

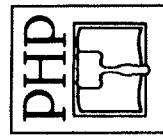
THE DUTY,
THE BENEFITS,
AND THE PROPER METHOD
OF
RELIGIOUS FASTING

by Samuel Miller

Presbyterian Heritage Publications

P. O. Box 180922

Dallas, Texas 75218



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The text of this edition is based upon "The Duty, the Benefits, and the Proper Method of Religious Fasting," which was originally published as two sermons in *The National Preacher*, Vol. V, No. 10 (March 1831), pp. 145-60.

Certain textual changes have been made in order to bring the material into greater conformity to modern English usage. The attempt has been made to retain the substance of Miller's presentation, but to place it into a form more palatable to the modern reader. The resulting text is *not* a paraphrase, but simply a grammatically revised text.

Cover Illustration: *Samuel Miller* by Talmord Brown; based upon a nineteenth-century engraving.

"And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by
prayer and supplications, with fasting."
— Daniel 9:3

This is the language of the prophet Daniel. He is speaking of that which occurred in Babylon, where he and his brethren were in captivity. It was a dark and distressing day. Religion was at a low ebb among the professing people of God. Even their deep adversity had not led them to repentance and reformation. And idolatry, attended with the most deplorable moral corruption, reigned among the heathen around them. Everything to the eye of sense appeared in the highest degree discouraging, not to say desperate.

But this holy man trusted in God; and in the exercise of faith, saw, beyond the clouds which encircled him and his people, a ray of light which promised at once deliverance and glory. He perceived nothing, indeed, among the mass of his Jewish brethren which indicated a speedy termination of their captivity; but he "understood by books," that is, he firmly believed, on the ground of a recorded prophecy delivered by Jeremiah, that the period of their liberation was drawing nigh. In this situation, what does he do? Instead of desponding, he "encourages himself in the Lord his God." And, instead of allowing himself to indulge in a spirit of presumption or indolence, on account of the certainty of the approaching deliverance, he considers himself as called to special humiliation, fasting, and prayer; to humble himself before God under a sense of the deep unworthiness of himself and his companions in captivity; and to pray with importunity that their unmerited emancipation might be at once hastened and sanctified. Such is the spirit of genuine piety. It neither despairs in adversity, nor is elated with pride at the approach of help. On the contrary, the firmer its confidence in the Divine fidelity, the lower does it lie in humility and penitence, and the more powerfully does it excite to holy action, and to holy desires to be a "worker together with God." It was when

Dan. 9:2

Cf. 1 Sam.
30:6

Cf. 2 Cor.
6:1;
1 Cor.
3:9

this man of God distinctly understood that the desolations of seventy years were coming to an end, that he "set his face to seek unto the Lord God by prayer and supplications with fasting."

The captive Jews in Babylon, as a body, seem to have been in the habit, before this time, of observing certain stated days of fasting and prayer; but they were evidently observed in a formal and heartless manner; and, therefore, instead of proving a blessing, had but increased their guilt. The exercise of the servant of God, to which our text refers, was of a very different character. It was with him a season of special, earnest, elevated devotion; prompted by special feelings; consecrated to a special object; and accompanied by those special circumstances of humility which indicated a soul deeply abased before God, and fervently engaged in pleading for his blessing.

I shall take occasion from the example of Daniel to consider the duty of FASTING, as a suitable and very important accompaniment of special humiliation and prayer. And in pursuance of this design, I shall request your attention to the DUTY, the BENEFITS, and the PROPER METHOD of RELIGIOUS FASTING. After which the way will be prepared for some remarks more immediately practical.

THE DUTY OF FASTING

I. The DUTY of religious fasting will claim our attention in the first place.

It is unnecessary to say that fasting is abstinence from food. It is not, however, every kind of abstinence that constitutes a religious fast. Some abstain from their usual aliment because, from indisposition, they loathe it; others, because they cannot obtain it; and a third class, because abstinence is enjoined by medical prescription. But the Christian, as such, refrains from choice, denying his appetite from religious principle, and with a view to spiritual benefit. Now, when it is affirmed that occasional fasting — in this sense, and with this view — is a Christian duty, it is not

intended to be maintained that it is one of those stated duties which all are bound to attend upon certain fixed periods, whatever may be their situation or the aspect of Providence towards them. There is no precept in the word of God which enjoins the observance of a particular number of fast days in each year. It is to be considered as an *occasional*, or perhaps, more properly speaking, a *special* duty, which, like seasons of *special prayer*, ought to be regulated, as to its frequency and manner of observance, by the circumstances in which we are placed. But although the times and seasons of religious fasting are left, as they obviously must be, to the judgment and the conscience of each individual, it may be confidently affirmed that it is a DIVINE INSTITUTION; that it is a duty on which ALL CHRISTIANS ARE BOUND, at PROPER SEASONS, to attend. This, it is believed, may be firmly established by the following considerations.

1. The LIGHT OF NATURE seems to recognize this duty. Abstinence from food, either as an aid or an expression of piety, has been common in all ages and among all nations. Those who have attended to the various forms of Paganism know that in all of them fasting has had a place, and in some of them a very prominent place. In entering on important undertakings, and in preparing for sacrifices of more than common solemnity, their fasts were often protracted and rigid to an almost incredible degree.

Now, the question is, how came this practice to be so general, nay universal, among those, whether polished or barbarous, who enjoyed no written revelation? Was it a *dictate of nature?* Then our position is established. If abstinence from food is a natural expression of deep humiliation and mourning, no further argument is necessary to show that it ought to accompany seasons of special prayer and peculiar approach to God. Was it the result of *tradition*, handing down to all generations the practice of the first parents of our race, received from Him who made them, and placed them, with the knowledge of his will, under a dispensation of mercy? Then is our position still more firmly established. From one or the other of these sources the practice must have been derived; and either of them will go far towards furnishing the warrant in question.

