

THE PRACTICE OF GODLINESS



IV

Not by Bread Alone

UNHESITATINGLY we recommend fasting for the Christians of today. In fact, we are inclined to say that there is more reason for fasting in our day than ever before. Corrupted human nature yearns for luxury, and tends to become more corrupt as wealth and luxury increase. God knows that we cannot well be checked except by burdens and sorrows. And He himself has suggested fasting, by means of which we may guard against the unspiritual influence of ease and luxury. I

Israel's experience in the wilderness contains a lesson to which we may well give heed.

When Jesus thrust away the temptation of Satan, he quoted from Deuteronomy 8, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

These were Moses' words, spoken in reference to the forty years* wandering in the wilderness. And Moses tells us the reason for that prolonged hardship, "The Lord your God led thee these forty years in the wilderness to humble thee, . . . to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart. . . . He humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger ... to do thee good at thy latter end. That your heart should not say, 'My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth,' but that thou shalt remember the Lord thy God; for

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it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day.”

In Old Testament times “to humble one’s soul” meant the same as “to fast.” Moses suggests this also in the words, “He humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger.”

Why did God cause His people to hunger? To teach them that they were dependent upon Him from moment to moment. To teach them that “man doth not live by bread only, but by whatever proceeds from the mouth of God.”

These words must not be interpreted as contrasting food for the body and food for the soul. They do not at all mean: Your soul must be fed as well as your body.

In the Hebrew, “every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God means “all things, all power, *whatsoever* cometh from the mouth of God.” And here it signifies the Manna, which came directly from the mouth of God, from the Word of His power.

When Israel had bread which they themselves prepared from their own meal and in their own ovens, they could say, “My strength and my hands have obtained this food.”

But Manna took away all opportunity for such self-exaltation. They *found* Manna, found it lying on the ground, ready to eat, sent by God’s creative word, and they found it according to individual need, as Moses explicitly stated.

Paul calls it “spiritual food.” Asaph, in Psalm 78, sings of “the bread of angels.” And our Lord taught us that the Manna was a symbol of His redemptive work when He said, “Your fathers ate Manna in the wilderness; I am the living bread come down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die.”

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And does not the Manna in the wilderness remind us of Paradise, where man also ate freely from the bountiful hand of God?

But man was not satisfied with the abundance of Paradise. He was not content to live thus in entire reliance upon God. He deliberately put forth his hand to take also the one fruit God had forbidden.

Consequently in the punishment which followed, man who would not live *from the hand of God* was bidden to “eat bread in the sweat of his face.”

But the punishment, far from humbling man, has inspired him to a pride of independence. By his own labor, or by making others labor for him, he acquires abundance. And seated at his groaning board he boasts, “All this have I acquired by my strength and ingenuity.”

In subsequent history, food and the desire for food played a striking part.

All mankind fell into the sin of independence and pride. “They were eating and drinking . . . until the day that Noah entered into the ark and the flood came.”

After the flood, the same evil tendency was soon evident again. Noah planted the vine and was the first to succumb to the intoxication of wine.

Later God separated Himself a people. Abraham received the sacramental sign of bread and wine from Melchizedek.

Famine drove first Abraham, later Isaac, and also Jacob to Egypt. They looked to the full barns of Egypt for help, not yet knowing that there is life in the power of God’s Word.

Because of food, Abraham had trouble over Sarah, Isaac came into difficulty about Rebekah, Jacob and all Israel became bondslaves.

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Hunger brought about Esau's fall. He sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.

Isaac's desire for tasty food was the occasion of deception which resulted in family tragedy.

The early history of Israel is clouded by the need of food and the lack of higher knowledge.

When the sons of Jacob were offered the beautiful land of Goshen, they committed much the same sin as Esau, *preferring the plenty of Egypt to the promised land.*

Their motto should have been:

*His mighty arm upholds His own
And guards their souls from death.*

But they were unfaithful. And they paid the awful penalty of having to throw their babes into the Nile, and of serving in abject slavery.

All this history throws light upon the meaning of the Manna which God provided in the wilderness.

In the first place, the chosen people had to pass through the same test which had been laid upon Adam. They must live by faith, live from the hand of God.

"He caused thee to hunger to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments or no."

And secondly, they must die to the sin which had brought them to Egypt. Hunger, need of food, had enticed them from Canaan. Now they were encamped at the door of Egypt without food, in order that their hearts might be tested. Would the desire for food draw them back to Egypt? Or, having learned their lesson, would they look to heaven now?

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The Israelites failed, as did Adam. They longed for Egypt.

The enormity of their sin is not clear to us except by thus tracing their history. Their hankering after the fieshpots of Egypt was a disobedience, a disloyalty, a lack of faith—with special significance.

It became evident that Israel could not save itself, that there is salvation only in Him who should come, who would also be *tempted by hunger in the wilderness*; but who, withstanding the temptation, would be victorious where Adam fell and Israel failed.