos.

They're a lot more attractively produced than mine are, and they have an element of them that mine don't have, which is a fantastic meal. So give me just some examples of some of the things that you've had as recipes and meals or other things so far as part of your videos. Yeah, yeah.

So I learned to make creme brulee, which I've never done before. And I did a video on that. One of my favorite things I've made so far in a video is a Korean fried chicken sandwich, where I'm bringing together Southern fried chicken and Korean fried chicken techniques and making this amazing sandwich.

It's probably one of the best things I think I've ever made. And then the recipe that I put up that I make the most here at home for my family is a nice glazed salmon. I just think if you cook salmon right, it's one of the best foods.

So how might food and meals be a helpful aid in our theological inquiry? Yeah, yeah. So there's a few motivating factors behind why I'm doing this project. And there are a few things going on in the back of my mind of what I want people to glean as they watch

these videos.

So I mentioned that I served in campus ministry for a number of years. And I think anytime you're in a sort of age group focused ministry like that, it's easy to see cultural trends and things that are emerging because you've got a new crop of people coming in every year who are on with whatever new trends there are. And one of the things I was noticing among college students was vastly increased use of smartphones and social media than when I was in college, just because of the timeline of the development of these things.

And the ways that these technologies were forming us in particular ways that we may not be aware of if we're not really paying attention to that sort of thing. So I started reading as much as I could on that issue of how technology might be impacting us. And one of the things I read was Andy Crouch's book, *The TechWise Family*.

And he has this line that really stuck with me. He writes that he was wanting to offer a positive vision for the household and the family in that book, not just write something against technology. And that really stuck with me.

And I think one of the ways we're being formed by modern technology is to expect everything to be instantaneous. But at the same time, we have this value for craft beer and craft coffee and handcrafted furniture and all these sorts of things. But any craftsman will tell you that a craft takes time.

It takes years to develop skill and then producing the particular artifact takes quite a bit of time usually as well. So we have this value for craft. And at the same time, we're just expecting everything to be instantaneous.

And so because of that, we're living in a culture where developing a craft and developing a skill is uniquely formative because it's something that you have to keep working at time and again. And you have to experience failure and learn from those failures and incorporate that into the next project. So one of the things I'm trying to do in these videos is tap into people's desire for craftsmanship, but then also show that cooking good food is actually very accessible.

This is a craft you can spend your life developing, but it's not something that's inaccessible. You can start making good food today. And I think for a lot of people, especially younger people, cooking is sort of this black box.

It's a little bit mysterious. But I want to show people cooking is actually quite accessible and it can be a part of your spiritual formation. So I think in cooking and eating, we're engaging with creation with all five senses.

We're engaging with the world that God has made with all five of our senses. And it's different than digitally mediated interactions, as much as we can gain from those sorts

of interactions. So there's this sort of craftsmanship formative aspects that I'm trying to help people to think about.

But then at the same time, food is also all over the Bible. There are meals found all over the Bible. And in one sense, that's obvious because we all eat.

And so meals are just an everyday part of life. But there are also other things that we do every day that aren't necessarily as common in scripture as food is. But food and meals are a pretty major theme throughout scripture.

And so I'm not trying to necessarily say that food is the hermeneutical key that unlocks everything in scripture. But I think it's an interesting theme in scripture that doesn't necessarily get as much attention as it should. So I'm trying to bring a little more attention to that theme and see what do we learn from food and meals in scripture and how can paying specific attention to a meal or the circumstances of a meal maybe give us a different angle on a passage in scripture.

Several times before. And then I also think, I'm sorry, this is a long answer to your question. But I think another thing I'm trying to do with this is also develop a, help people develop a specific posture towards God and the world through food and eating.

Because I love food. And if you think about it, there's just such a vast variety of flavors that God made in the world. Like last night I was cooking with some Meyer lemons, which are a little bit different than the normal kind of lemon that you would get at the grocery store.

