

rests on sworn compact, and negatives the suggestion of a "natural" link between God and people.

The last general criticism I desire to make before proceeding to the discussion of details is that large portions of the book will fall with the critical positions that are throughout assumed. Thus, the remarks on pp. 46-48 and 81-84 about feasts, to take only one instance, go by the board with the Wellhausen theories. This relieves me of the duty of considering large sections of the book with which it might otherwise be necessary to deal.



Fast^{ing}.

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IT is much to be wished that the Godly discipline of the primitive Church might be restored again" (Commination Service). There has been no generation of which this pious wish might be more appropriately entertained than the present one. The Church is in danger of repeating the Prophet Ezekiel's description of pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness (Ezek. xvi. 20), or that of Habakkuk, of pride, covetousness, intemperance, and idolatry (Hab. ii.). The Church is rich; it lives luxuriously; it is not sufficiently separate from the world; it is, like Lot in Sodom, too much at home in the world; self-denial is very little and very seldom practised. Hence, its spiritual life is thin, and its power weak, and the respect it receives from the world less. The seasons are by very many kept in name only, or made into worldly festivals, and they are properly observed by very few. It behoves everyone, therefore, who is anxious that the life of the Church should be deep, and its power in the world Divine, to bring himself up to a higher level at this season, by self-examination and discipline, and to seek to influence others to do the same.

One of the means by which this deepening of the life of the Church may be obtained, and which is very appropriate at this season, is that of fasting. This exercise has almost ceased as an institution. The vast majority do not think of it as a Christian duty, and often look upon those who do as peculiar, and perhaps a little given to fads, if not to superstition. It may be that the chief reason why this exercise is neglected is that Christians generally do not know its importance and benefits, and that, again, may be because the subject is not expounded nor the duty enforced by the clergy, who in this matter are in very many instances as negligent as the laity. It will, therefore, we hope, be profitable to consider the examples of fasting as recorded in Holy Scripture, so that we may understand in some measure the principles that govern it.

1. Fasting is included in the ordinary "godly exercises." Our Lord speaks of it along with prayer and alms. Also in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican He makes the Pharisee scrupulously observant of all these three. These are the three great means of grace, without which a Christian cannot be "perfect." In all the books of the Scripture, fasting, or the things which it signifies, is referred to as having been practised by "holy men of God." Sometimes it is commended, sometimes the way in which it is observed is condemned, and the true way is prescribed, but it is always referred to as being one of the recognised ordinances of religion.

2. The true principle of fasting is "unto God." This is the motive, which, as in all religious exercises, gives it its character and power. It is to be done in the presence of God, as much as possible from the knowledge of the world, with the whole man—body and mind face to face with God. It is both a state and an act of worship, for God's glory, and that only. Apart from this principle, fasting, as a religious act, is not good, but rather an evil. "Meat commendeth us not to God." A man is not spiritually better for eating, nor worse for not eating. Fasting is not to be undertaken for its own sake. It is not to be observed to enhance our own reputation—"to be seen of

men." St. Paul gives as one of the marks of the departing from "the faith" in the latter times that of abstaining from meats—*i.e.*, by a spurious spiritualism, which makes moral perfection consist in abstinence from outward things, some would pretend to attain to a higher perfection. Nor is fasting to be observed with a view to merit before God. The Pharisee in the Temple hoped to be commended, but the Publican, who, doubtless, never had observed this ordinance, was justified in preference. The Jews in the time of Isaiah complained that they had fasted, but God had taken no knowledge of it; and God replied that it was because it was not done "unto Him." If this principle, "unto God" be observed, all other features, such as total or partial fasting, the times, and the duration, may be left to each to decide for himself.

3. The place of fasting in the religious life. It is that condition and act of the body which accompanies those of the mind in times of great distress or intense supplication.

Man is "three in one and one in three." He needs all these to constitute his full manhood. And the condition and conduct of each affects for good or for evil that of the others. There is constant action and reaction between the several parts of his nature. "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones." If the spirit is depressed or exercised in severe anxiety or study, the body sympathizes with it, and desire for food ceases. "My heart is smitten and withered like grass, so that I forget to eat my bread." Hence, fasting is not an arbitrary command, out of harmony with man's constitution, but, like all the yoke of Christ, is natural and "light" at those times when it should be observed. The histories of holy men of God give several instances of its use. Fasts were kept as memorials of past calamities, so as to keep in memory the lessons of history, as those of the capture of Jerusalem and the murder of Gedaliah. They were observed when suffering from great misfortune, as when the children of Israel were defeated in battle by the Benjamites. In confession and repentance of sin and self-humiliation before God. The

Israelites were instructed to afflict their souls on the Day of Atonement, or the fast ordered by Jezebel at the pretended sin in the city. It sometimes formed a part of ordinary worship, as when Barnabas and Saul were set apart for preaching the Gospel. It accompanied earnest and intense supplication—David for the life of the child, Nehemiah for the restoration of the nation. It was employed in mortifying the flesh and the cultivation of the spiritual life : St. Paul kept his body under, lest he should become a castaway. The priests were commanded to abstain from luxurious living when ministering before the Lord, and men whose whole lives were ordained by God to special work were ordered to be strictly separated from all indulgences. In all these cases of stress, distress, and conflict, fasting was natural and feasting would have been repugnant, and a proof that the profession of inner mental agony was a mockery.

4. The benefits of fasting. It follows from what has been said of the union of body and mind, and the influence of each upon the other, that very great will be the good that comes from this exercise.

