

*Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava,
that we might humble ourselves before our God
to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones,
and all our possessions.*

—EZRA 8:21

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace,
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding ev'ry hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.*

—WILLIAM COWPER

“God Moves in a Mysterious Way”¹

FASTING FOR THE LITTLE ONES

Abortion and the Sovereignty of God Over False Worldviews

Our hunger for God is too small. This is true not only because our capacities to desire are atrophied—like a muscle that lifts only feathers—but also because our capacity to see the Desirable is untrained on the telescope of God’s Word.

On What Do We Exercise the Muscle of Desire?

We are meant to desire the Great with great desire.

Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

—Psalm 73:25-26

As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

—Psalm 42:1-2

O God, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee earnestly; My soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

—Psalm 63:1

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.

—Philippians 3:8

But we flex our desires for small things rather than for God. And so the very potential for desire diminishes.

How Large Are the Tiny Stars?

And we do not put our eye often to the telescope of God's Word where the tiny twinklings of God in our cluttered night sky are revealed as unspeakably great wonders. How often do we pray with the psalmist, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law" (Psalm 119:18)? And if we do not see him in his greatness, we will not desire him in his fullness.

Beholding the glory of God is not only a private experience on a mountain as he passes by. It is also a public experience as he multiplies plagues in the land of Egypt, and divides the Red Sea, and swallows the family of Korah into the earth, and turns water into wine, and raises the dead, and causes selfish men to lay down their lives for the sake of love, and turns the hearts of kings toward the cause of Truth. There is a hunger for God that goes beyond the desire for private experience. It longs for the public display of his glory in the world. It longs for the great dishonors against our God to be set right. It is not content to hope for private revelations of his saving help, as precious as they are. It yearns for the open triumph of his hand in the establishment of God-exalting

truth and righteousness—in universities and courts of law and advertising agencies and political debates and all the media of television and radio and newspapers and magazines and movies and the Internet. It is driven by a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.

Fasting for the Public Glory of God

If fasting is an exclamation point after the sentence of the heart, “O God, show us your glory!” then fasting is not merely a private matter either. It has to do with the public, historical, cultural, global demonstrations of the glory of God that our hearts desire. That is what this chapter is about. Taking abortion as one manifestation of a great godlessness in our culture, how shall we then live and pray and fast?

Francis Schaeffer’s Vindication

Francis Schaeffer died on May 5, 1984. Thirteen years later *Christianity Today* featured his picture on the front of the magazine over the caption, “Our Saint Francis.” In Michael Hamilton’s lead essay we read the tribute that in the last twenty years of his life

perhaps no intellectual save C.S. Lewis affected the thinking of evangelicals more profoundly; perhaps no leader of the period save Billy Graham left a deeper stamp on the movement [of American evangelicalism] as a whole. Together the Schaeffers gave currency to the idea of intentional Christian community, prodded evangelicals out of their cultural ghetto, inspired an army of evangelicals to become serious scholars, encouraged women who chose roles as mothers and homemakers, mentored the leaders of the New

Christian Right, and solidified popular evangelical opposition to abortion.²

Almost twenty years have passed since Schaeffer, together with C. Everett Koop, launched his missile against abortion, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1979)—a book, a film series, and a speaking tour. The amazing thing today at the end of the twentieth century is how up-to-date it still sounds, and how prophetic it has proved to be. Michael Hamilton acknowledges in his 1997 article that “some critics have recently allowed that [Schaeffer’s] big picture has proven durable. . . . In particular, he appears to have been prescient on the issue of human life.”³

When I turn back to Schaeffer’s two-decades-old words, they have that prophetic ring of durability and truth.

In the flood of the loss of humanness in our age—including the flow from abortion-on-demand to infanticide and on to euthanasia—the only thing that can stem this tide is the certainty of the absolute uniqueness and value of people. And the only thing which gives us that is the knowledge that people are made in the image of God. We have no other final protection. And the only way we know that people are made in the image of God is through the Bible and the incarnation of Christ, which we know from the Bible.

If people are not made in the image of God, the pessimistic, realistic humanist is right: the human race is an abnormal wart on the smooth face of a silent and meaningless universe. In this setting, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia (including the killing of mentally deranged criminals, the severely handicapped, or the elderly who are an economic burden) are completely logical. . . . Without the Bible and without the revelation in Christ (which is only told to us in the Bible) there is nothing to stand between us and our children and the eventual acceptance of the monstrous inhumanities of the age.⁴

Michael Hamilton comments that “Schaeffer’s bleak vision is now daily news.”

“Cadaver Jack” Kevorkian has already killed more people than Ted Bundy, but the state of Michigan cannot muster the political will to stop him. A federal court has forbidden the state of Washington to pass laws preventing doctors from killing their patients, while the University of Washington is permitted to scavenge and sell the body parts of thousands of aborted children every year.⁵

The Most Permissive Abortion Democracy in the World

It would not surprise Francis Schaeffer that America has become the most permissive of all democratic societies in the modern world when it comes to abortion.

Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard Law School is *the* authority on abortion law in the Western world. She notes that, of all democratic societies, the U.S. is far and away the most permissive on abortion. . . . She observes, the now-united Germany adopted a new abortion law providing significant protections for the unborn. As is the case in every democracy except the U.S., the law was adopted through legislative politics. But the Supreme Court has in effect declared that the American people, once thought to be the teachers of the world in the ways of democracy, are peculiarly unfitted for self-governance.⁶

This strange power of the Supreme Court symbolizes how intractable the American position seems to be. Its logic is that 1.6 million lives a year are

the price that must be paid in order not to interfere with lifestyles that presuppose abortion on demand. That is the

judgment imposed by judicial fiat on a society in which 75 percent of the people say that abortions should not be allowed for the reasons that 95 percent of abortions are in fact performed.⁷

There is a kind of desperation that begins to grip a people ruled not by legislators, but by judges who declare the Constitution to mean what they say it means. This desperation leads to talk of desperate measures. We have already had killings. This too would not have surprised Francis Schaeffer, who “defined abortion as the hinge issue for American society, called Christians to civil disobedience, and even broached the idea of resisting the government by force.”⁸ He concluded one of his last books, *A Christian Manifesto*, in 1981, with the words, “If there is no final place for civil disobedience, then the government has been made autonomous, and as such, it has been put in the place of the Living God.”⁹

The Legitimacy of the American Regime?

Again in fulfillment of Schaeffer’s warnings there have been stunning recent public discussions of the possible illegitimacy of the present American regime. In 1996 and 1997, a symposium including, among others, William Bennett, Robert Bork, Charles Colson, James Dobson, and Richard John Neuhaus addressed this issue. “The question here explored, in full awareness of its far-reaching consequences, is whether we have reached or are reaching the point where conscientious citizens can no longer give moral assent to the existing regime.”¹⁰

There is no endorsement here of killing abortionists. But there is the sober judgment that “A civilization cannot tolerate private executions, as a civilization cannot long survive the license to kill unwanted human beings.”¹¹ How long, is the ques-

tion. Richard Neuhaus observes that “the destructive effects of anomie and anger are already evident as a result of law divorced from constitutional text, moral argument, and democratic process. The ever-fragile bonds of civility are unraveled as politics becomes, to paraphrase Clausewitz, war pursued by other means. Lawless law is an invitation to lawlessness.”¹²

What Abortion Teaches a Nation

Meanwhile, the abortion license eats away at one precious thing after another. The children are the first to go. The women next, with the guilt and the heartbreak and the physical harm and the manifold effects of post-abortion syndrome.¹³ Then come the fathers with some remorse and anger and huge amounts of “irresponsibility and predatory male sexual behavior” encouraged by the assumption that there is a simple solution to any unwanted pregnancy. Then comes the erosion of the moral landscape that depends so much on virtues and values and commitments that go beyond mere autonomous individual liberties.