And in these two lemons, there's different flavors, different, slightly different textures of the skin. And it gives a completely different outcome in whatever cooking application you're using. I just think that's beautiful that God created the world in this way.

And so I think there's this way that cooking can help us develop a posture of gratitude towards creation of joy in the way that God has made the world. And I think that sort of posture of gratitude and joy is a helpful way to approach theology and the Bible more generally as well. The meal table really is a place where so many things come together.

And I think it's been that for me in my life. And I think it's that for many people and it integrates communities, bodies and minds, ourselves in our world, time through the various rhythms of the week or feast and fast times. And there are other things besides those.

What are some of the ways that you found the meal table to be an integrating force in your own life and thinking? And how do you think that we could accomplish this integration better? For instance, how are you hoping to resource people to do that in a more effective way in their own lives? Yeah, I think hospitality is a in 2021, hospitality is, I think, an underrated Christian practice and Christian value. And, you know, obviously,

the pandemic for the last year and a half, there have been varying abilities that people have had to practice hospitality. But we see hospitality across scripture and Christian history.

And each of us can probably think of many experiences of hospitality in our own lives that have significantly shaped some aspect of our faith, our walk with God, our life in community. One experience that really stands out for me was a summer that I spent in the Philippines, and we were staying in a pretty poor community. And my wife and I were living at the church on the church grounds of where we were staying.

And we were invited to the home of a family from the church for breakfast. And we were actually both feeling a little under the weather that day. So it was pretty inconvenient, given how we were feeling, we really didn't feel like going to this meal.

But we show up, and there's a nice array of food because the people are trying to show hospitality welcoming us, the foreigners who are staying at their church and showing really gracious hospitality. But as we're continuing to eat, more and more of the neighbors are coming in and bringing another dish. And so, you know, we've already piled up our plates with the first round of food that was already out there, because that's what we think is in, you know, ahead of us.

And we're trying to be good guests and enjoy the food that we've been given. But more and more dishes are coming in. We're just stuffed by the end of this, we've eaten way more than we needed to.

And all of these neighbors who have come to bring various foods are so excited to see our reaction to the thing they've made. They're so happy that we're trying this dish that they made. It's, you know, maybe their signature thing that they love to make.

And I think that meal is such a beautiful picture of, like you say, the integrating nature of the table that we're connecting across pretty vast differences in the scenario, language and cultural differences and socioeconomic differences. And yet there's this value for hospitality, this common Christian value for hospitality that's really bringing us together at the table. And people are sharing so generously in a way that we actually felt like was a little unnecessary.

Like you don't really need to do this much for us. We'd be very grateful for just the meal that we had at the beginning without all of these extra dishes. But what a picture of grace that dish after dish continues to come in, in such an unexpected way.

One of the things I love about the film *Bivette's Feast*, which is often a classic, the Christians reference in this context, that you have the dramatic and excessive gift of this one person, which provides a context within which lots of people can give their gifts to each other and forgive and be joined back together in ways that they hadn't been

before. And it's very interesting portrayal and exploration of the way that Christian faith can be enriched by the gift of a meal. And I find I've always found that powerful to reflect upon, particularly as in the Christian faith, one of our key practices is the practice of the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist.

I'd be interested to hear what thoughts you might have on how a richer understanding of the creational reality of food and cooking could give us a richer understanding of the Eucharist and the Lord's Supper and vice versa. Yeah, yeah. So I think I'll start with the, well, no, I'll reverse that.

I'll start with in the order you asked the question. So when we eat food, there's this, we can talk about the scientific processes of the ways that our bodies digest these food and proteins go into our cells and all of that. But just on a basic level, all of us understand that food in some way becomes a part of us, that as we're eating food, this, in some way, my cells, as I grow, I have a two-year-old daughter and as she is growing, you know, the stuff that she is made of, that she's growing is coming from the food that she's eating, that this food is nourishing her and is becoming a part of her.

