

## **Chapter 1: Why Fast?**

For nearly a century and a half fasting has been out of vogue, at least in the churches of the West. The very idea of someone actually fasting today seems strange to most twentieth-century Christians. They associate it with medieval Christianity, or perhaps with High Church practice. They may recall that political leaders, like Mahatma Gandhi, have used it as a weapon of passive resistance. As a spiritual exercise it is confined, they would think, to believers who appear to be a little extreme or fanatical.

There are others whose misgivings concern the practical aspect. To them fasting and starving are synonymous terms, and they fear it will have harmful results. Because "no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it" (Eph. 5:29), they oppose fasting almost instinctively. "Do be careful," they say. "You could seriously impair your health. Living such a busy life you cannot afford to get run down!"

Why such attitudes to a practice that is so obviously scriptural? One answer is that fasting was one of the dominant features of an asceticism which began to appear in the post-apostolic age and became extreme in form as well as widespread in influence in medieval times. The pendulum began to swing the other way as people revolted against anything that savored of asceticism. The Church today is still suffering from that reaction. We have not yet recovered the spiritual balance of New Testament Christianity.

The writer heard an able Bible teacher give a thought-provoking address on the reply our Lord gave to a question about fasting. It was that occasion when He said that the wedding guests would not fast until the Bridegroom was taken from them. All that the speaker said was most helpful, but he did not once touch upon the subject of fasting, or indicate whether it had any place in the economy of the Christian life today.

When our minds are conditioned by prejudice or paralyzed by traditional views, we may face a truth in Scripture again and again without its ever touching us. Our spiritual inhibition concerning that truth permits us to see, but not to perceive. The truth lies dormant within, mentally apprehended but not spiritually applied. This is particularly true in relation to fasting.

When, however, such a truth is first ignited by the Holy Spirit, there is immediate conflict in the minds of most people. The truth of the Bible has suddenly become "alive and powerful" and there is an assault upon our traditional attitudes and prejudices.

The outcome of the struggle reveals whether or not we are open to receive and obey fresh light about God, and so grow in the knowledge of the truth. This book is intended to face us with the question of whether we are prepared to bring our present attitude about the subject of fasting (or our lack of one) to the acid test of God's Word, and then "live according to scripture" (1 Cor. 4:6).

Most of the references to fasting in the Bible are dealt with at some point in this book. It may surprise the reader, as it certainly did the writer, to find that Scripture has so much to teach us by example and by precept about the value of this practice. There are warnings too, for fasting has its dangers, and we have tried to point these out.

Among great Bible saints who fasted were Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, and Daniel the seer. In the New Testament we have the example of our Lord as well as of His apostles. It clearly had its place in the life of the early

churches. Nor was this biblical practice confined to men, for we find the names of Hannah in the Old Testament and Anna in the New Testament in the ranks of the intercessors who fasted as well as prayed.

Some of the great saints of church history have practiced fasting and testified to its value, among them the great Reformers, such as Luther, Calvin and Knox. The custom has not been confined to any theological school. Here we find Jonathan Edwards, the Calvinist, joining hands with John Wesley, the Arminian; and David Brainerd having fellowship with Charles Finney.

These names represent great scholars and preachers, ministers and missionaries, revivalists and evangelist. We may find on the fasting list the names of Pastor Hsi of China and Pastor Blumhardt of Germany, whom God used in their respective spheres a century ago for the deliverance of those bound by Satan. Time would fail us to mention the growing number whom God is raising up and using in the same ministry today through prayer and fasting.

The doings of the great can scarcely be hidden. They are barely cold in their graves before their biographers are ferreting out their journals and private diaries. But only the opening of heaven's records in that day will reveal the numbers of anonymous saints, who had no diaries and no biographers, but who prayed with fasting to the God who sees in secret. They too shall surely shine among the galaxy of these illustrious saints, "even as the stars for ever and ever."

In New Testament times fasting was a channel of power. As spirituality waned and worldliness flourished in the churches, the power and gifts of the Spirit were withdrawn. With the loss of that inward power men could only cling to what they had left, its outward accompaniment. More and more emphasis was placed upon the outward act of fasting, though bereft of the inward spirit that alone could give it value. Asceticism became the mark of piety and spirituality. Paul's prediction about "the form of religion but denying the power" (2 Tim. 3:5) was being fulfilled.