In February 1995, before the President of the United States at the National Prayer Breakfast, Mother Teresa spoke with courage and directness concerning this erosive effect of abortion.

I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child—a direct killing of the innocent child—murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? . . .

By abortion, the mother does not learn to love, but kills even her own child to solve her problems. And by abortion, the father is told that he does not have to take any responsibility at all for the child he has brought into the world. That father is likely to put other women into the same trou-

ble. So abortion just leads to more abortion. Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching the people to love, but to use any violence to get what they want. That is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion.¹⁴

This is what Francis Schaeffer meant when he said, “Compassion . . . is being undermined. And it is not only the babies who are being killed; it is humanness which the humanist worldview is beating to death.”¹⁵

On Not Seeing Things in Bits and Pieces

Here is where Francis Schaeffer is at his best—at the level of worldviews. And this is surely the level at which the great battles of the universe are fought. Schaeffer said that “the basic problem of the Christians in this country in the last eighty years or so . . . is that they have seen things in bits and pieces instead of totals.”¹⁶ He means that the worldviews behind the bits and pieces—like abortion—have not been understood and resisted. The name he gives the worldview that sustains, while it can, the modern West, including abortion, is “the material-energy, chance view of final reality.”

We must try to roll back the results of the total worldview which considers material-energy, shaped by chance, as the final reality. We must realize that this view will with inevitable certainty always bring forth results which are not only relativistic, and not only wrong, but which will be inhuman, not only for other people, but for our children and grandchildren, and our spiritual children. It will always bring forth what is inhuman, for with its false view of total reality it not only does not have a basis for the uniqueness and dignity of the individual person, but it is totally ignorant as to what, and who Man is.¹⁷

God, not material-energy is the final reality. And he, not chance, shapes all things. The restoration of this foundation—the supremacy of God in all things—is the great challenge of the western world. A worldview built on matter and chance “leaves no room for meaning, purpose, or values in the universe and gives no base for law. . . . Its control of the consensus has become overwhelmingly dominant in about the last forty years.”¹⁸

A Worldview War on Abortion

This is the context for our opposition to abortion. So Schaeffer recommends not just that we resist the “bits and pieces” but the whole worldview in the way we pray and struggle and work. “Certainly every Christian ought to be praying and working to nullify the abominable abortion law. But as we work and pray, we should have in mind not only this important issue as though it stood alone. Rather, we should be struggling and praying that this whole other total entity—the material-energy, chance worldview—can be rolled back with all its results across all of life.”¹⁹

The most compelling pro-life efforts today grasp this goal. David Reardon’s vision is one example that connects even explicitly with Schaeffer’s worldview approach. Reardon, a biomedical ethicist, echoes Schaeffer’s concern in his specific strategy:

The political goal of making abortion illegal has always been a truncate vision. Our real desire has always been to create a culture where abortion is not just illegal, but is *unthinkable*. In such a culture, the physical, psychological, and spiritual dangers of abortion will be common knowledge. In such a culture, commitment, compassion, and a

sense of duty to aid and protect both mother and the child will be universal.²⁰

The key word is “unthinkable.” And it was Schaeffer, seventeen years earlier, who said, “There is a ‘thinkable’ and an ‘unthinkable’ in every era.”²¹ And it is the underlying worldview that governs what is thinkable and unthinkable. Therefore, Reardon and Schaeffer, and most thoughtful people today, realize that the battle over abortion is a much deeper battle for the soul of the culture and its worldview.²²

The Place of Prayer and Fasting

How then shall we resist and reform? In the last years of his life Schaeffer was increasingly oriented on the political arena and increasingly disenchanted with the narrow piety of evangelicalism—the “majority of the Silent Majority” who had “two bankrupt values—personal peace and affluence.”²³ His emphasis was a prophetic and timely call.

But I wonder if many of the young scholars and activists (now in their forties and fifties!) whom he inspired need to hear a balancing word about the power of prayer and fasting, not as an alternative to thinking and acting, but as a radical foundation that says, “The victory belongs to the Lord, even if the horse (of scholarship and politics) is made ready for the day of battle” (see Proverbs 21:31). Listen to the books crying out for evangelical renewal and reformation in the life of the mind, the restoration of Truth in the place of technique, the recovery of church social compassion from government powerlessness, the taking of moral high ground in the environmental cause, and many other causes. Is there a sense in each of these that the root issues are so intractable to human suasion that the call for fasting and prayer

would not only be fitting but desperately needed? I am commending such a call.

Fasting and Praying for Worldview Breakthroughs

This was not Schaeffer's main call at the end of his life, and for some today it is not part of their horizon—that fasting and prayer might bring the breakthroughs they write about and work for so passionately. Schaeffer did say, “Every Christian ought to be praying and working to nullify the abominable abortion law. . . . We should be struggling and praying that this whole other total entity—the material-energy, chance worldview—can be rolled back.”²⁴ I wonder if the scholars and activists take even that to heart. I confess that my own praying for worldview breakthroughs is not what it should be. Oh, how easily I settle into a resigned and fatalistic frame of mind when it comes to secular mindsets, and defective theologies, and institutional corruption, and philosophical falsehood, and pervasive cultural biases.

But this is not the time for resignation or fatalism. It is the time for radical prayer and fasting to the end that all our thinking and all our preaching and all our writing and all our social action and missions will have the aroma of God on it and will carry a transforming thrust far beyond anything mere man could do. Then might it be said, beyond all expectation and human possibility, “Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall before you” (Leviticus 26:8).

Avoiding a Siege Mentality in Babylon

Where shall we get the confidence and the encouragement to fast and pray for such sweeping worldview concerns?

I suggest that we consider the biblical story of Ezra, espe-

cially Ezra 8:21-23. Let me give you some faith-building background to this text so you hear it with all the force Ezra gives it, and with all its relevance for our worldview concerns.

Israel had been taken into Babylonian exile. They had been there for decades. Now the time had come, in God's reckoning, for their restoration. But how could this happen? They were a tiny, obscure ethnic minority in the massive Persian empire. The answer is that God rules empires. And when it is his time for his people to move, he moves empires. That's the point of the first eight chapters of this book of Ezra. And it is massively hope-giving for the people of God every time we slip back into a mentality of siege.

Consider, first, Ezra 1:1-2.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.'"

Do not miss the sovereign rule of God over the mind and will of Cyrus, the most powerful king in the world. God had prophesied by Jeremiah that the people would come back to their own land. "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place'" (Jeremiah 29:10). God never leaves his prophecies dangling uncertainly in the will of man. He does not merely predict; he acts to fulfill the predictions he makes. This is why his predictions are as sure as he is powerful.

So it says in Ezra 1:1, "He stirred up the spirit of Cyrus."

Cyrus did not merely experience inexplicably the fulfillment of a prophecy; he experienced God himself working sovereignly to fulfill that prophecy. There's the answer. When God is ready to do a great thing in the world, he can do it—whether it is through a Persian king, or a prophet, or a scholarly book, or a Christian pro-life worker. The key is God's absolute sovereignty over the empires of the world and over the minds and wills of kings and scholars and politicians and university presidents.

Even the Setbacks Are Meant for Greater Benefit

Here is what happens. A first wave of refugees return to Israel from Babylon—over 42,000 of them. They start building the temple. But their enemies in Judah oppose them and write to the new emperor, Artaxerxes, telling him that a rebellious city is being rebuilt (4:12). So Artaxerxes halts the work on the temple, and it looks like God's plans are frustrated. This is often the way things go—a great movement in the right direction in the church or in a city or in the culture as a whole, and then a setback. This often sets to moaning pessimists who have small views of God. But this story is meant to keep us hoping.

God had a different and better plan that was not just in spite of the opposition and setback, but that included it. O, let us learn that the lean years of trouble are preparations for God's blessing! Sooner or later he turns it all for good. He is God. In this case here is how he does it. According to Ezra 5:1, God sends two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who inspire the people to begin building again.