2. The EXAMPLES of religious fasting recorded in the word of God are multiplied and very decisive in their character. Out of many which might be selected, the following are worthy of special notice.

Joshua and the elders of Israel evidently kept a solemn fast when their people were defeated by the men of Ai; for they remained all day, from morning till eventide, prostrate on their faces before the ark, with dust on their heads, in exercises of the deepest humiliation and prayer. David, we are expressly told, fasted, as well as prayed, while he humbled himself under a heavy judgment of God, sent on him for his sin in the matter of Uriah. Even the hardened Ahab fasted and cried for mercy when the judgments of God were denounced against him by the prophet Elijah.

The pious and public-spirited Nehemiah, while he was yet in Babylon, set apart a season of special prayer accompanied with fasting when he heard of the desolations of the city and people of God; and afterward, when he came to Jerusalem, he proclaimed a public and solemn fast, to deplore the low state of religion and to pray for pardoning and restoring mercy. Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, appointed a day of fasting and prayer throughout his kingdom when the confederated forces of Ammon and Moab came up against him.

The inhabitants of Nineveh, though Pagans, when the prophet of God proclaimed his approaching judgments, immediately set apart a season of special prayer and fasting, in which not only all the adult inhabitants, but also their infants and the very beasts which served them, were required to abstain from all aliment. "For it was proclaimed and published by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing; let them not feed nor drink water; but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God."

When queen Esther felt herself and her people to be in danger from the conspiracy of Haman, she set apart a season of solemn prayer and fasting: that is, as she explains it, neither eating nor drinking for three days in succession, in which all her maidens in the palace, and all the Jews in Shushan, were united. The devoted and inspired Ezra, when

setting out on his important mission to Jerusalem, assembled the returning captives at the river Ahava, and there "proclaimed a fast, that they might afflict themselves before God, and seek of Him a right way for themselves and their little ones, and for all their substance."

Cf. Ezra 8:21

And it is remarkable that the blessing of God attended the exercise of fasting in every one of these cases. The armies of Joshua were, thenceforward, victorious. David, though deprived of the child for whose life he prayed, was forgiven his great sin. Nineveh, though exceedingly guilty, was spared. Jehoshaphat was made to triumph over his formidable enemies. Even the impenitent Ahab was favored with the delay of that dreadful judgment which had been denounced against him. Esther and her people experienced a signal deliverance. And Ezra obtained the blessing which he sought with such humble importunity.

After the coming of Christ, we find the same practice continued, and making a part of almost every extraordinary season of devotion. Jesus Christ himself entered on his public ministry after a long season of preparatory fasting. And although there is no doubt that his was a case of miraculous abstinence, still the general principle held forth and countenanced is the same.

We find also the apostles, in almost every instance of setting apart candidates for the gospel ministry, accompanying the ordination solemnities with fasting. The pious Anna, the prophetess, was engaged in "serving God, day and night, with fastings and prayers." When the Lord appeared to Cornelius, the "devout" centurion, and imparted the knowledge of his will to him, we are informed he was engaged in fasting and prayer. And the apostle Paul speaks repeatedly of his habit of waiting on God by fastings, as well as by prayer, and other means of divine appointment. In short, we scarcely find in all the scriptural record, either in the Old or New Testament, a single example of an extraordinary season of humiliation and prayer which is not accompanied by the abstinence of which we speak.

Now, I ask, can it be supposed that a fact so frequently

See Josh. 7:6

See 2 Sam. 12:16

See 1 Kings 21:27

See Neh. 1:4

See 2 Chron. 20:3

Cf. Jonah 3:7-8

See Esther 4:16

See Matt. 4:2

See Acts 14:23

Cf. Luke 2:37

See Acts 10:30

See 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27

repeated concerning pious people — in so great a variety of situations, from early periods of the Bible history to its very close — could have occurred by mere accident or caprice? It cannot be. That which stands forth sanctioned by the example of the people of God in all ages, and by the Author of our holy religion himself, is surely no human device, but an institution of Heaven.

3. Again, we may infer that religious fasting is a divine institution from a variety of *precepts and direct intimations* found in various parts of Scripture, especially in the New Testament.

And here I shall say nothing of the fixed periodical fasts solemnly enjoined under the ceremonial economy — as all grant that these are superseded by the new dispensation, and that no specific days have been divinely appointed to succeed them. But it is remarkable that (even under the ceremonial economy), besides the stated fasts, occasional ones were ordered by the express command of God. Thus Jehovah proclaims to the people of Judah, by the prophet Joel, in a day of great political and moral desolation: “Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry unto the Lord.”

Joel 1:14

But there are more than intimations to the same amount in the New Testament. Take, as an example of these, that remarkable passage in our Lord’s sermon on the mount. “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest (evidently taking for granted that they *must* and *would* fast), anoint thine head and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” Again, our blessed Savior, in speaking of some of the higher attainments in Christian character and power, says, “But this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.” And again, when some persons asked him, “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast often, but thy disciples fast not?” he replied, “Can the

Matt. 6:16-18

Cf. Matt. 9:14-15

children of the bridechamber fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and THEN SHALL THEY FAST IN THOSE DAYS.” And, accordingly, as I have already hinted, we find a number of striking examples of fasting, on occasions of special prayer, after our Lord ascended to heaven, and before the close of the inspired history. And the apostle Paul, in the seventh chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, in speaking of Christians withdrawing for a time from the ordinary concerns and relations of life, gives it his sanction — and assigns as a reason for it — “that they may give themselves to prayer and fasting.”