But, God be praised, a new day is dawning, and a new thirst for the Spirit is beginning to awaken the slumbering Church. It is a day of spiritual renewal. There are searchings and inquirings, burdens and longings on every hand. The heart-cry of the Church is ascending to heaven. The Spirit of God is stirring. What is all this but the first birthpangs of the new age that is soon to be born?

God is determined to have a glorious Church without spot or wrinkle, a bride fit for His beloved Son. It is the conviction of the writer that, in the travail that will bring to birth, we shall rediscover one of the lost secrets of the early Church: the power that is released through the truly biblical practice of fasting unto God.

## **Chapter 5: "When"—Not "If"**

*When you give alms...when you pray...when you fast—Matthew 6:2,5,16.*

In the great commission Christ commanded His apostles, "Make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19,20). There has been for a century or more a tendency to emphasize and elevate the teaching of the Epistles in such a way as to suggest that it supersedes the teaching of Christ as we have it in the Gospels.

Some have even asserted that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount has no direct application to believers today, that it is basically Messianic and Jewish, to be

fulfilled in some future millennial age. This is serious error, and in direct conflict with Christ's commission just quoted. If these words have any meaning it is surely that what Jesus taught His disciples was to be taught to every successive generation of disciples, and obeyed, even to the consummation of the age (see also 1 Tim. 6:3,4a).

What did our Lord teach His disciples concerning fasting? That must surely rule our conduct now. Quoted above is the first of His two vital utterances on this subject.

In speaking about giving, praying and fasting, Jesus warned His hearers of the futility of practicing their piety before men to be seen by them (Matt. 6:1-18). He did not say, "*If* you pray," as though praying were options, but, "*When* you pray," taking for granted that they would recognize prayer as a vital necessity.

Neither did Jesus say, "*If* you fast," as though fasting were something that disciples might nor might not be led to do, or as though it only applied to a select few, apostles or prophets, preachers or leaders. He stated unambiguously, categorically and without qualification to the mass of His disciples, "*When* you fast..." He left us in no doubt that He took it for granted that His disciples would be exercised to obey the leading of the Spirit in this, as in praying and giving, when the occasion demanded it.

It is significant that the Lord dealt with fasting as a spiritual exercise distinct from praying. Though fasting and praying are often linked in Scripture and in experience, this is not necessarily the case. We should not think of fasting as a semi-detached house, always joined to praying. On the contrary, it stands on its own grounds and may on occasion serve a spiritual purpose all its own.

Just as there may be praying without fasting, so there may at times be fasting, truly acceptable to God, without praying—at least in the sense of intercession. There is no mention of prayer accompanying the fast we read of in Esther. In the fast of prophets and teachers in Antioch, they were giving themselves to worship rather than prayer (Acts 13:2).

Because one is not able to give oneself to prayer for the whole of a fast does not mean that the period not accompanied by specific prayer is devoid of spiritual value. Fasting, as we shall notice later, has many purposes besides the very important one of facilitating intercession.

## **Chapter 8: Fasting Unto God**

*When ye fasted...did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?—Zechariah 7:5.*

*They ministered to the Lord, and fasted—Acts 13:2.*

"Fasting today! Whatever is to be gained by that?" is the incredulous question of many Christians. If they mean, "What does one personally gain by fasting?" then there are many answers that may be given, and will be given in this book, but there is a more important question to answer first.

So much of our thinking is ruled by that self-centered principle, "What do I get out of it?" Even in our spiritual desires and aspirations self may still be enthroned. The cross must work in us if the life is to be centered in God. Only so can our spiritual motivation be radically altered and become Christward instead of self-ward. "He died for all, that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto him" (2 Cor. 5:15, R.V.).

Even in circles where fasting is accepted as a normal spiritual exercise there is often so much emphasis on fasting for personal benefit, for the enduement of power, for

spiritual gifts, for physical healing, for specific answers to prayer, that the other aspect is forgotten. There is no suggestion that it is not right to seek these things, but our underlying motives must first be right. It is deeply significant that in the first statement on the subject of fasting in the New Testament Jesus dealt with the question of motive (Matt. 6:16-18). No aspect of the subject is more important than this.