“But now take courage, Zerubbabel” declares the LORD, “take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land, take courage,” declares the LORD, “and work; for I am with you,” says the LORD of

hosts. . . . “The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,” declares the LORD of hosts. “The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,” says the LORD of hosts.

—Haggai 2:4, 8-9

But, as is often the case, a new resurgence of energy and progress unleashes new opposition. So it is here: the enemies try the same tactic as before. This time they write a letter to Darius, the new emperor, in the hopes of bringing the work in Jerusalem to a halt. But this time it backfires, and we get to see why God had allowed the building to cease temporarily in the first place.

Darius does some research before responding to the enemies of Israel. He searches the archives and finds the original decree from Cyrus authorizing the building of the temple. So in Ezra 6:7-8 he writes back the stunning news—beyond anything the bedraggled Israelites could ask or think. Darius says to the enemies in Judah,

Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.

What a remarkable reversal! What a great God! The Jews thought the enemies had triumphed. But God was simply working history so that the enemies would not only *permit* the building of the temple but *pay* for it too! Ezra 6:22 states the great fact plainly: “*The Lord had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them* to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.” God rules the hearts of kings and emperors

and presidents and scientists and scholars and judges and governors and mayors. This is the great foundation for fasting and prayer for worldview concerns—God can convert people, and God can shape their thinking even if they are not converted. O, the lessons here for us in our struggle to bring truth to bear on the church and the culture.

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace,
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*²⁵

O, the lessons here for us! Name your discouraging setback—personal, political, scholarly, ecclesiastical, cultural, global. Dare any Christian say that God is not in this for the good of his people and the glory of his name? Not if our God is the God of Ezra! Do you think these setbacks are not without some great purpose of righteousness bigger and more stunning than any of us can imagine?

The King's Heart Is a Stream of Water in the Hand of God

Then Ezra comes into the picture with a flashback to the reign of Artaxerxes. The king sends Ezra with a company of people back to Jerusalem. According to Ezra 7:6 the king gives him everything he wants for the journey. Now why would the very king who stopped the building of the temple do that? Ezra gives the answer in his prayer in 7:27. “Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, *who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart.*” God did it. God put it in his heart.

He did it to Cyrus (1:1); he did it to Darius (6:22); and he did it to Artaxerxes (7:27). “The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes”

(Proverbs 21:1). God is ruling the world. He is ruling history. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Romans 11:33). We cannot understand the infinite wisdom of his ways. Ours is to trust and obey and pray—and as we shall see, to fast.

Fasting Before a World-sovereign God

Which brings us to what Ezra did as he left captivity on his way to Jerusalem. He refused an army escort so that he could testify to Artaxerxes about the power and faithfulness of God in protecting his company of people. Instead of the king’s help he sought God’s help, and he sought it *with fasting*. Ezra 8:21-23 records:

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones [here is the connection with saving little ones from abortion] and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.” So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.

In verse 21, fasting is an expression of humility—that is, our sense of desperate, utter dependence on God for what we need. “I proclaimed *a fast* there at the river of Ahava, that we might *humble ourselves*.” And if anything is plain from Francis Schaeffer’s analysis of the foundations of abortion, it is that the humanist worldview pervading American culture is so intractable

that we are utterly dependent on God to resist and reform. Faithful reasoning, persuasive writing, social activism and political engagement all have their place. But unless the sovereign God moves on darkened minds (like he did on Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes), the very best reasoning and action will be taken captive and turned upside down.

But fasting, for Ezra, was not only an expression of humility and desperation; it was an expression of desiring God with life-and-death seriousness. “So we fasted and sought our God.” Fasting comes in alongside prayer with all its hunger for God and says, “We are not able in ourselves to win this battle. We are not able to change hearts or minds. We are not able to change world-views and transform culture and save 1.6 million children. We are not able to reform the judiciary or embolden the legislature or mobilize the slumbering population. We are not able to heal the endless wounds of godless ideologies and their bloody deeds. But, O God, you are able! And we turn from reliance on ourselves to you. And we cry out to you and plead that for the sake of your name, and for the sake of your glory, and for the advancement of your saving purpose in the world, and for the demonstration of your wisdom and your power and your authority over all things, and for the sway of your Truth and the relief of the poor and the helpless, act, O God. This much we hunger for the revelation of your power. With all our thinking and all our writing and all our doing, we pray and we fast. Come. Manifest your glory.”

The merciful result of fasting and prayer is mentioned at the end of Ezra 8:23: “He listened to our entreaty.” The children were spared. The heart of the king was swayed. The enemies were turned away. This is an astonishing thing—that a God who sways the minds of kings should ordain that he be swayed by the weak to send his sovereign power on their behalf.

"Doing Business" Until He Comes

I appeal to you to seek the Lord with me concerning the place of fasting and prayer in breaking through the darkened mind that engulfs the modern world, in regard to abortion and a hundred other ills. This is not a call for a collective tantrum that screams at the bad people, "Give me back my country." It is a call to aliens and exiles in the earth, whose citizenship is in heaven and who await the appearance of their King, to "do business" until he comes (Luke 19:13). And the great business of the Christian is to "do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31), and to pray that God's name be hallowed and his kingdom come and his will be done in the earth (Matthew 6:9-10). And to yearn and work and pray and fast not only for the final revelation of the Son of Man, but in the meantime, for the demonstration of his Spirit and power in the reaching of every people, and the rescuing of the perishing, and the purifying of the church, and the putting right of as many wrongs as God will grant.

It is true that the biblical balance of labor among such great tasks is not an easy discovery. But that too may be a fruit of faithful fasting. May the Lord grant that the greatness of our calling not paralyze our desires. But may our hunger for private and public displays of the glory of our great God find release in fasting and prayer and every good work.

*Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you shall be satisfied.*

—LUKE 6:21

*Or who has first given to Him
that it might be paid back to Him again?
For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*

—ROMANS 11:35-36

God has been pleased to constitute prayer to be antecedent to the bestowment of mercy; and he is pleased to bestow mercy in consequence of prayer, as though he were prevailed on by prayer. When the people of God are stirred up to prayer, it is the effect of his intention to show mercy; therefore he pours out the spirit of grace and supplication.

—JONATHAN EDWARDS

“The Most High a Prayer-Hearing God”¹

CONCLUSION

Why Does God Reward Fasting?

One crucial question remains: Why does God respond to fasting? Why does he reward us when we fast? That he does is strewn across the pages of the Bible and history. And Jesus promised he would: “Your Father who sees [your fasting] in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:18, RSV). The question is urgent because a wrong answer can dishonor God and do us great harm.

An Answer That Dishonors God and Does Us Harm

For example, suppose we said that fasting gets rewards from God because it earns them by showing the merit of the one who fasts. That would dishonor God by turning his free grace into a business transaction. It would imply that fasting springs ultimately from our own will, and that this self-created discipline is then offered to God for recompense. This is a great dishonor to God because it claims for us what belongs only to God, namely, the ultimate initiative of prayer and fasting. In this way we put ourselves in the place of God and nullify the freedom of his grace.

This also does us great harm. If we choose to relate to God this way, in the end we will not be the beneficiaries of grace, but only of retributive justice. That will mean that we get from God what we deserve, rather than the “free gift” of eternal life (Romans 6:23). To use the terms of the apostle Paul, this way of viewing God’s response to fasting turns it into “works.” We see this in Romans 4:4—“Now to the one who *works*, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.” Translated literally: “To the one who works, the reward is not reckoned according to grace, but according to debt.” If we say God rewards fasting by paying “wages” or settling “debts” with those who have earned or merited his reward by fasting, then we act as though “the reward is not reckoned according to grace.” And that is a fatal way to relate to God. For the only alternative to free grace is condemnation.

