



Truth

On Tough Texts

WWW.THESCRPTUREALONE.COM

A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 72 (July/August 2011)

Fasting: Ritual or Relationship?

Mark 2:19–22

FASTING HAS BECOME A VERY POPULAR TREND IN recent years. In the secular world, for example, there is the book, *Juice Fasting and Detoxification: Use the Healing Power of Fresh Juice to Feel Young and Look Great*. Other books include, among many: *Fasting: The Super Diet*; *Fasting As a Way of Life*; and of course, *Fasting Made Easy* (surprisingly, there isn't *Fasting for Dummies*, but there is *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Fasting*.)

While such things might have some benefit, they have nothing to do with Scripture or spiritual reality. A fundamental principle, in fact, is that Scripture never, not once, speaks of fasting for physical reasons. Some argue that Isaiah 58:8 speaks of physical benefit because it uses the word "health." The Hebrew word (*'ărûkâh*) and context, however, clearly indicate that this is used in a metaphorical sense and pictures spiritual restoration from past sin.

Far more serious is what we read in Christian books nowadays. One popular one, for example, published in 2009, insists, "Those who seek God through fasting can expect tremendous rewards both for their personal lives and the church. They will see breakthroughs in many areas, such as healing, finances, bondages broken, and children set free." As evidence, of course, the author provides us with the usual plethora of "stories of those who have reaped miraculous rewards from this simple act of faith." You can also keep a record of your fasts using the companion *Fasting Journal* (sold separately, of course).

Another author claims that there is "hidden power in prayer and fasting, which holds keys that will unlock the resident power of the Holy Spirit within you! Through this book you will receive an impartation from a man who has

lived these truths and has seen the power of God released for total victory against impossible odds, resulting in revival and literal resurrection." Others maintain that one must fast so he can "hear from God" and "experience crucifixion moments."

Such unbiblical teaching immediately reminds me of the *Prayer of Jabez* fad of a few years back. These, and many other such trends, dramatically demonstrate the mysticism that permeates Christianity today.

While not as far out as the above, even one of today's leading, highly respected evangelical leaders insists in his book on the subject that fasting for the right reasons will bring us immeasurable gifts from our Father. Still another solid evangelical and university professor writes in his book that fasting can have such results as: solve a problem, break negative emotional habits, meet the need of others, and protect from demonic attacks.

Again, these are very troubling trends, for they do not reflect biblical precedent, rather they smack of eastern mysticism. Mystics, in fact, have always been passionately committed to fasting as a major contributor to higher levels of consciousness and new revelation.

So, what does Scripture tell us about fasting? Where does it fit into practical Christian living? Let us examine four emphases.

Fasting in the Old Testament

The most critical fact to note in the Old Testament concerning fasting is that one, and only one, fast was suggested, namely the one on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29–34; 23:26–32). The phrase "afflict

your souls” translates the Hebrew *’ānâ*, “to be afflicted, to be oppressed, to be humbled” and commonly included the idea of refraining from food. What is most significant here is that fasting was inseparably linked to the people’s deep mourning for sin and spiritual anxiety, which indicates the essence of what fasting is about.

As time passed, however, fasting increased almost exponentially. Many such fasts were inarguably sincere—such as Moses on the mount (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:9), David weeping over his child (2 Sam. 12:16–23), and Daniel’s reflecting on Judah’s captivity (Dan. 9:3; 10:2–3)—and flowed from the basic attitude of mourning for sin and spiritual anxiety noted above.

On the other hand, it is also common knowledge that great distress often results in a person simply losing his appetite (although some still immediately jump to the conclusion that the person is “deliberately fasting for spiritual result”). Hannah, for example, was greatly distressed on account of her childlessness and therefore “wept, and did not eat” (1 Sam. 1:7). This was certainly true in David’s case of mourning mentioned above, as it was when the valiant men of Israel buried and mourned over the bones of Saul and his sons (1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:12).

It’s also significant that anger can produce the same result, as when Jonathan was angry with his father and wouldn’t eat because of his mistreatment of David (1 Sam. 20:34), and when Ahab sulked and “would eat no bread” because Naboth refused to part with his estate. Likewise, it is difficult to tell in such passages as Ezra 10:6 and Esther 4:3 whether fasting carries a religious sense or is simply a natural expression of sorrow.

