

*And you shall remember all the way
which the LORD your God has led you
in the wilderness these forty years
that He might humble you, testing you,
to know what was in your heart,
whether you would keep His commandments or not.
And He humbled you and let you be hungry,
and fed you with manna which you did not know,
nor did your fathers know,
that He might make you understand
that man does not live by bread alone,
but man lives by everything
that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.*

—DEUTERONOMY 8:2-3

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."

—JOSEPH WIMMER

*Fasting in the New Testament*¹

MAN SHALL NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE

The Desert Feast of Fasting

The Son of God began his earthly ministry with a forty-day fast. This should give us pause. Especially if we—who are not God—have moved into ministry heedless of the battle we may have to fight. Why did Jesus do this? Why did God lead him to it? And what about us? Can we really face the superhuman hazards of life and ministry without walking with Jesus through the wilderness of fasting?

I think we must walk there to learn from him, at least, if not to imitate his triumph. He *was* the Son of God, and we are not. But he did say, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you” (John 20:21). The salvation of the world may not hang on our success, since we are light-years less than he. But that may heighten rather than lessen the need of fasting in our lives. The stakes of *my* warfare are smaller for the world, but my weakness is greater. Why did he fast as he began his great work? What can we learn about our own?

Hungry for All the Fullness of God

My heart is hungry for “all the fullness of God.” I long for a deeper work of God in the midst of his people. I yearn for a mighty tide of missionary zeal to spread a passion for the supremacy of Christ in all things for the joy of all peoples. I long to see unmistakable, supernatural new birth taking place week in and week out through the compelling witness of God’s transformed people wherever he is named. The ministry of Jesus was, and always will be, unparalleled. In some measure, it is a model for us. But in its fullness it bears witness to his utter divine uniqueness. Yet how can we not wonder if this extraordinary fast at the beginning of his ministry was meant for more than his own work?

Charles Spurgeon, the London pastor from a century ago, said, “Our seasons of fasting and prayer at the Tabernacle have been high days indeed; never has Heaven’s gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer the central Glory.”² Getting near the glory of God is surely the key to burning with inextinguishable light and heat. And is this not the need of the hour—every hour—that the blind may see, and turn from darkness to light, and give glory to our Father in heaven (Acts 26:18; Matthew 5:16)? If he who was *the* Light of the world fought for his fire with fasting, is there something to be learned here for our flickering wicks?

The Spirit Descended on Jesus Like a Dove

I think there is. Let us go back, then, and learn from him. According to Matthew 3:16, after being baptized, Jesus came up out of the water and the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. What does this mean? The Holy Spirit had always been with Jesus. He was conceived by the Holy

Spirit in his virgin mother's womb (Luke 1:35). And for all eternity before that, the Son of God and the Spirit of God had been one, as Paul said so bluntly, "The Lord is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:17). What then does Matthew mean when he reports that "the heavens were opened, and [Jesus] saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him"?

He means that God the Father so loved his Son that he would publicly and powerfully prepare him in this special way for the ministry that lay before him. He would assure him of his favor and his guidance and his sustaining help. As the Spirit comes upon Jesus, God the Father says (in verse 17), "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In other words, this special manifestation of the Spirit was a demonstration of the Father's infinite love for his Son ("This is my *loved* son"), and the Father's great endorsement of his person and ministry ("in whom I am well pleased").

None Had Ever Ventured Such a Thing, Nor Could They

What Jesus was about to undertake is unique in the history of the world. No other man ever set his face to live and die as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus knew that his task as the Son of Man was "to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), and that he "came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). He knew from Isaiah 53 that it was the will of God to crush him, and to lay on him the iniquity of us all, and by his death to justify many sinners (verses 6, 10-11). He knew that God had passed over many sins in former days, and that the vindication of the justice of God was at stake in his life and ministry (Romans 3:25-26). He knew that God's truthfulness in all his promises rode on Jesus' faithful and obedient fulfillment of every word spoken in the Old Testament (Romans 15:8). He knew that all this would cost him his life and

that the torture would be unspeakably shameful and painful (Mark 10:33-34).

The Father knew this was coming, and the Son knew it was coming. And so the Father commissions the Spirit to fly like a dove upon the Son to assure him of the Father's love and to make manifest beyond all question the approval of the Father. One of the wonderful effects of the Father's words, "My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," is to assure Jesus—and us—that the fire of misery that Jesus was walking into was *not* owing to his Father's displeasure. Already the Father was preparing Jesus—and us—to know that the desperate cry, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" would not be the last word.