God does not save us “by grace . . . through faith” (Ephesians 2:8) and then reward our fasting “by justice . . . through works.” The reward of justification and every subsequent reward come to us on the same grounds and by the same means: on the ground of God’s work in Christ, namely, his atoning death (Romans 3:24), and by the means of God’s work in us, namely, our life-changing faith (Ephesians 2:8; Galatians 5:6). The attempt to merit or earn anything from God is evil and fatal before and after our conversion. An act that nullifies grace is evil and fatal whenever you do it.

Therefore, a wrong answer to the question of why God rewards fasting can dishonor God and do us great harm. It is extremely important that we answer the question correctly. God’s glory and our good are at stake.

Fasting Is “from Him and Through Him and to Him”

God does not respond to fasting because it presents him with new knowledge about our faith or our devotion. He knows our hearts

better than we know them ourselves. In fact, our newborn heart of faith is the handiwork of God himself. He knows us because he knows his own work. “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:10). And he not only created us as new creatures of faith, but is still “working in us that which is pleasing in His sight” (Hebrews 13:21). It is our duty and delight to choose obedience hour by hour, but we must never forget that “it is God who is at work in [us], both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

The most fundamental reason why fasting cannot earn anything from God is that it is a gift of God. It is something that God is “working in us.” You can’t expect God to pay for what is already his. This is what Paul meant when he said in Romans 11:35-36, “Who has first given to [God] that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.” That includes fasting. It is from him and through him and to him. It is not first offered to God that we might be paid back because of it. It is first given by God that we might benefit from it and that he might be glorified through it.

The Ultimate Origin of Sacrifice

When King Solomon saw his people sacrificing their riches to build the temple, in the same way that one might sacrifice food in fasting, he was not puffed up with the self-wrought virtue of his people; he was humbled that God had given such a grace of generosity. He said, “Who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from Thee, and from Thy hand we have given Thee” (1 Chronicles 29:14). This is the way we should speak of fasting. There is no ground of boasting here. Who am I that I should be able to fast? Nobody. There is nothing in me that would choose

this for your glory apart from your transforming grace. And when Solomon looked to the future and pondered whether this heart of sacrifice would continue, he prayed, “O LORD . . . preserve this forever in the intentions of the heart of Thy people, and direct their heart to Thee” (1 Chronicles 29:18). And so we should pray about our own fasting and the fasting of the Christian church: O Lord, keep alive the intentions to fast that you have created, and direct the hearts of your people ever to you as the source of all their joy.

Reward Is for Helplessness and Hope in God

Well, if God does not reward fasting because *we* create it and offer it to him to get a recompense, why does he reward it? If, in fact, God himself is the Creator and Sustainer of fasting, why is it that he has appointed this act as an occasion of his reward? The answer is that God is committed to rewarding those acts of the human heart that signify human helplessness and hope in God. Over and over again in Scripture God promises to come to the aid of those who stop depending on themselves and seek God as their treasure and help.

“Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. . . . Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live” (Isaiah 55:1-3). God promises water and wine and milk and life that money cannot buy precisely to those who have no money, but only thirst, if they will turn away from what money can buy and come to him. “I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. . . . Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost” (Revelation 21:6; 22:17). The reward of life comes not to those who can buy it or

work for it. It is “without cost.” It is free. The “price” is thirst that turns from the broken cisterns of the world to the inexhaustible fountain in God.

It is the “poor in spirit” who will be rewarded with the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3). It is those who “wait for the Lord” for whom he works (Isaiah 64:4). It is those who “trust in God,” and not their horses or chariots, who triumph by his power (1 Chronicles 5:20; 2 Chronicles 13:18; Psalm 20:7). It is those who “delight in the Lord” and trust in him who get the desires of their heart (Psalm 37:4-5). The sacrifices acceptable to God are a broken spirit and a contrite heart; these empty things he will reward (Psalm 51:17). The one who serves God not in his own strength but “by the strength which God supplies” will be rewarded by the Lord (1 Peter 4:11).

God’s Ultimate Commitment: His Glory

God rewards those acts of the human heart that signify human helplessness and hope in God. The reason for this is that these acts call attention to God’s glory. First Peter 4:11 makes this plain: “whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Be sure to see the logic of the verse: if you serve not in your own strength, but in the strength that God supplies, then God gets the glory. The giver gets the glory.

God is committed to doing everything for his glory. This too is shown throughout the Scriptures, as Jonathan Edwards has demonstrated so powerfully in his essay entitled *Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World*. “It appears that all that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God’s works is included in that one phrase, ‘the glory of God.’”² God elects his people before the foundation of the

world for his glory (Ephesians 1:6). He creates humankind for his glory (Isaiah 43:7). He chooses Israel for his glory (Isaiah 49:3). He delivers them from Egypt for his glory (Psalm 106:7-8). He restores them after exile for his glory (Isaiah 48:9-11). He sends his Son to confirm his trustworthiness and so the Gentiles will glorify him for his mercy (Roman 15:8-9). He puts his Son to death to display the glory of his vindicated righteousness (Romans 3:25-26). He sends the Holy Spirit to glorify his Son (John 16:14). He commands his people to do all things for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). He will send his Son a second time to receive the glory due him (2 Thessalonians 1:9-10). And in the end he will fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory (Habakkuk 2:14).

God's ultimate aim in all that he does is that his glory might be displayed for the appreciation of those who embrace it, and the desolation of those who don't. Therefore he rewards acts that confess human helplessness and that express hope in God, because these acts call attention to his glory.

An Offering of Emptiness to Show Where Fullness Can Be Found

Prayer is explicitly appointed for this purpose: "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, *that the Father may be glorified in the Son*" (John 14:13). God responds to prayer because when we look away from ourselves to Christ as our only hope, that gives the Father an occasion to magnify the glory of his grace in the all-providing work of his Son.

Similarly, fasting is peculiarly suited to glorify God in this way. It is fundamentally an offering of emptiness to God in hope. It is a sacrifice of need and hunger. It says, by its very nature, "Father, I am empty, but you are full. I am hungry, but you are the Bread of Heaven. I am thirsty, but you are the Fountain of Life. I am weak, but you are strong. I am poor, but you are rich. I am

foolish, but you are wise. I am broken, but you are whole. I am dying, but your steadfast love is better than life (Psalm 63:3).”

When God sees this confession of need and this expression of trust, he acts, because the glory of his all-sufficient grace is at stake. The final answer is that God rewards fasting because fasting expresses the cry of the heart that nothing on the earth can satisfy our souls besides God. God must reward this cry because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

*Remember those who led you,
who spoke the word of God to you;
and considering the result of their conduct,
imitate their faith.*

—HEBREWS 13:7

Some, under the pretence of being taught of the Spirit of God, refuse to be instructed by books or by living men. This is no honoring of the Spirit of God. It is disrespect to Him, for if He gives to some of His servants more light than to others—and it is clear He does—then they are bound to give that light to others, and to use it for the good of the church. But if the other part of the church refuse to receive that light, to what end did the Spirit of God give it? This would imply that there is a mistake somewhere in the economy of God's gifts and graces, which is managed by the Holy Spirit.

—CHARLES SPURGEON

*Words of Counsel for Christian Workers*¹

APPENDIX

Quotes and Experiences

These quotes and experiences are a sampling from the reading I have done in preparation for this book. I include them here for inspiration and instruction, but with no claim to agree with all that is said. The sources are given so that the reader can follow up in the context. Sometimes just a passing comment can have as much impact on us as a whole chapter or a book. It may be that God would use one of these brief statements to awaken in someone *A Hunger for God*.