A key to all this presents itself in the fact, as Eugene Merrill writes, that

by the ninth century B.C. fasting had become institutionalized or formalized to the extent that days or other periods of fasting were called as occasions for public worship. The usual way of describing such convocation is “to call for” or “proclaim” a fast. . . . Jehoshaphat . . . called for such an assembly in order to implore God’s intercession on Judah’s behalf (2 Chron. 30:3).¹

There are, in fact, many examples of a king proclaiming a fast, as Jehoiakim did in Judah (Jer. 36:9). Such “extraordinary fasts,” writes Merrill F. Unger, “were appointed by the theocratic authorities on occasions of great national calamity in order that the people might humble themselves before the Lord on account of their sins, thus averting His wrath and getting Him to look upon them again with favor (Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 7:6; 2 Chron. 20:3; Joel 1:14; Joel 2:12; Jer. 36:9; Ezra 8:21; Neh. 1:4).”²

It should be emphasized again, however, that none of these, and other examples we could list (e.g., Esther 9:31–32), were commanded or mandated by God. The danger, in fact, is that such fasting could become nothing more than

outward ritual, and even hypocrisy, because the inner man did not reflect true spiritual worship. This is exactly what we see in Isaiah 58:3–6, where the prophet levels a scathing rebuke of the people because they were only going through the motions. They were more *concerned* by a *ritual* than they were a *reality*, more *consumed* by an *object* than they were *obedience*, more *captivated* by an outward *act* than they were and an inward *attitude*.

As Jeremiah 14:12 also records (about 100 years after Isaiah), because of the people’s rebellion, God declared, “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.” Writing about another century later, Zechariah asked the priests: “When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to [the LORD]?” (Zech. 7:5). Both their *fasting* and their *feasting* (v. 6) were for themselves, not for God.

This sets the stage for our next observation.

Fasting in the New Testament

In the 400 years between Malachi and the events in the Gospels, the situation only grew worse. By the time the Lord Jesus stepped onto the scene, anyone who was truly serious about his religion, especially a Pharisee, was required to keep two fast-days every week, Monday and Thursday, as proudly proclaimed by the boasting Pharisee in Luke 18:12. As commentator Adam Clark adds, “The Pharisees had many superstitious fasts. They fasted in order to have lucky dreams, to obtain the interpretation of a dream, or to avert the evil import of a dream. They also fasted often in order to obtain the things they wished for.” (Sounds pretty familiar to our own day, does it not?) For the most part, however, fasting had become no more than routine ritual that reflected no true piety, but instead was simply “a pious achievement”³ of the observer.

This is vividly illustrated in Matthew 6:16–18. The Pharisees wanted everyone to know they were fasting so people would know they were spiritual. To that end they would put on a “sad countenance” (*skuthrōpos*; grim, gloomy face) and “disfigured their faces” (probably by putting ashes on their heads). Our Lord categorically condemned such false piety, calling such men “hypocrites.” In fact, our Lord’s strongest condemnation was reserved for “hypocrites” (Matt. 23). The English transliterates the Greek *hupokritēs* (*hupo*, “under,” denoting secrecy, and *krinō*, “to judge”). The hypocrite is a pretender, one who professes to be something he is not. In Classical Greek, it originally meant to explain or interpret something but later came to be used in the theatre—the *hupokritēs* was “the ‘answerer’ who appeared on stage and turned the self-contained speeches of the chorus into dialogue form, or the ‘interpreter’ who explained the situation to the audience.”⁴

Interestingly, however, the Classical meanings of *hu-*

pokritēs never appear in the New Testament; it's the figurative idea that we find every time. The hypocrite is one who "plays the part," who says the right words, who convincingly acts the role, but who is not what he claims to be. Our Lord used it, for example, in Matthew 15:7–9 (a quotation of Isa: 29:13): "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."⁵

That serves as a sobering warning for us today. Some Christians want others to know they are fasting and work it into the conversation somehow. But whatever spiritual value there might be in it is negated because of such pride and hypocrisy. As we will see, the practice of fasting that still remains is to be a very personal and private thing.