(a) It tends to self-control. The body is intended to be the servant and instrument of the mind, but in the carnal man it is the master. Even in the life of the Christian “the flesh lusteth against the spirit.” One of the temptations to which all men are subject is the “desire of the flesh,” and by that even the Lord was tempted. It is natural to man to enjoy his food, but there is great danger of indulging. It requires an effort, and sometimes a strong will, to deny ourselves ; but a man who can thus rule his own body will be the more able to rule his own spirit, and by so much he will be a stronger and a better man.

(b) Fasting tends to make the Christian life more genuine. It is the last observed, the severest, and that which usually includes the other two. A man may give alms and not pray ; he may pray and not fast ; but if he fasts he will nearly always pray, and he will necessarily have that disposition of sacrifice of which alms is a proof. As it is the greatest religious exercise,

so, when it is observed with the proper spirit it makes for reality, and when it is hollow, "to be seen of men," and with a view to merit, it is the greatest religious sham. But if it is a real "fast unto God" it purifies and solidifies the life; because it is the severest ordinance it is the outward expression of the deepest feelings. It is secret, and whatever is secret is real. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." It affects and stirs up the deepest depths of the heart; and in these days of feasting, when it is a neglected and forgotten duty, it requires more than ordinary courage.

(c) Fasting lessens the power of temptation. "When I had fed them to the full, then they committed adultery." Many of the temptations are in the flesh. The condition of the body also affects the power of the mind. It therefore follows that to indulge the flesh is not only wrong in itself, but also leads to greater sin. St. Paul knew this, and kept his body under. Fasting, whether partial or total, is an antidote to sensuality. It is almost impossible for a man to overcome evil as long as he is self-indulgent, and one of the surest ways of weakening the power of lust is to mortify the flesh, because then the taste for many things is decreased, as, for instance, the craving for alcohol.

(d) Fasting is an aid to worship. The whole man should be employed in this service. "All that is within me bless His holy Name." In this, the highest occupation in which man can be engaged—prayer and adoration—the whole man should be at its best, and to attain to this fasting is a very great help. During a fast the body is in its best condition. The *posture* is thought to be important, but the *condition* is really more so. It is impossible to worship properly when the body is diseased or disabled. The body is at its best when digestion is finished and food is assimilated, as a fire when the coal is red before new coal is heaped upon it. There is no sickness, no fainting, no headache arising from digestion or indigestion. This idea may appear foolish to some people, but everyone knows that the condition of the body interferes often with the quality of his worship. It is impossible to worship God freely and fully after

a full meal. This is one of the reasons why congregations in some services are so sleepy, and unable to realize the full blessedness of the service, because they have come almost directly from the dinner-table. It ought to be thought as important to appear before the Lord in as good condition of the body as in the "due preparation of the heart." Fasting is an act of the mind as well as a condition of the body, and that also is a help to worship. It strengthens the reasoning powers and intensifies the purpose; it accompanies and deepens repentance; it is a kind of self-revenge for past sins; it gives wings to prayer: it gives greater power to supplication. All this tends to make the worship more acceptable to God. We do not mean that worship, however pure, is accepted for its own sake, but that it comes up more to the conditions of pure and effective worship; as, for instance, in the case of repentance "we judge ourselves, and therefore we are not judged by the Lord." Thus, God hearkens and hears, and keeps a book of remembrance. Fasting increases the power for Christian work. It tends to vigorous health and to lengthening of life. This is not intended at the time, but it has this result. Self-indulgence causes sickness and shortens life. "While the meat was in their mouths the wrath of God came upon them." "For this cause some are sick and some are fallen asleep." Many hard-working Christians, and not a few gifted and successful ministers, would have better health, and would prolong their useful lives if they would adopt this system of partial, and occasional total, fasting. It also refines the power of spiritual perception. Truth comes by inspiration as well as by study. Moses fasted forty days when he received the law. It makes a Christian a greater example of good, especially in these days when it is so little practised. It also brings the Holy Spirit more into the life, and makes that life a greater power.

5. The method of fasting. There are no rules. It is a principle to be put into operation spontaneously, according to the exigencies of the spiritual life, the constitution, and the leadings of the Holy Spirit. If it becomes a mere "living by

rule " it is in danger of becoming mechanical and formal. Still, a word may be written in the way of suggestion. Temperance will be habitually practised by all true Christians. There are some indulgences which may be right and proper for the world, but which a man of God *ought* not and *cannot* enjoy ; and there are seasons when semi-fasting will be seasonable and necessary, and other times when total abstinence from all food and pleasure will be profitable. The Christian himself who lives near to his God will know when these times come. I would suggest that all religious services would be more acceptable to God and profitable to the worshipper if they were preceded by partial or total abstinence. The Jews fasted on all festivals until the sixth hour, hence the answer of St. Peter to the charge of drunkenness. Many Christians have a rule of abstaining on one day in the week and spending more time in prayer ; and as far as possible it should be accompanied by good works, which is the kind of "fast" which God has chosen, and which He has promised to bless.

This subject has special importance for ministers of the Gospel. They are separated for life unto God for the highest office. They are expected to be holier than ordinary Christians. They ought to aim at being at their very best when they have to preach their sermons. A careful study of Lev. xxi. will teach that God expects His minister to attain to a higher standard of personal purity and power of body and spirit. For myself, I cannot understand how a preacher of the Gospel can indulge in the lusts of the flesh and of the mind, as some do, and properly fulfil their ministry. It is the rule of many to go from private prayer to public duty and back to private prayer, and to preach their Sunday morning sermons before partaking of food, and they all say that they are stronger in body, clearer in mind, and freer in spirit from so doing, and I believe that "this witness is true." But in any case, for all Christians I believe that if this ordinance were more frequently and generally observed, the Church would be less worldly, more powerful, and more successful.