The Spirit Leads Jesus into Testing and Fasting

This is especially important to see when we notice in the next verse (Matthew 4:1) what the Spirit's first act is after coming upon Jesus in this way. It says, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The first act of the Spirit in Jesus' ministry was to lead him into the wilderness and to expose him to Satan's testings.

Under the Spirit's leading Jesus prepared himself for this testing by fasting. "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. *And after He had fasted forty days . . .*" The Spirit of God willed that the Son of God be tested on his way into the ministry, and he willed that Jesus triumph in this testing through fasting. It must not go unnoticed that Jesus triumphed over the great enemy of his soul and our salvation through fasting.

It seems to me that this story should shake us. Here is Jesus, standing on the threshold of the most important ministry in the history of the world. On his obedience and righteousness hangs the salvation of the world. None will escape damnation without

this ministry of obedient suffering and death and resurrection. And God wills that, at the very outset, this ministry be threatened with destruction—namely, the temptations of Satan to abandon the path of lowliness and suffering and obedience. And of all the hundreds of things Jesus might have done to fight off this tremendous threat to salvation, he is led, in the Spirit, to fast.

If Satan had succeeded in deterring Jesus from the path of humble, sacrificial obedience, there would be no salvation. We would still be in our sins and without hope. Therefore, we owe our salvation, in some measure (not to overstate it), to the fasting of Jesus. This is a remarkable tribute to fasting. Don't pass over this quickly. Think on it. Jesus began his ministry with fasting. And he triumphed over his enemy through fasting. And our salvation was accomplished through perseverance by fasting.

The Reenactment of Israel's Testing in the Wilderness

Now to see the fuller meaning of this, we must look at the book of Deuteronomy. Each time Jesus responded to the three temptations of the devil in the wilderness he quoted from Deuteronomy. "Man shall not live by bread alone"—Deuteronomy 8:3. "You shall not tempt the Lord your God"—Deuteronomy 6:16. "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve"—Deuteronomy 6:13.

This is very significant. Here is Jesus led by the Spirit into the wilderness—mark this, the *wilderness* — and to counter the temptations of Satan, Jesus quotes passages from Deuteronomy, all of which are spoken by Moses to the people of Israel about their time of *testing in the wilderness*.

Matthew 4:3-4 says, "The tempter came and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' But He answered and said, 'It is written, Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the

mouth of God.’” Now compare Deuteronomy 8:2-3, and notice the parallels between that situation in the wilderness and Jesus’ situation in the wilderness. Moses says to the people,

You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness [note: as Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness] these forty years [note: as Jesus was there forty days], that He might humble you, testing you [note: as Jesus was “tested”], to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry [note: as Jesus was made hungry by his fasting], and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord [note: just as Jesus says to Satan].

There are too many similarities between what is happening to Jesus here in the wilderness and what happened to the people of Israel to think it is a mere coincidence. God is teaching us something here. The Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness. What does this mean?

It means that Old Testament shadows are being replaced with New Testament reality. It means that something greater than Moses and the wilderness and the Law and Joshua and the Promised Land is at stake here. It means that the time of fulfillment is at hand. The promise to Moses is coming true. “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him” (Deuteronomy 18:15). It means that God is now, with the incarnation of his Son, preparing to deliver his people—the new Israel—from the Egyptian bondage of sin into the Promised Land of forgiveness and righteousness and eternal life. To do this he has sent a new Moses, or in this case, a new Joshua (Jesus reenacts

both roles, and the name “Jesus” is identical to “Joshua” in New Testament Greek). This new Joshua stands as the head and representative of the whole new people that Jesus will gather from Jews and Gentiles. On their behalf Jesus will now be led by the Spirit into the wilderness. He will stay forty days to represent forty years. He will be tested as Israel was tested. And he will hunger as Israel hungered. And if he triumphs, he and all his people go safely into the Promised Land of forgiveness and eternal life.

His Fasting Was Both War and Weapon, Testing and Triumph

Now we can see the meaning of Jesus’ fasting more clearly. It was not an arbitrary choice of something to do in the face of Satanic temptation. It was a voluntary act of identification with the people of God in their wilderness deprivation and trial. Jesus was saying in effect, “I have been sent to lead the people of God out of the bondage of sin into the Promised Land of salvation. To do this I must be one of them. That is why I was born. That is why I was baptized. Therefore I will take on the testing that they experienced. I will represent them in the wilderness and allow my heart to be probed with fasting to see where my allegiance is and who is my God. And, with the Spirit’s help, I will triumph through this fasting. I will overcome the devil and lead all who trust me into the Promised Land of eternal glory.”