IGNATIUS

(Bishop of Antioch at the end of the first century)

Devote thyself to fasting and prayer, but not beyond measure, lest thou destroy thyself thereby. Do not altogether abstain from wine and flesh, for these things are not to be viewed with abhorrence, since [the Scripture] saith, “Ye shall eat the good things of the earth.” And again, “Ye shall eat flesh even as herbs.” And again, “Wine maketh glad the heart of man, and oil exhilarates, and bread strengthens him.” But all are to be used with moderation, as being the gifts of God. “For who

shall eat or who shall drink without Him? For if anything be beautiful, it is His; and if anything be good, it is His.”

THE EPISTLE TO HERO, *Chapter 1* (Albany, OR: Sage Software, 1995), p. 223.

AUGUSTINE

(*Bishop of Hippo who lived 354 to 430*)

By eating and drinking we repair the daily decays of our body, until Thou destroyest both belly and meat, when Thou hast slain my emptiness with a wonderful fullness, and clothed this incorruptible with an eternal incorruption. But now the necessity is sweet unto me, against which sweetness I fight, that I be not taken captive; and carry on a daily war by fastings; often bringing my body into subjection and my pains are removed by pleasure. . . . Oft it is uncertain, whether it be the necessary care of the body which is yet asking for sustenance, or whether a voluptuous deceivableness of greediness is proffering its services. In this uncertainty the unhappy soul rejoiceth, and therein prepares an excuse to shield itself, glad that it appeareth not what sufficeth for the moderation of health, that under the cloak of health, it may disguise the matter of gratification. These temptations I daily endeavor to resist, and I call on Thy right hand, and to Thee do I refer my perplexities; because I have as yet no settled counsel herein.

THE CONFESSIONS (New York: Washington Square Press, 1962), p. 198-199.



If I be asked what is my own opinion in this matter, I answer, after carefully pondering the question, that in the Gospels and Epistles, and the entire collection of books for our instruction

called the New Testament, I see that fasting is enjoined. But I do not discover any rule definitely laid down by the Lord or by the apostles as to days on which we ought or ought not to fast. And by this I am persuaded that exemption from fasting on the seventh day is more suitable, not indeed to obtain, but to foreshadow, that eternal rest in which the true Sabbath is realized, and which is obtained only by faith, and by that righteousness whereby the daughter of the King is all glorious within.

LETTER XXXVI, *Chapter 11, quoted from the Electronic Bible Society CD ROM, Vol. 1.*

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM

(Bishop of Jerusalem who lived from 315 to 386)

Be not then henceforth a viper, but as thou hast been formerly a viper's brood, put off, saith he, the slough of thy former sinful life. For every serpent creeps into a hole and casts its old slough, and having rubbed off the old skin, grows young again in body. In like manner enter thou also through the strait and narrow gate, rub off thy former self by fasting, and drive out that which is destroying thee.

THE CATECHETICAL LECTURES OF OUR HOLY FATHER, CYRIL, ARCHBISHOP OF JERUSALEM, *Lecture iii, "On Baptism," paragraph 7, quoted from the Electronic Bible Society CD ROM, Vol. 1.*

MARTIN LUTHER

(German reformer who lived 1483 to 1546)

[From a sermon on Matthew 4:1ff. in 1524] Of fasting I say this: it is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body. For when the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, for praying, for studying, or

for doing anything else that is good. Under such circumstances God's Word cannot remain. But one should not fast with a view to meriting something by it as by a good work.

WHAT LUTHER SAYS, *Vol. 1, compiled by Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 506.*



[On the soberness of mind that Peter exhorts in 1 Peter 1:13, Luther comments on the varied needs of different people.] He fixes no definite time, how long we are to fast, as the pope has done, but leaves it to the individual so to fast as always to remain sober and not burden the body with gluttony, that he may remain in possession of reason and reflections and determine how much he must do to keep his body under control. For it is utterly idle to impose one command about this on a whole group and congregation, since we are so unlike one another: one strong, another weak in body, so that one must mortify the body more, another less, if it is to remain sound and fit for good service. . . . It is good to fast. But only that can be called true fasting when we give the body no more food than it needs to retain its health. Let the body work and be wary, lest the old ass become too wanton and going on the ice to dance, break a bone. The body should be curbed and should follow the spirit; it should not act like those who, when they are about to fast, at one sitting fill themselves so full of fish and the best of wine that their bellies are bloated.

WHAT LUTHER SAYS, *Vol. 1, compiled by Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 507.*



Scripture places before us two kinds of fasting that are good. The first kind one accepts willingly for the purpose of

checking the flesh by the spirit. Concerning this Saint Paul says: “. . . in labors, in watchings, in fastings . . .” (2 Cor. 6:5). The second is the kind one must endure and yet accept willingly. Concerning this St. Paul says: “Even unto this present hour we both hunger and thirst” (1 Cor. 4:11). And Christ says of it: “When the bridegroom shall be taken from them . . . then they shall fast” (Matt. 9:15).

WHAT LUTHER SAYS, *Vol. 1, compiled by Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 508.*

JOHN CALVIN

(Reformer of Geneva who lived 1509 to 1564)

To sum them up: whenever a controversy over religion arises which ought to be settled by either a synod or an ecclesiastical court, whenever there is a question about choosing a minister, whenever, finally, any difficult matter of great importance is to be discussed, or again when there appear the judgments of the Lord's anger (as pestilence, war, and famine)—'tis a holy ordinance and one salutary for all ages, that pastors urge the people to public fasting and extraordinary prayers.

INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, *Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1241 (IV, xii, 14).*



Holy and lawful fasting has three objectives. We use it either to weaken and subdue the flesh that it may not act wantonly, or that we may be better prepared for prayers and holy meditations, or that it may be a testimony of our self-abasement before God when we wish to confess our guilt before him.

INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, *Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1241 (IV, xii, 15).*



[Paul's word on the sex-fast in 1 Corinthians 7:5 shows that fasting serves prayer and is not an end in itself. After referring to Anna in Luke 2:37 and Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1:4 he says:] For this reason, Paul says that believers act rightly if they abstain for a time from the marriage bed, that they may be left freer for prayer and fasting. There he joins fasting with prayer as an aid to it, and warns that it is of no importance of itself except as it is applied to this end [1 Corinthians 7:5].

INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, *Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1241 (IV, xii, 17).*



Throughout its course, the life of the godly indeed ought to be tempered with frugality and sobriety, so that as far as possible it bears some resemblance to a fast. But, in addition, there is another sort of fasting, temporary in character, when we withdraw something from the normal regimen of living, either for one day or for a definite time, and pledge ourselves to a tighter more severe restraint in diet than ordinarily.

INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, *Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1241 (IV, xii, 18).*

MATTHEW HENRY

(English Presbyterian pastor and Bible expositor who lived 1662 to 1714)

If the solemnities of our fasting, though frequent, long and severe, do not serve to put an edge upon devout affections,

to quicken prayer, to increase Godly sorrow, and to alter the temper of our minds, and the course of our lives, for the better, they do not at all answer the intention, and God will not accept them as performed to Him.

A COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE, Vol. 4 (*New York: Funk and Wagnalls, n. d.*), p. 1478.

WILLIAM LAW

(*English spiritual writer who lived 1668 to 1761*)

If religion requires us sometimes to fast and deny our natural appetites, it is to lessen that struggle and war that is in our nature; it is to render our bodies fitter instruments of purity, and more obedient to the good motions of divine grace; it is to dry up the springs of our passions that war against the soul, to cool the flame of our blood, and render the mind more capable of divine meditations. So that although these abstinences give some pain to the body, yet they so lessen the power of bodily appetites and passions, and so increase our taste of spiritual joys, that even these severities of religion, when practiced with discretion, add much to the comfortable enjoyment of our lives.

A SERIOUS CALL TO A DEVOUT AND HOLY LIFE (*Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966, orig. 1728*), p. 112.

