

WHY 'FAST DAY'?

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As some may not fully understand why the Thursday of a Communion is called the Fast Day, it may be helpful to consider the subject and see how appropriately the name describes a day set apart for humbly confessing our sins to God as part of the preparation needed for remembering the death of Christ worthily. If it is proper for Christians to fast, we may expect to find a warrant for it, in the Word of God, as a practice in keeping with the spiritual nature of the new era of the Church inaugurated by the Saviour. This is what we do find when we examine the Scriptures.

Let our enquiry be directed first to the Gospels. We see there that fasting was much practiced by the Pharisees who regarded themselves as the foremost, practical exponents of the Jews' religion. Jesus commented adversely on many of the Pharisees' activities; did He approve or disapprove of this one? We find in Matthew 4, v. 2 that He gives direction for fasting. In Luke chapter eighteen, the Pharisee's fasting which he boasted of in prayer, is deprecated as sinful ostentation. Of special interest, however, in this enquiry is Matthew 9, v14-17, especially verse fifteen. "And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bride chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast."

The Baptist was in prison and those disciples of his who had not accepted his testimony to Jesus, evidently felt resentful and ready to fault the Saviour, and even to align themselves with the Pharisees on occasion, as here. Yet it is understandable that John's plight should make them sad and that they should wonder how it is possible for Jesus and his disciples not to be fasting along with them. The Saviour's explanation is given in this verse and it is suited to help us also in our enquiry as to the suitability of the term Fast Day.

It is to be understood that we are concerned with religious fasting, not the kind engaged in for physical reasons. To fast is to abstain from eating, and from earliest ages it has been recognised as a natural accompaniment of deep grief. Intense sorrow takes away the inclination to eat. It did so in Saul's case when at Endor doom was pronounced upon himself, his sons and the host of Israel (I Sam. 28, v. 23). It would be just the same if the grief had a spiritual cause;

fasting would be natural. It was so with David after the discovery of his great sin. "Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die...David therefore besought the Lord for the child, and David fasted, and went in and lay all night upon the earth." (2 Sam. 12, v. 14, 16). Just as feasting is appropriate to feelings of joy, so fasting seems suited to sorrow.

The first mention of fasting in the Bible is in Judges 20, v. 26, when all Israel fasted in their grief at having to fight the tribe of Benjamin. It is remarkable that there is no word of fasting in the five books of Moses, and it shows how far removed the Jewish religion, as established, was from the false asceticism and outward mortifications practised in the religions of their heathen contemporaries. There was, however, one annual occasion which in the latter ages of Israel became known as the "Fast." This was the Day of Atonement when "the high priest went alone, once every year, not without blood which he offered for himself and for the errors of the people." (Heb. 9, v. 7). Being a day for calling sins to remembrance (just like our Fast Day), the people were to afflict their souls and do no work at all.

"It shall be a Sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls by a statute for ever. (Lev. 16, v. 31). On that day it was appropriate that godly sorrow for sins should be matched by their ceasing to gratify fleshly desires. Later in Israel's history the people fasted completely on the Day of Atonement, and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes was adopted as an additional sign of grief.

It is one thing, however, to fast because of deep, spiritual sorrow and another to fast apart from true humiliation of soul. In Israel, in times of backsliding, this became the tendency, and this we find Isaiah denouncing purely formed fasts in Chapter 58, v. 3-7. The people protested that they had fasted yet God had taken no notice of their piety. The Lord, however, saw that along with their fasting went pleasure-seeking and "business as usual." They oppressed the poor for gain and sinned in many other ways too. This is always the danger with external observances, that they will become empty forms. The church in both dispensations has been prone to rest satisfied with the externals of religion, and to offer God the husks of words, postures and ceremonies, while their hearts remained far from him. We see then that while God did not prescribe fasting as a religious ordinance, the practice, because of its suitability to express heart sorrow, made a place for itself in the religion of Israel in later

times. Where it is a natural, voluntary expression of soul sorrow, the Word refers to it approvingly. In addition to the cases already mentioned, there are those of Ahab (I Kings 21, v, 27), the people of Nineveh (Jonah 2, v, 7), Ezra's proclamation of a fast at the river Ahava, and in the New Testament, the instance of the Church at Antioch fasting and praying before sending Barnabas and Saul to their missionary work.

Now in our text it is clear that the Saviour confirms the spiritual view of fasting. As an end in itself, a mere outward and often hypocritical observance, He gave it no place and referred to it disparagingly in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. "I thank thee, O God, that I am not as other men are, extortions, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess." (Luke 18, v, 11-12). Therefore on this occasion Christ excused his followers, because fasting now would be unnatural, but He foretold that the time would come when they would fast. Now as they drank in the gracious words which fell from His lips and rejoiced in His unique fellowship, the Light of the world and the Lover of the Church, they could not mourn. But the days would come, three terrible days, when they would weep and lament, and in their sorrow they would fast then. The men and women who loved the Saviour and mourned over his decease had no heart for eating and drinking while he lay in the grave.

Therefore as far as private fasting is concerned, the matter lies with the individual. If sorrow demands it, then let it be done. It is a general law of our nature that the outward should correspond with the inward. Mournful expressions and gloomy words do not fit with a marriage feast. Raucous laughter and exuberant jollity would be sadly discordant in the home desolated by death. Thus it is that a sober abstinence, total or partial, can help towards a proper feeling of sorrow for sin. Fasting is an act of self-denial, a refusal to gratify the appetites of the flesh, which can be an assertion of the soul's supremacy over the body, and does in fact tend to strengthen its authority. No doubt, when the Fast Day came to be observed, fasting in some measure did constitute part of the observance. Partial abstention from food would quite likely be an aid to the profitable observance of the day. Nowadays the practice of actually fasting is in abeyance, but the name lingers on. If one would seek by God's grace to feel truly humbled before Him on account of our transgressions and the sin of our hearts, the sadness to which fasting is so natural an accompaniment, would possess us and prompt us to pray as David did "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter

than the snow, make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.” If we would sincerely mourn over sin, the literal fasting be an indifferent matter. At the same time it might be pleaded, that should anyone think that it would be helpful to be sparing in diet on the Fast Day, none should stand in his way. The Lord Jesus has given directions for true fasting that is accepted of God and beneficial to him who does it. “But thou, when thou fastest, 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.” (Matt. 6, v, 17, 18).