But the duty of religious fasting will be still further illustrated and confirmed when we consider,

II. In the second place, the BENEFITS which may be expected to result from the proper performance of this duty.

THE BENEFITS OF FASTING

And in reference to this point, it behooves us to be ever upon our guard against the dictates of a vain superstition. For, as the practice of fasting for religious purposes has probably been in the world ever since the fall of man — and we have every reason to suppose was thus early received from the Author of our being — so this practice began very early, like every other divine appointment, to be perverted and abused.

The Heathen evidently considered it as highly meritorious, and as purchasing for them the favor of the deities whom they vainly worshipped. And some of the ancient heretics, supposing that there was, as they expressed it, a certain “malignity in matter” — and that the less they had to do, in any shape, with material objects, the better — taught their followers to consider abstinence, as far as possible, from all aliment, and especially from animal food, as in itself the

Cf. 1 Cor. 7:5

highest merit in the sight of God, and as one of the most important and essential of all duties. Hence they imagined that the more any one mortified, enfeebled, and emancipated his body (without destroying life), the nearer he approached to moral perfection.

But not only did the early heretics fall into the grossest superstition on this subject, the great body of professing Christians, very soon after the apostles' days, began to pervert the practice of fasting to superstitious purposes. Christians, in fact, began very early to be corrupted to Gnostic dreams and Pagan habits. As early as the close of the second century, they seem to have commenced the practice of observing Wednesday and Friday of every week as days of fasting. Not long after, we find them observing one great annual fast to commemorate the death of the blessed Savior. This fast was kept, after its commencement, for different periods of time by different persons — plainly showing, as indeed many of them confessed, that it had no divine appointment for its origin, but was a mere uncommanded invention of man. Some kept it for one day; but the more common practice was to keep it precisely *forty hours*, because they supposed it was just about forty hours from the time of our Lord's death until he rose from the dead. And hence it was called, in ancient calendars, the *quadragesimal fast*, or the *fast of forty*. This time, however, as early as the sixth century after Christ, was extended by human superstition to *forty days instead of forty hours*; and the reason assigned for this change was that the Savior himself fasted forty days and forty nights. Of this annual fast, as well as of all the Fridays in the year, the Romish Church has long been in the habit of making a most superstitious use. The more serious and devout among them make themselves, without any divine warrant, the perfect slaves of this observance, and consider eating meat in Lent, or on Friday, as a mortal sin.

Still more servile, if possible, is the rigor of Mohammedan fasting. The votaries of that imposture consider periodical abstinence from food as forming a large part of the duty of an exemplary Mussulman, and perhaps, next to the pilgrimage to Mecca, as the most important part of the price of heaven. And, in conformity with this delusion, the whole of their

month *Ramadan*, the ninth in their year, is a great fast, during which the law of their religion is that no one shall eat or drink, or suffer the least particle of aliment to pass his lips, from the commencement to the termination of light on each day.

Now, all this is weakly and criminally superstitious. For "meat," as the inspired apostle expressly tells us, "commendeth us not to God; for neither, if we eat, are we better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse." And, therefore, in estimating the benefits of religious fasting, we ascribe to it no mystical charm, no sanctifying power. We have no idea that there is any merit in macerating and enfeebling the body; nor can we regard with any other sentiment than that of abhorrence, the doctrine that abstaining from particular kinds of food ever did or can make expiation for sin, or serve, in any form, as the price of our acceptance with God.

But we consider religious fasting, when properly conducted, as attended with the following *benefits*:

1. *It is a natural and significant expression of our penitence for sin.* We may say, perhaps, the primary design, the most obvious and immediate object of fasting is to mortify and afflict the body, as a token of our penitence before God; as an acknowledgement of our entire dependence upon him for all our comforts, and also of our utter unworthiness of them as sinners. For as few things more effectually destroy the inclination for food than great distress of mind, so there seems to be no more suitable emblem of real mourning for sin than voluntarily refraining from food. Fasting is also a proper expression of penitence, inasmuch as it carries with it an implied confession that all our comforts, even to a morsel of bread, are forfeited by sin; and that we might justly be deprived of them all, if a holy God "should deal with us after our sins, or reward us according to our iniquities." To which may be added, that the inconvenience to which abstinence from food gives rise is well adapted to make us feel how entirely dependent we are on the bounty of Providence, not only for our enjoyment, but also for our very existence from day to day.

2. Another very important benefit of religious fasting is that by denying the animal appetite we "keep under the body,

and bring it into subjection." The tendency of the flesh, in our fallen nature, to gain the mastery over our better part is that great standing evidence of our depravity which the word of God everywhere recognizes, and which all history and daily observation, with melancholy uniformity, establish. This unhallowed dominion is first broken when the "reign of grace" commences in the heart. But still the carnal principle, "the flesh" as the Scriptures call it, has too much influence even in the most pious; and to mortify and subdue it is the great object of the spiritual warfare, from its commencement to the last moment of the conflict. When, therefore, the professing Christian indulges the flesh, and pampers appetite over a plentiful table from day to day, he nourishes this unfriendly principle, gives it strength, and, of course, increases its power over his better part. It is undoubtedly found by universal experience, that when the body is constantly gratified by fullness of aliment, it is more heavy, more sensual, and imparts to the mind a more fleshly and lethargic character, than when the appetite has been wisely denied. Hence it will always be found that habitual luxury, in direct proportion to the degree in which it is indulged, is unfavorable to deep spirituality. Probably they were never found united in any individual since the world began. On this principle is founded the importance of that self-denial which our blessed Savior requires as a distinguishing characteristic of his disciples. Upon this principle rests that great gospel maxim delivered by the apostle: "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts." Now, one of the most obvious means of effecting this purpose is to deny the appetite for food. This tends emphatically to "keep under the body," to restrain animal desire, to counteract sensuality, and to promote a holy superiority to all those "fleshy lusts" which war against the soul.⁴ Accordingly, it may be asserted, that in all ages, those Christians who have been most distinguished for "mortifying the deeds of the body," bringing it "into subjection," and "setting their affections upon things above" have been no less remarkable for the frequency and seriousness of their seasons of religious fasting.