And she is being constituted by these things. And I think it's really interesting to think about the Eucharist in that way. What does it mean for us to receive Christ and to become constituted by Him, to grow into Him, that as we continue to grow over the course of our lives, we're growing more and more into Christ as we continue to receive Christ in the Eucharist.

And then, you know, I think vice versa, Norman Wurzba writes about this in a book called Food and Faith that I think is a really great book. He talks about Eucharistic table manners. It's a phrase that he coins.

What does mean for the rest of our eating when we think about the meal that God gave us in the Lord's Supper? How does that meal shape the way that we come to the table and all these other places? As God has graciously extended Himself as host and given Himself to us, it should lead us both to practice hospitality in extravagant ways, like I talked about, but also to be able to receive hospitality. And then, as we see in the Babettes Feast film, the table becomes this place of reconciliation, which is a major part of our liturgies around the Lord's Supper in most traditions, that the table is this place where we're coming together as one body, we're being reconciled as one body, reconciled to the Lord as one body. And so I think the more we think about the rest of our meals being the shadow of the Eucharist, of the Lord's Supper in a way, we'll become both more gracious hosts and also more gracious guests, and also people who want to continue to be more deeply joined with the rest of the body.

One of the things you mentioned, just the way that you learn certain ways of behavior at the table, is something that's always stood out to me, reading for instance the Gospel of Luke, how much of it is based around the table, what it means to be a good guest, what

about being a good host, where do you sit when you go to the table, who gets invited to the meal, the sorts of questions about what you eat, when you celebrate these things, and Jesus as both guest and host within the stories as well. It seems to me that the meal table is a place where we learn an awful lot of life, it's where we firstly learn what it might be to be a family, to be joined together, how we honor each other and show the dignity of each other in the way that we comport ourselves around each other, the way that we learn the importance of time and rhythms, the practice of the meal tables is one that we're constantly repeating as a sort of habit, but then there are also special occasions, and there are traditions associated with those things, it's a sense of occasion accompanied by bringing out the special china, or the customs that you have for your Christmas meal, or special dishes that you make on certain occasions, and it seems to me that a lot of the ways that we learn about life are focused upon these meal time settings, and in the same way the Lord's Supper seems to play a similar sort of role, and as we learn through that, many of those lessons might go out to other meals that we eat together, we might learn something about hospitality and sharing and belonging to each other at the Lord's Supper that actually helps us in the meal that we invite people to on a Friday evening for instance, and in the same way the idea of being a guest and receiving from others with gratitude, the idea of the Eucharist as Thanksgiving, which in many ways is what it means, that that is something that helps us to understand more of what's taking place both in that meal and also in our meals more generally. It's another thing that I've, I love about the Book of Deuteronomy, you have this list of the Ten Commandments in Chapter 5, and then in Chapter 6 to 26 you have these chapters unpacking, commandment by commandment, what those sorts of things could mean in different cases, and then how do you unpack the Tenth Commandment, you shall not covet, there's a lot said about it in unusual case laws in Chapter 25, but then you get to Chapter 26 and there's this encouragement to throw a great meal and as a celebration, and it's that bringing together of thanksgiving, gratitude, generosity, contentment, and all these things coming together, and that's how you deal with the problem of covetousness, by practicing all these alternative virtues.

You've mentioned these sorts of issues a number of times in your videos, and I'd be interested to hear how you think that the practice of meals can inform our ethics and enrich our ways of understanding how we're supposed to act in community and what it means to be Christian with each other. Yeah, yeah, well I think just to jump off what you're saying, anyone who doesn't think that meals are a central informative feature of life is not the one planning meals for their family or for their community, because that means they just don't realize how often meals are happening and how often meals are connected with these major moments of life, whether it's celebrations or mourning or what have you. I think another interesting place to think about that is, well there's two that come to mind.