In other words, Jesus’ fasting was not only preparation for testing, it was part of his testing, in the same way that hunger was a test of faith for the people of Israel in the wilderness. Moses said, “[God led you in the wilderness] that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry” (Deuteronomy 8:2). So it was with Jesus. The Spirit led him in the wilderness and let him be hungry that he might test him to see what was in his heart. Did he love God or

did he love bread? But that doesn't mean that his fasting was not also—even at the same time—a weapon in the fight against Satan. Fasting tests where the heart is. And when it reveals that the heart is with God and not the world, a mighty blow is struck against Satan. For then Satan does not have the foothold he would if our heart were in love with earthly things like bread.

Fasting as a Heart-revealing Forfeiture

The people of God are often called to go without the ordinary means of life. “Many are the afflictions of the righteous” (Psalm 34:19). “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom” (Acts 14:22). “Even we ourselves groan . . . waiting the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). Fasting is a brief, voluntary experience of this deprivation. When we experience this willing forfeiture, the Lord reveals what is in our hearts. What are we controlled by? What do we value and trust? We saw this already in the Introduction and referred there to Richard Foster's comment in *The Celebration of Discipline* that “more than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us.”³

What are we slaves to? What are we most hungry for—food or God? Fasting is God's testing ground—and healing ground. Will we murmur as the Israelites murmured in the absence of bread? For Jesus the question was: Would he leave the path of sacrificial obedience and turn stones into bread? Or would he “live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God”? Fasting is a way of revealing to ourselves and confessing to our God what is in our hearts. Where do we find our deepest satisfaction—in God or in his gifts?

And the aim of fasting is that we come to rely less on food and more on God. That's the meaning of the words in Matthew 4:4, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” Every time we fast we are

saying with Jesus, “Not by bread alone, but by you, Lord. Not by bread alone, but by you, Lord.”

Fasting for God, Not His Miracle Bread

Let me try to show you why I think this is what Jesus means when he repels Satan with the words, “[Man shall live] on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” Why do I think Jesus is saying, “Trust in God, not in bread”?

The key is found in the context of Deuteronomy 8:3 where Jesus gets the word in Matthew 4:4:

[God] fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that [note the argument] He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.

Notice carefully. Now he is saying that the giving of manna is the test. Not the *withholding* of food, but the *giving* of food—to teach them that man does not live by bread alone. He gave them manna, an utterly unheard-of food falling from heaven. Why? So that they would learn, Moses says, to live on everything that comes from the mouth of God. Now how is that? How does the giving of miraculous manna teach that? Because manna is one of the incredible ways God can, with a mere word, meet your needs when all else looks hopeless. So Moses’ point is that we must learn to depend on God and not ourselves. We must trust him for every utterly unexpected blessing that is commanded for us from the mouth of God.

But now watch what Satan does with that truth in dealing with Jesus. Satan says to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread” (Matthew 4:3). In other

words, “Make manna for yourself, like your Father did in the wilderness.” Satan is crafty in the extreme. He is a subtle exegete of Scripture. He knows the raw content of the Bible. He has seen that the manna was meant to teach the miracle-working power of God to provide for his people in distress. So he argues with Jesus, “The reason your Father gave manna in the wilderness was to teach the people to expect miracles in distress; so treat yourself to some miracle bread, and you will be obeying Scripture.”

To this Jesus responds, “Satan, you are so close and yet so far. You have always handled the word of God that way, so subtly and so deceptively. You sound like you approve, but you turn every word against God. The point of the manna was this, Satan: Don’t trust in bread—nor even miracle bread—trust in *God*! Don’t get your deepest satisfactions in life from food—not even God-wrought miracle food—but from God. Every word that comes out of the mouth of God reveals God. And it is this self-revelation that we feed on most deeply. This will last for ever. This is eternal life. Be gone, Satan, *God* is my portion. I will not turn from his path and his fellowship, not even for miraculous manna.”