Cf. Rom. 5:24

Gal. 5:24

1 Pet. 2:11

Cf. Rom. 8:13

Cf. Col. 3:2

3. A third benefit to be derived from fasting, when properly conducted, is *that it renders the mind more active, clear, and vigorous.* The connection between mind and body, however mysterious, is yet manifest and familiar. And there is, perhaps, no fact in the whole history of this connection which experience more uniformly attests than that repletion is unfriendly to the highest and most successful mental operations. The seeming exceptions to this law of our nature are so few, and of such a character, as rather to confirm than contradict it. He, therefore, who desires to attain the highest efforts and the best products of his intellectual faculties, must often abstain, either in whole or in part, from his usual amount of bodily aliment, even though that amount be habitually moderate. Fasting, then, is, beyond all controversy, one of the best preparatives for high intellectual effort. It imparts a degree of acuteness to the understanding, of vigor to the imagination, and of activity and promptness to the memory, which are not experienced in other circumstances. Hence, it is well known, that some of the Pagan philosophers, when about to meet their adversaries in public debate, were in the habit of entering on the conflict *fasting*, that their intellectual powers might be more awake, acute, and active. Did they cheerfully submit to this privation for the purpose of preparing their minds for meeting with advantage a fellow worm? And shall Christians refuse to submit to the same privation, for preparing them to wait upon God with alacrity, and with holy elevation of sentiment and affection? If any man be desirous of preparing his mind for the highest acts of devotion; for the most complete withdrawal, for a time from the world; for being lifted above the vanities and sensualities of life; for collecting and fastening his whole soul on God and heavenly things — among other means of attaining his hallowed object — let him not omit to accompany them with real fasting. He who neglects this precious auxiliary to devotion (for so it assuredly deserves to be called) has not well considered either the structure of his own frame or the spirit of the word of God.
4. A further advantage accruing from well conducted religious fasting is *that it ministers essentially to the bodily health.* Few things are more severely trying and ultimately

undermining to the human body than habitual repletions. A statesman and philosopher of our own country, distinguished at once for his talents, his practical character, his vigorous health, and his long life, was accustomed to observe a fast (either total or partial) one day in every week — assigning as the reason of it no religious motive, but that he wished “to give nature a holiday.” And he had no doubt of its solid benefit to his bodily health. The practice, I am persuaded, was founded in the clearest and soundest principles of physiology. Truly our nature needs such a “holiday” much oftener than we are willing to yield it. The most enlightened physicians have given it as their opinion that thousands accounted temperate, and really so in the popular sense of the term, are bringing themselves to premature graves for want of such frequent respite from the burden of aliment as an occasional day of fasting would furnish. It is plain, then, that any sacred religious habit which secures such a respite — which tends, in the course of each month and weeks, to preserve us from the effects of habitual indulgence and repletion — cannot fail of contributing to the preservation and vigor of our bodily health, as well as preparing our minds for prompt and active application to the most important of all objects.

5. There is one more advantage of frequent religious fasting by no means to be despised. I mean *making it systematically subservient to the purposes of charity*. Some pious persons — whose pecuniary circumstances were narrow, but whose love to God and their fellow-men was uncommonly fervent — have practiced fasting, in part at least, upon this plan. They have constantly omitted one meal in a week, and sometimes more, that they might be able to give to those who were still poorer than themselves, what the meal or meals in question would have cost them. I have no doubt that this will strike some worldly-minded sensual professors of religion as extreme, and as almost a ridiculous, if not contemptible, effort of benevolence. But I will say, in the language of a narrator of such a case, “Such charity, instead of being contemptible, shows a strength of principle and a greatness of soul beyond the ordinary standard; and a self-denial so applied, adds magnanimity to benevolence.”

And I will venture to say, further, that if every professing Christian in the United States would consent to omit as many meals in each year as upon every principle he ought, and would honestly throw the value of them, annually, into the Lord’s treasury — for sending the gospel to the benighted heathen, and to the destitute everywhere — not only would his bodily health be better, his life probably longer and happier, and his soul more richly fed and edified; but were *nothing else* cast into that treasury, there would be pecuniary means sufficient for sustaining all the Bible and missionary operations that American zeal and instrumentality could carry on for the benefit of every part of the world.

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Let me entreat you, then, my friends, to lay these considerations seriously to heart. A duty so manifestly founded on the Divine will, and attended with so many important benefits, cannot be disregarded without both sin and loss. Remember that it involves interests concerning which you are not at liberty to “confer with flesh and blood.” And remember, too, that in this whole concern, you have to do with Him who “weightheth the spirits” — who “cannot be deceived and will not be mocked.”