God is not merely concerned with what we do but why we do it. A right act may be robbed of all its value in the sight of God if it is done with a wrong motive. The danger of this is acute in the realm of outward religious exercise, "Why have we fasted, and thou seest it not?" asked the perplexed religionists of Isaiah's day. Swift was heaven's answer, "Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure" (Isa. 58:3). The fasts they undertook, with all their show of piety, were motivated by self-interest and self-seeking. No wonder God asked indignantly, "Is such the fast that I choose?" (v.5).

This same self-centeredness under a cloak of piety was seen in all its shameful hypocrisy in the fasting of the Pharisees, and it was against this that Jesus lifted up His voice in the Sermon on the Mount, telling His followers that when they fasted they were not to be like the hypocrites. The Pharisees paraded their piety for the applause of men by making sure that people knew they were fasting. They were not ministering to God but to the pride of their own hearts. Later, when Jesus described the Pharisee praying in the temple and saying, "God, I think thee that I am not like other men...I fast twice a week," He is careful to inform us that he "prayed thus *with himself*" (Luke 18:11,12).

Fasting must be done unto God, even before the eye of the Father who sees in secret. While avoiding the brazen conceit of the Pharisee and the desire to court the praise of man, we may still act out of selfish motives, for the gratification of personal desires and ambitions, and without the basic motive being the glory of God.

In Isaiah 58, the classic of Scripture on the subject of fasting, God reminds His people that the acceptable fast is the one which *He* has chosen. Fasting, like prayer, must be God-initiated and God-ordained if it is to be effective. Prevailing prayer begins with God; He places upon us a burden by the Spirit, and we respond to that burden. Prayer that originates with God always returns to God. So it is with fasting. When God chooses our fast He will not have to ask us, as He asked His people long ago, "When ye fasted...did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?" (Zech. 7:5, R.V.).

All this does not of course relieve us of our responsibility. On our part there must be the recognition of the rightness and need of fasting, the willingness for the self-discipline involved, and the exercise of heart before God; but in the final analysis the initiative is His. When we fast, how long we fast, the nature of the fast, and the spiritual objectives we have before us are all God's choice, to which the obedient disciple gladly responds.

This principle applies even to *the regular fast*, say one day a week. We must be sure that God is leading us to do this. Even then there may be times when it will be inconvenient to carry it out, or when we are guided not to do so; or a time may come when we are led to discontinue the practice. We are not to be in bondage to rules, even spiritual ones. "If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law" (Gal. 5:18).

When Joel cried, "Sanctify a fast," he meant "Set it apart for God." This is absolutely basic of our fasting is to be acceptable to Him. Then there will be times when we shall forget the matter of our personal gain, when we shall be caught up in wonder,

love and praise, as we fast unto God. We shall find ourselves like Anna the prophetess, “worshipping with fasting” (Luke 2:37), or like those leaders of the church in Antioch who “ministered to the Lord, and fasted” (Acts 13:2, A.V.; “worshipping the Lord,” R.S.V.). This is surely the loftiest conception, that it is a worshipping or ministering to the Lord, a giving of ourselves to God, and only secondarily a means to secure certain spiritual ends.

We cannot do better than to quote in conclusion from John Wesley’s famous sermon on fasting<sup>1</sup>:

First, let it be done unto the Lord, with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven; to express our sorrow and shame for our manifold transgressions of His holy law; to wait for an increase of purifying grace, drawing our affections to things above; to add seriousness and to obtain all the great and precious promises which He hath made to us in Jesus Christ...Let us beware of fancying we *merit* anything of God by our fasting. We cannot be too often warned of this; inasmuch as a desire to “establish our own righteousness,” to procure salvation of debt and not of grace, is so deeply rooted in all our hearts. Fasting is only a way which God hath ordained, wherein we wait for His unmerited mercy; and wherein, without any desert of ours, He hath promised freely to give us His blessing.

God’s chosen fast, then, is that which He has appointed; that which is set apart for Him, to minister to Him, to honor and glorify Him; that which is designed to accomplish His sovereign will. Then we shall find, as though it were heaven’s afterthought, that the fast unto God rebounds in blessing on our heads, and the God who sees in secret is graciously pleased to reward us openly. In this way we are preserved from ever permitting the blessings to mean more to us than the Blessor, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory for ever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

<sup>1</sup>John Wesley, *Sermon 27* (Discourse 7 on the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:16-18).