That brings us to our main text: **And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, 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** (Mk. 2:19–20). As one authority submits, here is an "entirely new view to the question of fasting." He continues:

The irruption of the Kingdom of God, the presence of the Messiah, the good news of salvation not dependant on good works—all this means joy which is something excluded by fasting in the Jewish sense. . . . Such fasting is a thing of the past, belonging to a by-gone era. . . . The answer to the question . . . is linked to the parables of [Mk. 2:21–22]. We must take this as an indication that fasting has been superseded by Jesus. In fact, there is no evidence from the 1st-century that Christians voluntarily imposed fasting on themselves. The epistles of the NT make no reference to it [except 1 Cor. 7:5, 2 Cor. 5:5 and 11:27, which we will address later], and even in those passages which concentrate on the ascetic tendencies of some (Rom. 14 and Col. 2), fasting remains unmentioned.⁶

I am convinced that this is the key to understanding this whole issue. The context concerns the disciples of John the Baptist (possibly a former Essene), who according to Jewish tradition practiced twice-weekly ritual fasting. They noticed, however, that Jesus' disciples did not do this and asked why. Our Lord's response was dazzling. He likened Himself to a bridegroom; as long as He was with them, it made absolutely no sense to fast. A wedding feast usually lasted seven days and was a time of rejoicing, not mourning. While the time would come when he would be **taken away** (even violently removed, *apairō*) and mourning would be appropriate, this was not the time.

To make His point—and here, indeed, is the crux—He adds two illustrations in verses 21–22 of mixing the old with the new. Patching a garment with new, unshrunk cloth

will result in the patch shrinking and tearing the garment when it's washed. Likewise, putting new wine into old wineskins will result in the weak wineskins bursting during fermentation. "The life and liberty of the Gospel," writes William MacDonald, "ruins the wineskins of ritualism."⁷ Such, then, is the result of mixing Judaism with Christianity. As A. C. Gaebelien well says:

A Judaistic Christianity which, with a profession of Grace and the Gospel, attempts to keep the law and fosters legal righteousness is a greater abomination in the eyes of God than professing Israel in the past worshipping idols.⁸

We would submit, therefore, that all this underscores the difference between *ritual* and *relationship*. By the time of Christ, any semblance of personal relationship with God had vanished from Judaism; it was little more than empty ritual. (That is still true today, as I witnessed repeatedly in my recent trip to Israel.) Our Lord, however, was speaking of personal relationship, that He was present with His people, so why would fasting be necessary? As all else in the old Mosaic System is passed, so is ritual fasting.

Now, before we say, "Well, but He's gone now, so fasting is appropriate," let us just stop and think a moment. Is He really gone? Yes, he told the disciples that He would be **taken away**, but let us remember He rose again. Equally significant, He told them that when He departed, He would come again (Jn. 14:18), but in the meantime He would "give [them] another Comforter, that he may abide with [them] for ever" (14:16), adding, in fact, that this was actually profitable for them (16:7). The Greek behind "another" is all important. It is not *heteros*, "another of a different kind" (English "heterodox" and "heterosexual"), rather it is *allos*, "another of similar or identical nature." How thrilling! The Savior is saying in essence, "When I depart, I will send another in my place who is virtually identical to Me."

Yes, physically our Lord is gone and will return. But this in no way diminishes the reality of His personal indwelling presence through the Holy Spirit right now and forever. *That* is a relationship that should replace any trace of ritual. Why would we mourn when He is still here and closer to us than ever in history?

Fasting in Church History

An examination of the practice of fasting in Church History further underscores this difference between ritual and relationship. As noted earlier, there is no evidence from the 1st-century that Christians voluntarily imposed fasting on themselves. This dramatically changed in the 2nd-century, however, when the Jewish ritual tradition of Monday and Thursday took hold in Christianity, although the days chosen were, as Philip Schaff notes, "Wednesday and especially Friday, as days of half-fasting or abstinence from flesh, in commemoration of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus." Also arising at this time was "the custom of

Quadragesimal fasts before Easter,” that is, the 40-day fast of Lent. Such fasts were rigidly practiced especially by the heretical Montanists. In addition to these, in fact, they observed special *Xerophagiae* (“dry eating”) fasts (a “dry” diet excludes meat, dairy products, fish, alcohol, and foods cooked in oil).⁹

The Montanists are especially noteworthy. Founded by Montanus in the early 2nd-century, he claimed that he and his two prophetesses (Prisca and Maximilla) “spoke in a state of ecstasy [i.e., so-called tongues], as though their personalities were suspended while the Paraclete spoke in them. [He] was convinced that he and his prophetesses were the God-given instruments of revelation.” So authoritative was he that to him any “opposition to the new prophecy was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” and he even “claimed the right to push Christ and the apostolic message into the background. . . . Christ was no longer central. In the name of the Spirit, Montanus denied that God’s decisive and normative revelation had occurred in Christ.”¹⁰ We see the same attitudes in some groups today, with their “revelations” often coming “through prayer and fasting.”