THE PROPER METHOD OF FASTING

III. Consider, in the third place, that METHOD OF OBSERVING A RELIGIOUS FAST which will render it truly profitable.

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And I begin this head by remarking, that the frequency with which every individual Christian ought to fast, and the extent to which he ought to carry his abstinence on each occasion, are questions concerning which no definite rule can be laid down. The word of God prescribes no precise law as to either of these points. The whole subject is left, as the subject of alms-giving is left, to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. No one can open the Bible without perceiving that we are bound to give alms to those who need them; that “we have the poor always with us, that whenever we will we may do

Cf. Mk. 14:7

them good." But *how often*, and *how much* we are bound to give is nowhere said. Yet I have no doubt that in the great duty of fasting, as well as of alms-giving, where the heart is right with God, and where there is a sincere and humble desire to walk in that course which is adapted to promote our best interest, there will be no material mistake with regard to the path of duty. That degree of abstinence which is salutary and not uncomfortable to one, would be deeply injurious as well as painful to another.

Matt. 9:13; 12:7; Cf. Hosea 6:6

The great END of the duty is to be regarded. God "will have mercy and not sacrifice." Fasting, like the Sabbath, was made for man, and not man for fasting. No one, therefore, ought to carry abstinence to such an extreme as to impair or endanger his bodily health — of which there have been undoubtedly, some mournful examples, both in ancient and modern times. We have no more right to injure our bodies than we have to enfeeble our minds. Yet this, it must be acknowledged, is by no means the extreme to which the masses of professing Christians, at the present day, are inclined. On the contrary, it is manifest that the tendency in general is to *deficiency* rather than *excess* in this important duty. For one who injures himself by excessive frequency or protraction of his seasons of abstinence, thousands, it is probable, either wholly neglect this self-denying duty, or perform it in a most superficial and inadequate manner.

The abstinence in religious fasting may either be *total* or *partial*. When it is continued for a single day only, it ought in many cases to be *total*; and, with most persons, may be so, not only without injury, but with profit. Of this every one must conscientiously judge for himself. But when the fast is continued through several successive days — as it sometimes ought to be in a great physical or moral crisis of life — then it is obvious the abstinence should be only *partial*; that is, aliment ought to be sparingly taken, not to gratify appetite, but merely to sustain nature. The prophet Daniel, in a period of protracted pious humiliation, tells us that he "ate no *pleasant bread*, neither came flesh nor wine into his mouth."

Nor let any one imagine that it is not *his* duty to fast

because the abstinence of a single day, and even from a single meal, in some degree incommodes his feelings. This is no valid objection to the duty. In fact, as you have heard, one great design of the privation is to "afflict the soul," to humble us under a sense of our weakness and dependence, and to remind us, by a feeling of want, of the purpose for which we submit to the privation. If no such feeling were induced, an important purpose of the exercise would be defeated. Thousands were fully persuaded a few years ago, that total abstinence from that fell destroyer, *ardent spirit*, would weaken their bodies and injure their health. But no man ever honestly made the experiment without finding that his fears had all been delusive. No less delusive, be assured, is the plea that you cannot comply, in an enlightened manner, with the Christian duty of fasting without injury either physical or moral. To those who think otherwise, I would say, "Have you ever FAIRLY MADE THE TRIAL?" If you think you have, MAKE IT AGAIN, in the fear of God, and with humble prayer for divine direction. And imagine not that a mere feeling of emptiness, and even importunate hunger, must necessarily mark the approach of mischief. So far from this, they are feelings which you often *need* for your physical as well as moral benefit; and no injury will be likely to flow from them, when carried to a *proper length*, unless unguardedly followed by an *excessive indulgence of appetite*.

The duty of fasting may be considered as devolving on men in all the circumstances and relations in which they are placed. Seasons of devout fasting ought, undoubtedly, to be observed by INDIVIDUALS, in private, with a special reference to their own personal sins, wants, and trials; by FAMILIES, who have often much reason as such, for special humiliation and prayer; by PARTICULAR CHURCHES, whose circumstances are frequently such as to call for seasons of peculiar mourning, penitence, and supplication; by WHOLE DENOMINATIONS OF CHRISTIANS, who have very often occasion to humble themselves before God on account of the absence of his Spirit, and the prevalence of some great evils in the midst of them; and, finally, by NATIONS, when suffering under the righteous displeasure of God, or when sensible that, for their sins, they are exposed to his heavy judgments. Of all these we

have examples in the word of God; and if the spirit of the gospel were reigning in the midst of us, we should often see examples of them all at the present day.

In delineating the METHOD in which a religious fast ought to be kept, let it be observed:

1. First of all, that it will be outwardly kept in vain, unless *the heart is sincerely engaged in the service*. Let Pagans, Mohammedans, and nominal Christians flatter themselves, as you have heard, with the dream that the mere physical observance of abstinence, independent of the state of the soul, will recommend them to God. But let US remember that the character and exercises of the inner man are everything here.

Yes, my friends, in fasting, as well as praying, the engagement of the heart is the great and essential matter. There is no piety in merely abstaining from food aside from the spirit and purpose with which it is done. It is in this case as in the observance of the Sabbath. A man may shut himself up from all the world on that day, or he may spend the whole of it in the house of God; and yet, if his heart is all the time going after the world, he does not sanctify the Sabbath at all in the most important sense of the term. So it is with the case before us. We may keep multitudes of fast-days — with all the external exactness of Popish, or even Mohammedan vigor — and yet be nothing the better for them; nay, instead of receiving benefit, may contract guilt by them all. A holy God might, and doubtless would, still say to us, as He did in substance to his professing people of old, "Is this such a fast as I have chosen? Have ye fasted to Me, even to Me, saith the Lord? This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me; their appointed fasts are an abomination unto me; I am weary to bear them."