One is wisdom in the Book of Proverbs described as throwing a feast, and then folly

throwing a rival feast, and why is wisdom throwing a feast, and why is the pursuit of wisdom likened to a feast? I think one reason for that is that the pursuit of wisdom is something that takes time. It's not instantaneous, and just like a meal takes time to chew and digest, and a feast often implies several courses coming out one after another, this event that takes quite a bit of time all in all. I think that's part of what the pursuit of wisdom and ultimately the Christian life is about.

It's something that takes time. Spiritual formation and learning to live as a Christian, growing up into Christ, takes time. It's not something we can just flip on or off at the flick of a switch or push of a button, but it's something we need to take in regularly and chew and mull over and digest and let it come out of us.

Something that also came to mind when you're asking that question are the offerings in Leviticus, and I think many evangelicals have a pretty anemic understanding of sacrifice because perhaps the Old Testament isn't a place we spend a lot of time, and especially Leviticus is where almost all Bible reading plans stall out. And so I think many people don't even realize that there's a meal attached to almost every one of these offerings. Perhaps you could even make an argument that every offering is a meal with God involved, but in particular the peace offering is an offering in which the lay worshipers would also partake in the meal, and I think that's really fascinating because this, you know, reductive understanding of sacrifice as this religious ritual that happens with the killing of animals and then that makes us right with God, that eliminates the meal there, I think sort of reduces our understanding of how these sacrifices were to connect with the rest of Israelite life and how the sacrifices were this ongoing pattern, just like meals are an ongoing pattern in our lives, and how feasting in the temple was meant to impact feasting outside, you know, just like we talked about how our practice of the Eucharist impacts the way that we eat and following on from that the way that we live the rest of our lives, this feasting that Israel would do in the temple as part of the regular offerings would impact the way that they would eat outside of the temple because you're recognizing that this comes from God, that God is the provider of this meat that we're partaking of, which also would be a rare part of the Israelite diet.

Israelites weren't eating meat every single day. Their diet was extremely different from the modern western diet, and so this rich unctuous meat that you're eating in the temple as part of your worship then shapes the way that you see the rest of creation and yourself and your fellow Israelites because all has been provided by God who is Lord over all, and then we live in gratitude to him, and that practice of continual reminders of why we should be grateful then shapes us into a different sort of people who again can be more generous, can be more hospitable, can be better guests, more receptive of the grace that we're shown by God and the grace that we're being shown by others. So we've mentioned gratitude a number of times to this point, and it seems to me we take a lot of food and eating and meals and things like that for granted.

How can we be those who learn the practice of thankfulness and practice it better in the context of our day-to-day eating and then also on special occasions? Yeah, I think it's very important to take time to savor food. You know, many of us are in such a high-pace environment, such a hectic environment where it sometimes feels like we need to just scarf down a meal in between things so we can get on to the next thing, but taking time to really savor food, to pay attention to flavors and textures I think is the first step to getting to that place of gratitude. And then what will likely happen if you're not doing that and you start to take time to slow down and savor more of your meals is that you might realize you're eating things that you don't really enjoy.

Maybe you need to take time to think differently about what you're eating, to learn how to cook things that you actually enjoy more and things that are worth savoring because maybe just constantly eating fast food is not a diet that you really want to take time to savor. So I think that's a big part of how we can grow in gratitude and be formed in that way is taking time to slow down to savor food and to learn to cook food because for people who don't cook regularly, if you spend an afternoon or evening making a meal, even if it's not a big celebratory meal, even if it's just an everyday dinner for family and friends, you're going to want to enjoy and appreciate the fruit of your labor and you're going to want to savor that meal more. So learning to cook can be a big part of learning to savor and learning to be grateful.

And then I think celebration meals are, as you said, a big part of that as well because in a celebration meal, we're not just cooking a whole rack of ribs or a leg of lamb just for its own sake. I'm making this meal because we're celebrating the Lord's resurrection at Easter or we're celebrating my brother's birthday or these various occasions. And so we're taking time to craft something for a particular purpose, for a particular occasion.

