

## BIBLICAL FASTING



### II

## Biblical Fasting

FIRST of all let us note three significant passages of Scripture: Exodus 84, I Kings 19, and Matthew 4.

There we read of three men, each of whom passed through a remarkable forty-day fast. These were the three who appeared to the disciples in glory upon Mount Tabor; these were the three through whom God revealed Himself pre-eminently.

We read of our Saviour that *when he had fasted forty days*, he hungered.

Elijah, having been fed by the angel, "*went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights* unto Mount Horeb, the mount of God."

And Moses, when he was upon the mount with the Lord forty days and forty nights, "did neither eat bread nor drink water." As he himself relates it. "When I was gone up into the mount to receive the tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I abode in the mount *forty days and forty nights*, *I neither did eat bread nor drink water*" .

These fastings were very exceptional. We are most surely not called upon to emulate such a fast of nearly *six* weeks. It would require miraculous intervention, and nowhere in Scripture are we led to expect such a wonder to be wrought upon us.

## THE PRACTICE OF GODLINESS



But there was special significance in this fasting, closely related to the spiritual struggle through which each had to wrestle in the Name of the Lord. For each it was a momentous experience — not a superstitious vagary, but a deed in which the Name of God was honored and glorified. Moses fasted in the presence of God upon the mount; Elijah was sustained by food which the angel of the Lord brought him; and Jesus, when He was about to fast, was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. For each, the mysterious experience had a deep spiritual meaning.

Note in the second place that Jesus frequently spoke of fasting with approval. In the Sermon on the Mount, He placed prayer and alms-giving and fasting on a level. When warning against the misuse of fasting, he prescribed how it ought to be done. “And when you fast, anoint thy head and wash thy face, that thou be not seen of men to fast, but of thy Father who is in secret; and thy Father who seeth in secret shall recompense thee/’

Jesus thus, in the third place, plainly and explicitly declared fasting to be an act of faith which God would in His grace reward. In Matthew 6:18 he says, “When you fast, do so without outward show, for your father who is in secret and who seeth in secret *shall reward you.*”

Jesus also recommended fasting as the one effective weapon in certain struggles against Satan when He said. “This kind goeth not out but by fasting and prayer” (Matt. 17:21).

Finally, Jesus said of His disciples that though they did not fast while He was with them, afterwards they would do so. “Can ye make the children of the bride-chamber fast while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and *then shall they fast in those days*” (Luke 5,34, 35). Thus

## BIBLICAL FASTING



He predicted that there would be fasting among His people after His departure.

In the early church, according to the writings of the apostles, this prophecy was verified. There was frequent fasting. The short record of Acts tells of no less than three occasions, all spoken of favorably, all characterized by sincere godliness.

It was while men were *fasting and praying* that the Holy Spirit gave special revelation of His will concerning Paul and Barnabas. Acts 13:2: "And as they ministered to the Lord *and fasted*, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul. ."

Then, to understand further the meaning of the Spirit, they besought the Lord again in prayer and fasting. "And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."

From Acts 14:23 it is evident that under Paul's direction prayer and fasting accompanied the appointment of elders. "And when they had appointed for them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they had believed."

Paul also taught by precept. Writing to the Corinthians he says, "That ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer" (I Cor. 7:5). He cites himself as example, "...commending ourselves as ministers of God, in much patience ... in watchings, in fastings" (II Cor. 6:5) and (II Cor. 11:27) he tells how he was "in labor, in fasting often, in cold and nakedness."

In Old Testament times the prophets frequently exhorted the people to fasting in the Name of the Lord. "Therefore also now, *saieth the Lord*, turn ye even to me with all your



## THE PRACTICE OF GODLINESS



heart, and *with fasting* and with weeping and with mourning, and rend your heart and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful. (Joel 2:12).

In Jeremiah 86:9 we read, “They proclaimed a fast before the Lord to all the people in Jerusalem,” at the express direction of the prophet.

The prophets themselves resorted to fasting. Daniel says, “And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplication, with fasting, and sackcloth and ashes” (Daniel 9:3).

Old Testament fastings were not proclaimed in times of prosperity nor in times of murmuring and discontent, but in times of distress, when the soul was humbled before God. And such supplication and fasting was frequently followed by answered prayer and blessing.

Ezra (chapter 8:21) writes, “Then I proclaimed a fast, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substances... So we fasted and besought our God for this, and he was intreated of us.”

\* # \*

Having thus summarized the teaching of Scripture in regard to fasting, can we have any doubt as to its spiritual value? Can we doubt whether it is a godly practice, and according to God's will?

In the Middle Ages, fasting had degenerated into a mere ritual imposed by man. But the Reformers, freeing it from the encumbrance of human rules, renewed the practice in accordance with the requirements of Scripture, that it might be well-pleasing unto God. They recommended it as an

## BIBLICAL FASTING



expression of godly living. Luther and Calvin and other Reformers proclaimed general fasting in times of trouble and when evil threatened the church, and also when a minister was called or some problem of the congregation must be solved. To them a day of *prayer* was a day of prayer and fasting.

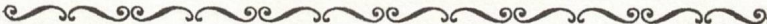
Today fasting is a rarity. Few ever think of it. Few remember seeing mother or father fast. Even in times of distress we fail to take recourse to fasting and prayer, as did our forefathers.

When, in the early days of the Reformation, there was trouble among Christian brothers, communion was suspended and a day of fasting and prayer was proclaimed, that men might humble themselves before God and be reconciled to each other.

Now we reason and argue, and strive to lay the blame on one or another, and too often we go our way, even to the Table of the Lord, unreconciled.

Is ours a period of greater spirituality? Can we afford to dispense with a means of godliness of which our fathers felt a need?

## THE PRACTICE OF GODLINESS



### III

#### Godliness

**F**ASTING is but a more emphatic expression of Paul's outcry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

For it is the body that protests when we would fast. It is the body that occupies almost all of our time, demanding to be fed and clothed and tended. We are so busy from morning till night fulfilling the demands of the body, that there is barely a half hour left in the day for quiet meditation and prayer. That is a common complaint.

Paul says, "I buffet my body and bring it into bondage..." Thereby he reverses the natural tendency which says, "My body is master and I am its servant."

It is amazing how the physical often dominates, even in a Christian home. A large proportion of time is spent in the procuring, preparing and eating of food, in cleaning, sewing, mending, buying and beautifying. And above all, how largely our minds—our conversations, plans and wishes—are occupied with these things!

Would Paul's words be a fitting motto on our walls: "I bring my body into bondage"?

Not only does the physical occupy a great share of our time. There is the further danger that it may actually dominate the spiritual. Particularly when men abandon themselves to the enjoyment of food and drink.