The primary consideration, then, in keeping a religious fast, is that the whole soul be truly engaged in the work; that while we use the outward symbol of humiliation; and penitence, we labor to have our minds deeply occupied and affected with the humbling realities which we express with

our lips. A heartless and hypocritical prayer, in any circumstances, is a virtual insult to Him to whom it is addressed; but a HEARTLESS AND HYPOCRITICAL FAST seems to be a DOUBLE INSULT, because offered under the guise of double solemnity and humility. In searching, therefore, for the characteristics of an "acceptable fast," we must begin here. The more deeply, feelingly, and constantly the heart is engaged in the service, the more pleasing to God, and the more profitable to ourselves will it ever be found.

2. While the state of the heart is everything here, *a real abstinence from aliment is also essential to the proper and acceptable performance of this duty*. Such a remark as this may appear to many unnecessary; and I should certainly deem it, were there not some serious persons who adopt, and endeavor to inculcate, the strange notion that nothing more is implied in the duty in question than "fasting," as they express it, "in spirit;" meaning, by the phrase, mere moral abstinence, or "abstinence from sin." Hence, those who adopt this opinion suppose that a regular and acceptable gospel fast may be kept, while the animal appetite is fully indulged as usual, provided there be an effort made, for a season, greater than usual to shut out evil and to maintain a spiritual and devout frame. In this sense they interpret that solemn passage in the fifty-eighth chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah, "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, etc.?" In this pointed appeal it is manifest we are to understand Jehovah not as saying that "loosing the bands of wickedness" includes *everything* that belongs to a religious fast; but that the true penitence and moral reformation form, as we have before intimated, its best accompaniment and its most essential fruits.

I am constrained, then, to consider this notion which I am opposing as a mere evasion, and not a very plausible one, of a plain Christian duty. It is nothing less than egregious trifling with the heart-searching God, and cheating ourselves by a miserable subterfuge. We might just as well talk of giving alms "in spirit," or paying our debts "in spirit." No, my friends, real abstinence from food is, no doubt, intended in all the examples and precepts which are given us on this subject

*Cf. Isa. 58:5;
Zech. 7:5;
Isa. 29:13;
1:13,14*

Cf. Mal. 3:8.

in the word of God. And we “rob Him,” and “wrong our own souls,” when we shrink from the literal self-denial implied in the abstinence in question. In fact, those who decline submitting to the literal privation of food of which we speak not only contravene both the letter and spirit of Scripture (when describing an acceptable fast), but they entirely give up some of the most important benefits to which, as we have seen, this privation is naturally subservient.

3. It is important to the proper observance of a religious fast that *we retire, during its continuance, as much as possible from the world, shut out its illusions, and endeavor to break its hold of our hearts.* One grand object of observing such days at all is that we may occasionally come to a solemn pause; that we may break the spell which is so apt to bind us down to the retrospect of our infirmities, failures, and sins. It is of the utmost importance, therefore, that in solemnities which have such an object, we should sacredly withdraw, for a time, from all worldly cares and allurements that we should put a firm negative upon every appetite and passion which might tend to drag us down to the dust of the earth; and try to get away from the snares and entanglements of this passing scene. With the utmost propriety, then, when a public fast is proclaimed, it is commonly recommended that all servile labor and recreation be laid aside. This is no less important to the spiritual observance of the day than as a testimony of outward respect. And quite as indispensable is it, when an individual or family resolve to fast in private, that every occupation be as far as possible suspended, which may even remotely tend to draw off the mind from an entire and unreserved devotion to the appropriate exercises of the day.

4. Days of religious fasting are to be devoted to a deep and heartfelt recollection of our sins and unfeigned repentance for them. It is true, indeed, that in all seasons of special as well as ordinary prayer, our mercies as well as our sins ought to be recollected and acknowledged. And, therefore, in celebrating a religious fast, *thanksgiving* is by no means inappropriate or to be forgotten. It is a matter of thankfulness to a sinner, in

any situation, that he is out of hell; and, surely, the sinner who is truly penitent can never see greater reason for gratitude than when he is deeply pondering before God the number and aggravation of his sins; and remembers that to such a rebel, life and glory are offered.

Still, it is evident that the primary object of a religious fast is evangelical humiliation. To attempt to keep such a fast, then, without entering deeply into the consideration of our sins, and mourning over them, is really to place out of sight the most prominent object of the observance. This is peculiarly “a day for a man to afflict his soul” for all the pollutions of his nature, for all the evil he hath done, and for all the abominations which are committed around him. This is a season in which it is incumbent upon us, if ever, to call to mind with cordial penitence our personal sins, our family sins, the sins of the church, and of the nation; to labor, if I may so speak, with concentrated effort, to take strong, profound, and abasing views of our heinousness in the sight of God; to meditate upon them again and again, until the heart is in some measure broken and contrite; to repent, as in dust and ashes; and to apply anew to that atoning blood, by which alone our guilt can be washed away, and to that “Holy Spirit of promise,” who alone can destroy the reign of corruption and “heal all our backslidings.” Such exercises, though humiliating, “do good as doth a medicine.” Blessed are they who thus mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5. As days of religious fasting ought ever to be marked by a special recognition and a deep sense of our sins, *so this recognition, if it is of the right stamp, will ever be followed by genuine reformation.* That confession which is not succeeded by amendment is worse than vain. It is manifestly heartless, and, of course, adding sin to sin. Where the heart is really broken and contrite on account of transgression, that transgression will be sincerely loathed and forsaken. If, therefore, a season of humiliation and fasting leaves us as much in love with sin, and as hardened in habits of iniquity as it found us, there is abundant evidence not merely that we have failed of being profited, but that we have contracted guilt by the observance. Hence we find a holy God expressing

his righteous displeasure, and denouncing his severest judgments against his professing people of old, because, while they wearied Him with their fastings and prayers, they remained as obdurate and disobedient as ever. To such He declares, "When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence."