JONATHAN EDWARDS

(*New England pastor-theologian who lived 1703 to 1758*)

I suppose there is scarcely a minister in this land, but from Sabbath to Sabbath used to pray that God would pour out his Spirit, and work a reformation and revival of religion in the country, and turn us from our intemperance, profaneness,

uncleanness, worldliness and other sins; and we have kept from year to year days of public fasting and prayer to God, to acknowledge our backslidings, and humble ourselves for our sins, and to seek of God forgiveness and reformation: and now when so great and extensive a reformation is so suddenly and wonderfully accomplished, in those very things that we have sought to God for, shall we not acknowledge it?

SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE REVIVAL, *in* THE WORKS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS, Vol. 4 (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972*), p. 331.



The state of the times extremely requires a fullness of the divine Spirit in ministers, and we ought to give ourselves no rest till we have obtained it. And in order to [do] this, I should think ministers, above all persons, ought to be much in secret prayer and fasting, and also much in praying and fasting one with another. It seems to me it would be becoming the circumstances of the present day, if ministers in a neighborhood would often meet together and spend days in fasting and fervent prayer among themselves, earnestly seeking for those extraordinary supplies of divine grace from heaven, that we need at this day.

SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE REVIVAL, *in* THE WORKS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS, Vol. 4 (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972*), p. 507.



One thing more I would mention concerning fasting and prayer, wherein I think there has been a neglect in ministers; and that is that although they recommend and much insist on the duty of secret prayer, in their preaching; so little is said

about secret fasting. It is a duty recommended by our Savior to his followers, just in like manner as secret prayer is; as may be seen by comparing the 5th and 6th vss. of the 6th chap. of Matt. with vss. 16-18. Though I don't suppose that secret fasting is to be practiced in a stated manner and steady course as secret prayer, yet it seems to me 'tis a duty that all professing Christians should practice, and frequently practice. There are many occasions of both a spiritual and temporal nature that do properly require it; and there are many particular mercies that we desire for ourselves or friends that it would be proper, in this manner, to seek of God.

SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE REVIVAL, *in* THE WORKS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS, Vol. 4 (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972*), p. 521.

JOHN WESLEY

(*English evangelist of the Great Awakening who lived 1703 to 1791*)

The man who never fasts is no more in the way to heaven than the man who never prays.

"*Causes of Inefficacy of Christianity*," SERMONS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, ed. Thomas Jackson, Vol. 2 (*New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840*), p. 440.



[Fasting] is an help to prayer; particularly when we set apart larger portions of time for private prayer. Then especially it is that God is often pleased to lift up the souls of his servants above all the things of earth, and sometimes to rap them up, as it were, into the third heaven. And it is chiefly, as it is an help to prayer, that it has so frequently been found a means, in the hand of God, of confirming and increasing, not one

virtue, not chastity only, (as some have idly imagined, without any ground either from Scripture, reason, or experience,) but also seriousness of spirit, earnestness, sensibility and tenderness of conscience, deadness to the world, and consequently the love of God, and every holy and heavenly affection.

“Sermon XXVII, On Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” THE WORKS OF JOHN WESLEY, Vol. 5 (Albany, OR: Sage Software, 1995), p. 441.



Not that there is any natural or necessary connection between fasting, and the blessings God conveys thereby. But he will have mercy as he will have mercy; he will convey whatsoever seemeth him good by whatsoever means he is pleased to appoint. And he hath, in all ages, appointed this to be a means of averting his wrath, and obtaining whatever blessings we, from time to time, stand in need of.

“Sermon XXVII, On Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” THE WORKS OF JOHN WESLEY, Vol. 5 (Albany, OR: Sage Software, 1995), p 441.



But, if we desire this reward, let us beware . . . of fancying we merit anything of God by our fasting. We cannot be too often warned of this; inasmuch as a desire to “establish our own righteousness,” to procure salvation of debt and not of grace, is so deeply rooted in all our hearts. Fasting is only a way which God hath ordained, wherein we wait for his unmerited mercy; and wherein, without any desert of ours, he hath promised freely to give us his blessing.

“*Sermon XXVII, On Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,*” THE WORKS OF JOHN WESLEY, Vol. 5 (*Albany, OR: Sage Software, 1995*), p. 449.

ANDREW FULLER

(*English Baptist pastor and writer who lived 1754 to 1815*)

Fasting is supposed to be the ordinary practice of the godly. Christ does not make light of it, but merely cautions them against its abuses. . . . It is an appendage to prayer, and designed to aid its importunity. It is humbling, and in a manner, chastising ourselves before God. The spirit of it is expressed in the following passages—“So do God to me and more also, if I taste bread, or aught else, till the sun be down.” “Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up into my bed; I will not give sleep to mine eyes, nor slumber to mine eyelids, until I find out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob.” No mention is made of the time, or how often the duty should be attended to. . . . It is only a *means*, however; if rested in as an *end*, it will be an abomination in the sight of God.

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF THE REV. ANDREW FULLER, Vol. 1 (*Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publication, 1988, orig. 1844*), p. 583.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

(*President of the United States 1861-1865*)

Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme authority and Just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has,

by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day for National prayer and humiliation:

And whereas, it is the duty of nations, as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord:

And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations, like individuals, are subjected to punishment and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views of the Senate, I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer. And I do hereby request all the People to abstain on

that day from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the divine teachings that the united cry of the nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins, and restoration of our now divided and suffering country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed. Done at the city of Washington this thirtieth day of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-seventh. Abraham Lincoln

Library of Congress, Appendix No. 19, Vol. 12 of THE UNITED STATES AT LARGE quoted in Derek Prince, SHAPING HISTORY THROUGH PRAYER AND FASTING (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973), pp. 5-8. For proclamations by George Washington, John Adams, and James Madison, see. pp. 138-147.

J. C. RYLE

(Evangelical bishop of Liverpool who lived 1816 to 1900)

Let us learn from our Lord's instruction about fasting, the great importance of cheerfulness in our religion. Those words, "anoint thy head, and wash thy face," are full of deep meaning. They should teach us to aim at letting men see that we find Christianity makes us happy. Never let us forget that there is not religion in looking melancholy and

gloomy. Are we dissatisfied with Christ's wages, and Christ's service? Surely not! Then let us not look as if we were.

RYLE'S EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS, MATTHEW-MARK (*Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.*), p.57.

PHILLIPS BROOKS

(*American pastor,*

author of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," 1835-1893)

This, then, is the philosophy of fasting. It expresses repentance, and it uncovers the life to God. "Come down, my pride; stand back my passions; for I am wicked, and I wait for God to bless me."

"Fasting" (*a sermon for Lent*), in: THE CANDLE OF THE LORD AND OTHER SERMONS (*New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1881*), p. 207.

PASTOR HSI

(*Chinese pastor in the nineteenth century*)

[He made a medication in his ministry to opium-addicted Chinese.] Whenever it was necessary to make a fresh supply, he began with prayer and fasting. It was his habit to go without food the whole twenty-four hours of the day given to that work. Sometimes he was so exhausted towards the evening that he could hardly stand. Then he would go away for a few minutes alone to wait upon God. "Lord, it is Thy work. Give me Thy strength," was his plea. And he always came back fresh and reinvigorated, as if with food and rest.

Mrs. Howard M. Taylor, PASTOR HSI (*Singapore: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1989, orig. 1900*), p. 131.

PRAYING (JOHN) HYDE

(missionary to India at the turn of the twentieth century)

[At the Sialkot Convention in India for missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century John Hyde spent the whole time of the convention in the prayer room.] What about his meals, and his bed? The Convention lasted for ten days in those early days, and his “boy,” a lad about sixteen that he had taken to his home and his heart, had brought Hyde’s bedding and had carefully made his bed, but it was never used during the Convention. I saw him more than once when the prayer room was full, go aside into one of the corners and throw himself on the floor to sleep, but if the room began to get empty and prayer to flag, he somehow seemed to know it and was up immediately and took his place with the other intercessors. Did he go to his meals? I think it was only once or twice that I saw him with us at table. Sometimes his “boy,” or Gulla, the sweeper, or one of his friends would take a plate of curry and rice or something else to him to the prayer room, and if convenient he would go to a corner and eat it. How his “boy” used to cry because he would not eat properly and would not go to bed to sleep.