It’s also noteworthy that the early Church Father Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215) was opposed to such “over-valuation of fasting” and quoted “the word of Paul” against it: “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, therefore neither abstinence from wine and flesh, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit [Rom. 14:17].”¹¹

Such overemphasis continued virtually unabated nonetheless. As the years unfolded, “Wednesday and Friday continued to be observed in many countries as days commemorative of the passion of Christ (*dies stationum* [guard or watch days]), with half-fasting.”¹² “By the sixth century,” writes Merrill Unger, “fasting was made obligatory by the Second Council of Orleans (A.D. 541), which decreed that anyone neglecting to observe the stated time of abstinence should be treated as an offender. In the eighth century it was regarded as praiseworthy, and failure to observe subjected the offender to excommunication. In the Roman Catholic and Greek churches fasting remains obligatory, whereas in most Protestant churches it is merely recommended.”¹³

What should be glaringly obvious in all that, and more history we could recount, is that there is not a trace of biblical authority in any of it. It is all opinion, tradition, and even superstition, with obvious overtones of paganism. To repeat an earlier statement, it is an “over-valuation of fasting,” an over-emphasis that started very early and has continued to this very day. It totally ignores the change of emphasis that came in the New Testament and clings to *ritual* instead of a *relationship*.

So, where does all that place the believer today?

Fasting Today

While we will come back to instances of fasting in the

book of Acts in a moment, we should first strongly emphasize that there are only three occurrences of the Greek *nesteia* (fasting) in all the New Testament *Epistles*. Two (2 Cor. 5:5 and 11:27) are included in lists of Paul’s trials and tribulations, obviously referring simply to a lack of food.

The only remaining instance appears in 1 Corinthians 7:5 in the context of marriage. With overtones of paganism again, some believers in Corinth were practicing celibacy but with only one partner consenting, tempting the other one to adultery. Paul’s counsel, therefore, was that one partner should not deprive the other. The only exception is that, if both agree to a specific time frame, they could abstain for the purpose of concentrated “fasting and prayer” on the part of either one or both.

This clears up the matter wonderfully. There will be times when we are so engaged in the Word and prayer that food is not only unimportant but even distracting. Since the whole matter is also between husband and wife (who are one), no one else knows anything about it, so there is no pretentious display.

So, *should* a Christian fast today? No, not in the manner prescribed in the Old Testament, for we have a relationship with the living Savior who abides in us through His Spirit. But *will* a Christian fast at times? Yes, whether it might be either losing one’s appetite out of distress, or simply a lack of interest in food because of concentrated spiritual activity. Both the instances of fasting in Acts, in fact, fit the latter idea (13:2–3; 14:23). Contrary to popular mystic teaching, it is neither mandated nor commanded. Neither does it promise any special spiritual effect—there will be no “hearing from God” or “unlocking the resident power of the Spirit.” It is an extremely personal reality between the believer and his Lord.

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher

NOTES

¹ Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Baker Books, 1996), 246.

² *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (electronic edition), entry on “FAST, FASTING.”

³ Colin Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975, 1986), Vol. 1, 612.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 468.

⁵ Word study taken from Pastor Watson’s book, *A Word for the Day* (AMG Publishers, 2006), 343.

⁶ Brown, Vol. 1, 612–13.

⁷ *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, electronic edition).

⁸ A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Loizeaux, 1910), 193.

⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (electronic edition), Vol. II, Chapter VIII, § 101.

¹⁰ Bruce L. Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language*, 3rd Edition (Thomas Nelson, 2008), 65.

¹¹ Noted in Schaff, *op. cit.*

¹² Schaff, Vol. III, Chapter VII, § 75.

¹³ Unger, *op. cit.*

Starting with this issue, TOTT will now be published bi-monthly. Finances, as well as other pressing ministry demands, have made this necessary, but we rejoice nonetheless in God's provision to continue what we pray is an edifying ministry (August, in fact, begins our seventh year of TOTT). Each issue will contain an additional page, however, which will provide space for a little longer study and/or a book review.