6. In keeping a religious fast, *everything like ostentation, or self-righteousness, should be put far from us.* The Jewish hypocrites, in the days of our Lord's ministry, displayed much of this unseemly spirit. As they loved to "pray standing at the corners of the streets, that they might be seen of men," so even in their *private* fasts (for to these the Savior seems to have had a particular reference in reproofing them), they put on "a sad countenance, and disfigured their faces, that they might appear to men to fast." And when the Pharisee went up to the temple to pray, it was one of the grounds of his boasting, and his confidence toward God, that he "fasted twice in a week." In both these cases, our Lord denounces the spirit which they manifested as diametrically opposed to all true religion, and warns his disciples against it.

And, truly, if there is any exercise in the Christian's life from which a spirit of ostentation display and of proud self-dependence ought to be shut out with abhorrence, it is when he is prostrate before the throne of mercy, professing to mourn over his sins, and to acknowledge his ill-desert in the sight of God. Then, surely, if ever, the most unfeigned abasement of soul, the most cordial self-renunciation, the most heart-felt application to and reliance upon the righteousness of the divine Surety, as the only ground of hope, ought not only to be expressed in every word that is uttered by the lips, but to reign in every feeling, affection, and hope of the immortal soul. The only language ever becoming the redeemed sinner, and especially in such a season as this, is "God be merciful to me a sinner!" "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

7. Once more: Christian fasting ought ever to be accom-

Jer. 14:12

*Cf. Matt.
6:5, 16*

panied with more or less of sympathy and benevolence to the destitute. This point has already been alluded to, but a distinct notice of it in this connection is indispensable. The word of God lays much stress upon it as a concomitant and evidence of acceptable fasting. "Is not this such a fast as I have chosen," says Jehovah by the prophet, "that thou deal thy bread to the hungry; that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house; when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" What occasion so appropriate to sympathize with those who are *hungry from necessity*, as when we submit to the privation *from choice*, and as an aid to prayer, in approaching Him who is the common Benefactor of the rich and the poor?

With many people, it is almost as much a matter of mortification and self-denial — that is, it requires almost as much, and, in some cases, even more, of painful effort — to give a trifle to the poor, as it does to abstain, when hungry, from a favorite meal. It appears peculiarly proper, then, for all professing Christians, and especially those who feel this backwardness to an important duty, always to make their seasons of special prayer occasions of liberality, in some form, to the indigent. Surely there are few things more reasonable and becoming than that, while we are engaged in mourning over our sins, and confessing our unworthiness of the least of all our comforts, we should practically show mercy to others, as our heavenly Father has done to us. Then is the time to devise plans of mercy and benevolence; to cherish forgiveness of injuries; to make restitution to those whom we may have injured; to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and cause "the widow's heart to sing for joy." *Above all, such solemnity is an appropriate season for devising the best of all charity to the benighted, perishing heathen.* FOR OPENING THE HEART IN PRAYER AND CONTRIBUTIONS, THAT THE PRECIOUS BIBLE AND THE LIVING TEACHER MAY BE SENT TO THE MILLIONS WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THAT "FAITHFUL SAYING, AND WORTHY OF ALL ACCEPTATION, THAT JESUS CHRIST CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SAVE SINNERS."

The foregoing discussion suggests a number of *practical reflections*, to several of which your serious attention is requested.

*Luke 18:13;
Gal. 6:14*

*Cf. Isa.
58:6-7*

Job. 29:13

I Tim. 1:15

1. From what has been said, it is evident that *the great duty of religious fasting is by far too much neglected*. It is a self-denying duty, having nothing in it adapted to gratify either the reign of appetite or the love of praise. It is an unfashionable duty. Even many serious professors of religion have no taste for fast-days. Indeed, they are agreeable to the natural inclination of no man. They are seldom, there is too much reason to believe, observed *in private*; and when recommended by public authority, either in Church or State, the *honest and faithful observance* of them is confined, I fear, to a small part even of those who profess to take the word of God for their guide. This is deeply to be lamented. It argues a low standard of piety in the Church generally.

If the spirit of the apostolic days were more prevalent, if we had more of the spirit of Baxter, and Flavel, and Brainerd, and Edwards, and Payson, there would be a much more frequent recurrence than there now is to this important auxiliary of special prayer. It would be much oftener resorted to by individual Christians, and more especially by ministers, in bewailing before God the small measure of their success. We should never hear of an ORDINATION SERVICE being DISGRACED BY A SUMPTUOUS DINNER, instead of solemn fasting. We should be told of churches in every direction availling themselves of this rational and gospel means of adding interest, and feeling, and humiliation to their seasons of special prayer for the descent of the Holy Spirit. In a word, we may say of deep and spiritual piety, "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." And until the latter shall be extensively restored, we cannot rationally expect to see the former revived and prevalent.

Cf. Matt. 17:21 Dear brethren, we pray in words, we pray abundantly, for the universal revival of religion and the dawn of millennial glory; and, when we hear of those triumphs of the Holy Spirit's power in various parts of our land — over which, we doubt not, there is "joy in heaven," as well as on earth — we feel as if we had ample encouragement to prayer. We have the highest encouragement. But we have no reason to expect that we shall receive these blessings, and certainly shall not be suitably prepared for their arrival, unless we are found

waiting for them with that deep contrition and humiliation, as well as longing importunity of spirit, which belong to the frequent and faithful discharge of the duty now recommended.