And I think the care in producing a craft for a particular occasion again helps form us to be people of gratitude, people who can marvel at the creation and marvel at the creator behind it and then bring that sort of thankfulness into the rest of our lives, into our interactions with other people. So your videos aren't just about meals, they're not just about food, they're very much about cooking. And all creatures eat food and have meals of some kind, but human beings are fairly unique in being creatures that cook.

And why does cooking matter, do you think? You've already said a bit about this, but I'd like to hear more about your thoughts about why cooking is worth taking time over and why actually also think about and reflect upon it as a practice. Yeah, yeah, cooking is an area of life where we take the raw materials of nature and make something new from them. And especially for modern people, many of us are divorced from taking the raw materials of nature and actually producing something that we see and that we can actually touch and taste.

Because so many people in so-called knowledge work or manufacturing or all sorts of

professions end up being quite divorced from taking raw materials from the creation, applying some skill, developing some skill, and then actually enjoying the tangible product that is produced at the end of it. And cooking is one of many different crafts where a person can experience the joy of that sort of endeavor, where you are taking fruits, vegetables, meats, grains, and actually making something that you can eat and that you can share with others. For me, cooking isn't just about things that I want to eat.

I mean, I love food, and so I make food that I want to eat. But I think it's much more joyful when I'm able to cook for others, when I'm able to share the things that I'm cooking with others. So yeah, so I think that's why cooking is an important practice to actually consider.

You know, most people aren't going to spend as much time cooking as I spend cooking, because it's a particular thing that I really love doing. But I think everyone could spend a little bit more time cooking and a little bit more time thinking about cooking. And like, say, woodworking or various other sorts of crafts, knitting, cooking is a way that, like I said, you can take these materials and produce something, and then that thing can bring enjoyment to not just you, but to the community as well.

It's something that you can share with others. And it's about way more than mere sustenance. I think that's the thing I repeat in my videos several times, is that meals are about much more than just nutrition and sustaining ourselves, because like we've said, there's all this life that happens around the table.

There's all this formation and the joys and sorrows and the learnings of life that are happening at the table. Cooking is a practice, a skill that we share with others. And so you'll often learn how to cook from your mum or your dad and or maybe from your grandparents.

And you carry on that skill and also certain habits of eating, the way that you'll celebrate certain meals. You have recipes that you've been handed down through your family or some families I know even have recipe books for the family that the extended family will share and all put in their contribution. It seems to me that the practice of cooking can be a very communal one and also one that binds together the generations.

And particularly in this day and age where people have often been cut off from those handed down practices, things like YouTube and other resources online are coming in to fill some of that gap. How did you first learn how to cook and develop an interest in it? And how do you hope to develop practices and habits within your own household to pass that down to the next generation? So my dad loves to cook, which in the US is fairly unusual. Usually in married couples, the woman is doing all of the cooking.

My dad has always loved to cook and would cook very elaborate meals. And I was the only one of my siblings who I think started to catch on and enjoy some of the more

interesting non-kid food that he was making. And so throughout my childhood, I just loved being in the kitchen and seeing how the process actually worked.

How you could take these fruits and vegetables that we bought at the store that I think for most kids, it seems a buy can become the finished product. How did these tomatoes become part of my spaghetti and meatballs? And so I just had a curiosity for that. I loved being in the kitchen to see how that process was working.

And then I think along with that, I just started noticing how much cooking was a part of family life, not just the daily life of the immediate family, but extended family get-togethers family recipes. And when the extended family would get together, there would be certain recipes that have to be made. This aunt has this thing that she makes and my mom has this recipe that she makes.

And these have been passed down for a few generations at least. So there's this connection between cooking and memory, or maybe not even cooking, but also eating in memory that is really significant. The movie Ratatouille actually illustrates this very well.