E. G. Carre, *PRAYING HYDE: A CHALLENGE TO PRAYER* (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publishing, Inc., n.d.), p. 92.

ANDREW MURRAY

(South African pastor and missionary statesman, 1828-1916)

Prayer needs fasting for its full growth. Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible. Fasting is the other hand, the one with which we let go of the visible. In nothing is man more closely connected with the world of sense than in this need for, and enjoyment of, food. It was the fruit with which man was tempted and fell in Paradise. It was with bread that

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. But He triumphed in fasting. . . . The body has been redeemed to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. In body as well as spirit, Scripture says, we are to glorify God in eating and drinking. There are many Christians to whom this eating for the glory of God has not yet become a spiritual reality. The first thought suggested by Jesus' words in regard to fasting and prayer is that only in a life of moderation and self-denial will there be sufficient heart and strength to pray much. . . . Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves, to attain the Kingdom of God. And Jesus, Who Himself fasted and sacrificed, knows to value, accept, and reward with spiritual power the soul that is thus ready to give up everything for Him and His Kingdom.

WITH CHRIST IN THE SCHOOL OF PRAYER (*Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1981*), pp. 100-101.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER
(*twentieth-century German theologian and martyr*)

Jesus takes it for granted that his disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life. Such customs have only one purpose—to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP (*New York: Collier Books / Macmillan Publishing Co., 1949*), p. 188.



When the flesh is satisfied it is hard to pray with cheerfulness or to devote oneself to a life of service which calls for much self-renunciation.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP (*New York: Collier Books / Macmillan Publishing Co., 1949*), p. 189.



We have to practice strictest daily discipline; only so can the flesh learn the painful lesson that it has no rights of its own.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP (*New York: Collier Books / Macmillan Publishing Co., 1949*), p. 189.

C. S. LEWIS

(*English Literature professor and Christian writer, 1898-1963*)

It is impossible to accept Christianity for the sake of finding comfort: but the Christian tries to lay himself open to the will of God, to do what God wants him to do. You don't know in advance whether God is going to set you to do something difficult or painful, or something that you will quite like; and some people of heroic mould are disappointed when the job doled out to them turns out to be something quite nice. But you must be prepared for the unpleasant things and the discomforts. I don't mean fasting, and things like that. They are a different matter. When you are training soldiers in maneuvers, you practice in blank ammunition because you would like them to have practices before meeting the real enemy. So we must practice in abstaining from pleasures which are not in themselves wicked. If you don't abstain from pleasure, you won't be good when the time comes along. It is purely a matter of practice.

GOD IN THE DOCK (*Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970*), pp. 53-54.

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

(twentieth-century preacher in London)

Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not . . . be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.

STUDIES IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, Vol. 2 (*Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960*), p. 38.

DAVID R. SMITH

(twentieth-century author)

A selfish person is unable to enjoy the gospel; a Christian is someone who has begun to deny himself, and is in the continuous process of denying himself. Jesus said "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." Self-denial is not limited to one particular kind of giving; it embraces all personal disciplines. Fasting is only one discipline; nevertheless, it is self-denial. This does not mean that to fast is to embrace legalism; it is gospel liberty which encourages us to deny ourselves.

FASTING: A NEGLECTED DISCIPLINE (*Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1954*), p. 17.



Nobody can maintain a desired state of mind whilst his bodily condition is not in accordance with it. If a man is anxious

to devote himself to spiritual things, for a time, he is obliged to ensure that his body is in similar environment, or else he may not succeed. He cannot be reverent in the midst of his own physical irreverence. Fasting ensures the correct environment for sorrowful and serious considerations. Asterius wrote, in the 4th Century, that one role of fasting is to ensure that the stomach does not make the body boil like a kettle, to the hindering of the soul.

FASTING: A NEGLECTED DISCIPLINE (*Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1954*), pp. 38-39.



Fasting does not *create* faith, for faith grows in us as we hear, and read, and dwell upon, God's Word; it is a work of the Holy Spirit to bring faith to God's people. However, fasting has the capacity to *encourage* faith in the one who is involved in this discipline. It seems as though the neglect of self feeds the faith which God has implanted in the hearts of born-again believers. This doesn't mean that those who eat the least have the most faith; such a view is not only untrue, it is extremist. It is simply that regular self-denial has its benefits, and one of these is seen in a personal increase in faith.

FASTING: A NEGLECTED DISCIPLINE (*Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1954*), pp. 47-48.

KEITH MAIN
(*twentieth-century writer*)

To Judaism, a fast was an *outward* sign of an inward condition. To Jesus, a fast was an *inward* sign of an inward condition. The former, if misused, "a peculiarly ugly form of religious dramatic art," the latter a part of "closet" devotions.

PRAYER AND FASTING: A STUDY IN THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH (*New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1971*), p. 37.



Thus far we have suggested that the joy and thanksgiving that marks the prayer life of the New Testament is a sign of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Fasting is no longer consistent with the joyous and thankful attitude that marks the fellowship. Yet this is only partially so. . . . It is true that the crisis and the tragedy are there as a stark reality. The Kingdom is not *fully* realized. Granted that the Bridegroom is present and now is not an appropriate time to mourn. Yet this is not entirely so, for we are still in the flesh and weak in faith. . . . Within this “bitter struggle” the believer, in this devotional life, might conceivably find occasion to fast. It would be only one among many of the ingredients that go to make up the life of the man in Christ. One might read through 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 and 11:23-29 for a glimpse into the wide range of such suffering in the “bitter struggle” for the cause of Christ. Against such a background the “hungers” mentioned in 6:5 and 11:27 gain their true perspective.

PRAYER AND FASTING: A STUDY IN THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH (*New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1971*), pp. 83-84.

RICHARD J. FOSTER
(*twentieth-century devotional writer*)

It is well to know the process your body goes through in the course of a longer fast. The first three days are usually the most difficult in terms of physical discomfort and hunger pains. The body is beginning to rid itself of the toxic poisons that have built up over years of poor eating habits, and it is not a comfortable process. This is the reason for the coating

of the tongue and bad breath. Do not be disturbed by these symptoms; rather be grateful for the increased health and wellbeing that will result. You may experience headaches during this time, especially if you are an avid coffee or tea drinker. Those are mild withdrawal symptoms which will pass, though they may be very unpleasant for a time.

By the fourth day the hunger pains are beginning to subside though you will have feelings of weakness and occasional dizziness. The dizziness is only temporary and caused by sudden changes in position. Move more slowly and you will have no difficulty. The weakness can come to the point where the simplest task takes great effort. Rest is the best remedy. Many find this the most difficult period of the fast.

By the sixth or seventh day you will begin to feel stronger and more alert. Hunger pains will continue to diminish until by the ninth or tenth day they are only a minor irritation. The body will have eliminated the bulk of toxic poisons and you will feel good. Your sense of concentration will be sharpened and you will feel as if you could continue fasting indefinitely. Physically this is the most enjoyable part of the fast.

Anywhere from twenty-one to forty days or longer, depending upon the individual, hunger pains will return. This is the first stage of starvation and signals that the body has used up all its excess reserves and is beginning to draw on the living tissue. The fast should be broken at this time.

THE CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE (*New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1978*), pp. 51-52.

DALLAS WILLARD

(*twentieth-century writer on the spiritual disciplines*)

Fasting is a hard discipline to practice without its consuming all our attention. Yet when we use it as a part of prayer or service, we cannot allow it to do so. When a person chooses

fasting as a spiritual discipline, he or she must, then, practice it well enough and often enough to become experienced in it, because only the person who is well habituated to systematic fasting as a discipline can use it effectively as a part of direct service to God, as in special times of prayer or other service.