2. We are led to reflect, by what has been said, *on the reason why fast-days, even when appointed and decently observed, are productive of so little beneficial effect*. The plain reason is that religious fasting, when attempted, is seldom attended upon *honestly* and *sincerely*, in the *appropriate spirit of the institution*. The abstinence from food, the deep and peculiar humiliation of soul which professedly accompanies it, and the solemn vows and efforts to "crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts" which it implies, are all so distasteful to the carnal principle that they are seldom sincerely — much less thoroughly — carried into effect. The exercise is made, for the most part, a formal and superficial one; and leaves those who undertake to perform it, perhaps, more cold and unfeeling than before. So that, I fear, many of our fast-days in modern times, as was certainly the case in times of old, become the means of hardening, instead of softening the heart; and of drawing down the hotter displeasure of God upon us, instead of averting his wrath. Unless we enter cordially and in good earnest into the real design of such days, we had better never pretend to observe them. They are but solemn mockery. And, perhaps, on no occasion have we more reason than on the approach of such a season, whether private or public, to pray fervently that the Holy Spirit may enable us to sanctify it in a manner well pleasing to God, and to the furtherance of his cause in our hearts and around us.

3. Another reflection suggested by what has been said is that *every part of the service enjoined upon us as Christians is a reasonable service*. None of the commandments of God are grievous. For every duty that He requires of us, there is a just and adequate reason, and a reason which makes as much for our own true welfare and happiness as for the glory of Him who lays the duty upon us. We see, for example, that religious fasting is not enjoined for its own sake; or because it has any inherent power to recommend us to God; or because He delights to inflict upon us the pain of privation; but because,

when properly conducted, it tends to promote the benefit of both our souls and our bodies. It is favorable to our bodily health. It is friendly to the culture and strength of our intellectual faculties. It is an important means of mortifying and subduing our corrupt passions, of weaning us from sin, and of promoting our true happiness here and hereafter. Thus the wisdom as well as the goodness of God appears in all that He requires of us. If our nature were not morally diseased, we should not stand in need of so much discipline, and discipline of the corporeal as well as of the mental kind. But as our nature is deeply diseased, we must not wonder at our constant need of medicine which, though not commonly pleasant to the taste, is always salutary when properly applied. Instead of repining that we need it — or, needing it, that our heavenly Sovereign has placed us under a dispensation which requires us to use it — let us be thankful and submissive. The principles of his government are as benignant as they are holy. “Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.”

1 Tim. 4:8

4. Finally, from the foregoing view of the subject, the reflection is obvious, that WE have no less reason for fasting and humiliation than our fathers of former ages. Let us not imagine that there was some special character either in the men or the events of ancient times which rendered the exercise in question more needful to them than to us. By no means; human nature is the same, religion is the same, and the causes of Christian mourning are the same now as they were when Joshua, David, Nehemiah, and Paul fasted and laid in the dust before the mercy-seat. What though the number of the hopefully pious be greater in our day than in theirs? What though the God of all grace has gladdened the hearts of his people in many places by “pouring out his Spirit” and “reviving his work?”

How many millions of our fellow men around us still remain in hardened rebellion! How many churches in our land, notwithstanding all the precious revivals with which it has pleased God to favor us, are to this hour as cold, as desolate, and almost lifeless (in a spiritual sense), as the tombs which

surround their places of worship! How many personal, domestic, ecclesiastical and national sins press heavily upon us as a people and cry aloud for the judgments of a righteous God! Think of the abounding atheism and various forms of infidelity, the pride, the degrading intemperance, the profanations of the Sabbath, the fraud, the gross impiety, the neglect and contempt of the gospel, and all the numberless forms of enormous moral corruption, which even in the most favored parts of our country prevail in a deplorable degree, and in the less favored hold a melancholy and undisturbed reign; think of these abounding sins — and think also in how small a degree multitudes even of the professing people of God seem to be awake to the great responsibilities and duties of their high vocation — and then say whether we have not reason for special humiliation and prayer?

My beloved hearers, if we see no cause on account of these things for weeping and mourning and fasting before the Lord, it is because we have never had our eyes opened to see the evil of sin; never yet taken our stand among those who bear Jehovah’s “mark upon their foreheads,” and who “sigh and mourn for all the abominations that are done” in the land. Professing Christians!, whatever name you bear, unless you are really found in these ranks of the faithful, how can you expect, when the angel of Jehovah’s judgment passes by (as pass by he assuredly will), that your habitations will be spared — or that, amid the surrounding darkness, there will be “light in your dwellings?”

*Cf. Ezek 9:4;
Rev 22:4;
7:3; 9:4*

Cf. Ex. 10:23

*Cf. Acts
2:17,18;
Hab. 3:2*

I. There is no day under the gospel commanded to be kept holy, except the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath.

II. Nevertheless, to observe days of fasting and thanksgiving, as the extraordinary dispensations of divine providence may direct, we judge both scriptural and rational.

III. Fasts and thanksgivings may be observed by individual Christians; or families, in private; by particular congregations; by a number of congregations contiguous to each other; by congregations under the care of a presbytery, or of a synod; or by all the congregations of our church.

IV. It must be left to the judgment and discretion of every Christian and family to determine when it is proper to observe a private fast or thanksgiving; and to the church-sessions to determine for particular congregations; and to the presbyteries or synods to determine for larger districts. When it is deemed expedient that a fast or thanksgiving should be general, the call for them must be judged of by the synod or General Assembly. And if at any time the civil power should think it proper to appoint a fast or thanksgiving, it is the duty of the ministers and people of our communion, as we live under a Christian government, to pay all due respect to the same.

V. Public notice is to be given a convenient time before the day of fasting or thanksgiving comes, that persons may so order their temporal affairs, that they may properly attend to the duties thereof.

From Chapter XIV, *Directory for
Worship* (as amended, 1821),
The Presbyterian Church in the
United States of America