If people haven't seen the movie, the Pixar movie Ratatouille. But so many of us have these foods or dishes that we eat that immediately bring us back to a specific time and place or remind us of specific people. And as you say, this is a practice that's sort of being lost in the modern world, given how disconnected we are from family and the way that education or work can cause people to move quite a bit of distance from their family in ways that wouldn't have happened a few generations ago.

And so one of the ways I'm thinking about this in my own family is just allowing my daughter to see cooking all the time. So I have a little stool that she can stand on to at least see what I'm doing up on the counter. So it's not this mysterious place.

That's always an object of curiosity for kids. Right, right. Kids want to know what's going on.

And it's a little bit inefficient for us to get kids involved in the kitchen like it is with almost any task. But kids love being a part of what's happening because most of the time they love the outcome of it. And so if she loves this food, then getting to see how it's made is pretty enjoyable for her.

And then, you know, one of the tricks that I think some parents learn is that if the child has been involved in making it, they're much more likely to eat it than if it was just something you prepared and gave to them that they might just turn their nose up at. Yeah. So you've made a number of things to this point.

And I'm going to put you on the spot and ask whether there's a particular favorite recipe that you have of the ones that you've created on your channel so far. Yeah, yeah. Well, so a couple that I mentioned before, the salmon I mentioned I make all the time.

But I think probably the favorite thing I've made so far was roasting a whole lamb shoulder, which I've never done before. And at least in the US, the lamb shoulder is not a cut that's as common as, say, a leg of lamb or a lamb shank. So I had been wanting to try a lamb shoulder for quite a while.

And so for Easter, I roasted a whole lamb shoulder for my family, brined it for three days, roasted it for an entire day. We ate it that night for Easter. And it was amazing.

What authors have you found especially helpful in thinking through these issues? The one who really, I would say, initiated this project for me is Robert Farrar-Capin, who wrote a book called *The Supper of the Lamb*. He was an Episcopal priest who loved to cook. And so he wrote this book that's part cookbook, part theology of food, part joyful memoir, where he is sort of doing what I'm trying to do in my videos, which is teach people a little bit about food and cooking, but also the ways that these things can point us God, the ways that these things can deepen our worship.

So Capin is a major influence. And I hope that my project is in some way continuing the legacy of what he was trying to do in that book. Peter Lightheart and James Jordan both have scattered writings related to food in all sorts of places.

James Jordan's work especially can be tricky to track down when it's referenced somewhere. But I've definitely been learning a lot from his work on how to think about food. Norman Worspa, I mentioned before, has a book called *Food and Faith* that's been helpful.

And then Leon Kass has a book called *The Hungry Soul* that's a philosophical account of eating that was not what I expected. It's a good book, that one is. It is.

It's a great book. And especially his work at the end of the book on dietary laws and the way that eating is sanctified through practicing particular ways of eating in Israel, I think is very fascinating. Can you give, in conclusion, a teaser of some of the things that viewers of your channel might have to look forward to? Yeah, yeah.

So I'm currently working on an advent devotional that's going to teach the basics of sourdough bread baking. So if you didn't learn sourdough during the pandemic, don't worry. There's still an opportunity to learn about sourdough.

And also frame bread baking as a spiritual practice. So like I'm doing in my other videos, how can the practice of sourdough bread, which is this elongated process and a process that is highly outside of our control, which is dependent on this natural yeast to come in and leaven the bread, what can that practice teach us about God, particularly in the season of advent? So that's going to come out in November, and I'm going to give some of my favorite sourdough recipes alongside it. So I've got a nice sourdough pizza dough, sourdough waffles.

I'm working on a sourdough crumpet recipe. So we'll see if my British audience approves of that one. I look forward to it.

Thank you so much for joining me. This has been a great discussion, and I highly recommend that people go over to your channel, take a look, make some of the recipes, and just spend time thinking about your food and your meals a bit more. I think you'll find Ralph a very helpful guide and companion on the way.

Thank you for joining me. Yeah, thanks, Alastair.