THE SPIRIT OF THE DISCIPLINES: UNDERSTANDING HOW GOD CHANGES LIVES (*San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988*), p. 168.

JOSEPH F. WIMMER
(*twentieth-century writer*)

[On Mark 2:18-22 and the bridegroom's presence and absence:] Their non-fasting was intended to make a point, namely that the eschatological age had come in Jesus. . . . The future return to fasting after his being "taken away" was therefore also related to Jesus, as a sad memorial of what happened on that fateful Friday, mixed with inner confidence and humble trust in his second coming and the final consummation of the parousia. This Christian fast was something new, distinct from that of Judaism, not only as regards the day of fasting, but more importantly, in terms of its inner motivation. Even as a sign of humble worship of the Father it was henceforth related to Jesus, through whom our salvation has come, and in whose presence we will one day rejoice without reservation, in the plenitude of his Kingdom.

FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY (*New York: Paulist Press, 1982*), p. 101.



The weakness of hunger which leads to death brings forth the goodness and power of God who wills life. Here there is no extortion, no magic attempt to force God's will. We merely

look with confidence upon our heavenly Father and through our fasting say gently in our hearts: "Father, without you I will die; come to my assistance, make haste to help me."

FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY (*New York: Paulist Press, 1982*), p. 119.

ADALBERT DE VOGÜÉ

(*twentieth-century Monk of the Abbey of La Pierre-qui-Vire, France*)

The beneficial results of the fast are felt first in the sexual sphere. I have easily verified the connection established by the Ancients between the first two "principal vices," gluttony and lust, and consequently between the corresponding disciplines: fasting and chastity. Fasting is the most effective help for a religious who has vowed chastity. Fantasies no longer appear even during the happy hours of physiological freedom of which I have spoken, and the rest of the time they are easily controlled and eliminated.

TO LOVE FASTING: THE MONASTIC EXPERIENCE (*Petersham, MA: Saint Bede's Publications, 1989*), p. 10.



It will surprise no one if I confess that I am subject to anxiety and irritation, sadness and nervousness, to say nothing of vanity, touchiness or envy. . . . The habit of fasting effects a profound appeasement of all these instinctive movements. I think the cause is that a certain mastery of the primordial appetite, eating, permits a greater mastery of the other manifestations of the libido and aggressiveness. It is as if the man who fasts were more himself, in possession of his true identity, and less dependent on exterior objects and the impulses they arouse in

him. . . . Among the lesser advantages, let us note only the time saved in sitting down to table once instead of three times.

TO LOVE FASTING: THE MONASTIC EXPERIENCE (*Petersham, MA: Saint Bede's Publications, 1989*), p. 10.



To love fasting is not only possible. In the light of the facts, I will go so far as to say that the contrary appears impossible to me, to whatever degree one has truly experienced fasting. Experience fasting, and you will love it.

TO LOVE FASTING: THE MONASTIC EXPERIENCE (*Petersham, MA: Saint Bede's Publications, 1989*), p. 104.

ARTHUR WALLIS
(*twentieth-century devotional writer*)

Almost all are agreed that a visitation of the spirit upon the Church is desperately needed. Are we to believe the promise to Joel has nothing to say to this situation? . . . Did the events at Pentecost exhaust the Joel prophecy? Obviously not, or there would have been no further outpourings. . . . If however we believe this wonderful promise is for us—is in fact God's answer to the present need—it is vital that we fulfill the conditions as well as plead the promise. Three times Joel sounds a clarion call, in view of the imminence of the Day of the Lord, to return to God *with fasting* (Joel 1:14; 2:12, 15). Then he seems to see in vision God's response: "Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on this people" (v. 18).

GOD'S CHOSEN FAST: A SPIRITUAL AND PRACTICAL GUIDE TO FASTING (*Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968*), pp. 131-132.

WESLEY DUEWEL
(*twentieth-century writer on prayer*)

You and I have no more right to omit fasting because we feel no special emotional prompting than we have a right to omit prayer, Bible reading, or assembling with God's children for lack of some special emotional prompting. Fasting is just as biblical and normal a part of a spiritual walk of obedience with God as are these others.

MIGHTY PREVAILING PRAYER (*Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Francis Asbury Press, 1990*), p. 184.



How do you take up your cross? To take up a cross is not to have someone place the cross upon you. Sickness, persecution, and the antagonism of other people are not your real cross. To take up a cross is a deliberate choice. We must purposely humble ourself [sic], stoop down, and pick up the cross for Jesus. Fasting is one of the most biblical ways to do so.

MIGHTY PREVAILING PRAYER (*Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Francis Asbury Press, 1990*), p. 184.



Fasting can deepen hunger for God to work. Spiritual hunger and fasting have a reciprocal power. Each deepens and strengthens the other. Each makes the other more effective. When your spiritual hunger becomes very deep, you may even lose the desire for food. All of the most intense forms of prevailing prayer . . . can be deepened, clarified, and greatly empowered by fasting.

Fasting is natural when you are burdened sufficiently, wrestling with mighty prevailings, and warring in hand-to-

hand conflict with Satan and his powers of darkness. Fasting becomes sweet and blessed as your hunger reaches out to God. Your hunger gains tremendous power as you fast and pray—particularly if you set apart time from all else to give yourself to fasting and prayer. It can become a spiritual joy to fast.

MIGHTY PREVAILING PRAYER (*Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Francis Asbury Press, 1990*), p. 188.



Fasting feeds your faith. . . . Your confidence begins to deepen. Your hope begins to rise, for you know you are doing what pleases the Lord. Your willingness to deny self and voluntarily to take up this added cross kindles an inner joy. Your faith begins to lay hold of God's promise more simply and more firmly.

MIGHTY PREVAILING PRAYER (*Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Francis Asbury Press, 1990*), p. 189.

J. OSWALD SANDERS
(*twentieth-century missionary statesman*)

Fasting is not a legalistic requirement but a spontaneous reaction under special circumstances. . . . There are . . . godly and prayerful people who have found fasting a hindrance rather than a help. Some are so constituted physically that the lack of a minimum amount of food renders them unable to concentrate in prayer. . . . There is no need for such to be in bondage. Let them do what most helps them to pray.

PRAYER POWER UNLIMITED (*Chicago: Moody Press, 1977*), p. 67.

EDITH SCHAEFFER

(twentieth-century writer)

Is fasting ever a bribe to get God to pay more attention to the petitions? No, a thousand times no. It is simply a way to make clear that we sufficiently reverence the amazing opportunity to ask help from the everlasting God, the Creator of the universe, to choose to put everything else aside and concentrate on worshiping, asking for forgiveness, and making our requests known—considering His help more important than anything we could do ourselves in our own strength and with our own ideas.

THE LIFE OF PRAYER (*Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992*), pp. 75-76.

JERRY FALWELL

(twentieth-century Baptist pastor)

An old saint once said that fasting prevents luxuries from becoming necessities. Fasting is a protection of the spirit against the encroachments of the body. When a person fasts, he has his body well in hand, and is able to do the work of the Master.

FASTING: WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES (*Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1981*), p. 11.

BILL BRIGHT

*(twentieth-century evangelist**and founder of Campus Crusade for Christ)*

It will take nothing short of the supernatural to stem the tides of judgment devastating our land. I believe that nothing else can compare with the supernatural power released

when we fast and pray. We know for certain from Hebrews 11:6 and from personal experience that God rewards those who diligently seek Him.

THE COMING REVIVAL: AMERICA'S CALL TO FAST, PRAY AND "SEEK GOD'S FACE" (*Orlando, FL: New Life Publications, 1995*), pp. 108.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA, JR.
(*twentieth-century theologian*)

Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believed that a person's appetites are linked: full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God.

Quoted from THE REFORMED JOURNAL, Nov. 1988, *in* Donald S. Whitney, SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE (*Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991*), p. 151.