Book Review: *Pillars of Grace*

By: Dr. Steven J. Lawson

A few months back (Issue 69), I reviewed the first of five projected volumes in Dr. Steven J. Lawson's series, *A Long Line of Godly Men*. That first volume, *Foundations of Grace*, masterfully traces the Doctrines of Grace from Genesis to Revelation. "The teaching of sovereign grace," Lawson writes, "literally stretches from cover to cover in the Bible" (p. 36). Beginning with Moses, moving on to the historical writers and prophets, and then marching on to the Apostles, early Church Fathers and their descendents throughout Church History, and finally up to modern defenders of the faith, the doctrines of sovereign grace are shown to be biblical and historical beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt. As I also recently wrote (Issue 67), this is on my "Top Ten" list and is an absolute must.

Well, the long-awaited Volume 2, *Pillars of Grace* (Reformation Trust), was released back in March. Here Lawson does what he did in the first volume, this time covering the 2nd- through 16th-centuries, noting such "pillars" as: Clement of Rome, Irenaeus, Jerome, Augustine, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.

As does the first book, this one demonstrates that any notion that "sovereign grace" was the novel creation of John Calvin ("in an ivory tower in Western Europe," p. 19) is ludicrous. It is rather rooted in Scripture and historic theology. In fact, "concerning the doctrines of grace," Lawson contends, "virtually nothing new was taught during the Reformation era. No teaching of divine sovereignty was proclaimed during the sixteenth century that had not already been developed and taught in previous centuries, to some degree, by the Church Fathers, Monastics, Scholastics, and Pre-Reformers. The renowned Scottish church historian William Cunningham notes, "There was nothing new in substance in the Calvinism of Calvin." (p. 20). As Calvin believed (and I am convinced correctly so), the medieval Roman Catholic Church had abandoned the true Gospel. To him the Reformation was simply a return to biblical theology, which included the Doctrines of Grace as the core of the faith.

Chapter 1, "Pillars of Sovereign Grace," is in itself a gem. It is a complete nine-page (plus endnotes) overview from the Church Fathers (AD 100–500), through the Medieval Leaders (500–1500), and finally the Protestant Reformers (1483–1575), encapsulating the faithful men who

embraced the biblical truth of the sovereign grace of God in salvation. Chapters 2 through 24 then detail each of these: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Carthage, Cyprian of Carthage, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, Isidore of Seville, Gottschalk of Orbais, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Bradwardine, John Wycliffe, John Hus, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, William Tyndale, Heinrich Bullinger, and finally John Calvin. Each modest length chapter also provides study questions, and there are Scripture and Subject indices.

"From Clement of Rome in the first century to Calvin of Geneva in the sixteenth," Lawson writes, "there is a progression in the church's understanding of the doctrines of grace, a gradual maturation in the comprehension of these glorious truths. What began as mere restatements of Scripture grew into fuller descriptions of God's sovereign grace in salvation." While Lawson makes clear that "these stalwarts had feet of clay" and "were capable of holding views that contradicted their own teachings"—such as baptismal regeneration that was held by several of the Church Fathers—they nonetheless "helped bring great clarity to the church regarding many essential truths" (p. 37).

Some readers might feel a little repetition at times, while others will simply view this as consistency. There is the occasional omission, such as Bernard of Clairvaux's devotion to the Virgin Mary, but as noted above, Lawson admits the "clay feet" problem upfront. For my taste, there could have been a little more detail of each person's theology and overall contribution—then again, the book is already 530 pages.

In short, as with Volume 1, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It is absolutely essential reading for students in training for ministry and pastors who are already there. In a day when we are running away from history and biblical doctrine, these volumes remind us that we are giving up the ship.

(To comply with Federal Trade Commission rules, I would note that I will receive a free copy of this book as compensation for my review. Such, however, in no way effects my honest review.)

“Expositing Ephesians” Blog

We hope you will visit our blog: “Expositing Ephesians: The Christian's Wealth and Walk.” *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* is one of the chief passions of Pastor Watson’s life and ministry. He believes this epistle is at the very core of the Christian life. He spent years in the study of it and then three and one half years expositing it from the pulpit. While the complete exposition is on our website, we felt “bite sized” blog posts would be easier for readers to access. We hope this blog will be a blessing to you. We also hope you will tell others about this blog. Please check for new posts each *Monday* and *Friday*:

<http://expositingephesians.blogspot.com/>.