This is the deepest lesson of Jesus’ fasting in the wilderness. It was a weapon in the war against satanic deception because it was a demonstration that Jesus hungered more for God and God’s will than he did for God’s wonders. He might have rationalized that turning stones to bread is precisely what the Son of God should do as he reenacted the wilderness experience of God’s people. They got manna. He would get manna. In that case, fasting would be a religious prelude to miraculous provision.

But that is not how Jesus reasoned. And that is not what fasting was. Instead, Jesus reasoned like this: “I have been sent to suffer and to die for my people. The only hope of carrying

this through is to so love God, my Father, that he is more precious to me than even the demonstrations of his miraculous power to relieve me of my distresses. I know it is his will to crush me and put me to grief for the sake of his people. I have read it in Isaiah 53:10. I will not use fasting as an effort to escape this calling. That is what Satan wants me to make of it—a prelude to the miraculous divine provision of bread, just like Deuteronomy. But here's the difference. They were tested a little, and I will be tested much. For much more hangs on my test than on theirs.”

The Triumph of Hunger for God

And what then was fasting for Jesus? It was both test and triumph. It was the test of his deepest appetite and the triumph of his hunger for God above all things. And therefore it was also a triumph over Satan. The Calvary Road was the way to his own death and the defeat of the devil. At the cross Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities [and] made a public display of them, having triumphed over them” (Colossians 2:15). The road that led to this defeat started with a forty-day fast. And in that fast Jesus demonstrated the power that enabled him to bruise the serpent's head at Golgotha. It was the power of faith, that is, the power of a superior satisfaction in God above all things, even the miraculous gifts of God. This deep confidence and contentment in God sustained Christ all the way to the end. “*For the joy set before Him* [Christ] endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

Fasting is a periodic—and sometimes decisive—declaration that we would rather feast at God's table in the kingdom of heaven than feed on the finest delicacies of this world. Jesus knew what he had left in heaven. And he knew what he was returning

to. This was his great hope and joy. He once said to his disciples. “If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). To return to the Father with “the fruit of the travail of his soul”—the church—(Isaiah 53:11, RSV) was Jesus’ great desire. On this his soul feasted, and this is what sustained him in fasting and dying.

Can We Do Without the Hungry Handmaid of Faith?

The question for us is not mainly whether we fast, but whether we hunger for God like this. Is this the nature of our faith—that we are satisfied with all God promises to be for us in Jesus? So satisfied that we can take up our cross and follow him on the Calvary Road? So hungry for him alone that not even the wonders and miracles of his provision are sufficient to satisfy our souls? And if that is the question, then we must ask, Can we do without the hungry handmaid of faith called fasting?

The question is not of earning or meriting or coercing anything from God. The question is: having tasted the goodness of God in the gospel, how can I maximize my enjoyment of him, when every moment of my life I am tempted to make a god out of his good gifts? By what weapons shall I fight the fight of faith and guard my heart from alien affections and treasonous appetites? Surely I will take the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, and I will pray. But I will also take the poor and hungry handmaid of faith as my help. In her weakness she is strong. Her emptiness magnifies my need and makes the perfection of God more precious.

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.”⁴

How Shall We Sustain a Soul-satisfying Vision of God?

The assistance we need, above all physical healing and all financial security and all employment successes and all career guidance and all relational harmony, is the divine assistance to see and to savor the glory of God in Christ. Beholding the glory of God in the gospel, we were saved (2 Corinthians 4:4,6). Beholding the glory of God in his promises, we are being sanctified (2 Corinthians 3:18). There is only one way that we will finish our course and keep the faith and persevere to the end, and that is by “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2; see also 3:1), and by looking “not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen” (2 Corinthians 4:18), and by setting “[our] minds on things that are above” (Colossians 3:2). This is God’s will for us and God’s work in us (Hebrews 13:20-21). But we are so constituted as fallen human beings, Jesus says, that “the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things [even innocent things like food] enter in and choke the word,” which is meant to reveal to us the glory of God (Mark 4:19). Therefore the fight of faith and the battle to behold the glory of the Lord day by day is fought not only by feeding the soul on truth, but fasting, to put our appetites to the test, and if necessary to death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled earnestly with “The Cost of Discipleship.” He thought long and hard about the cost of the Calvary Road. As he understood it, for him, it meant finally resisting Adolf Hitler, for which he was hanged in Flossenbürg, Germany, on April 9, 1945, at thirty-nine years of age. He saw clearly the deceptiveness of our flesh and need to fight on every

front the fight of faith day by day with exultation and humiliation.

The flesh resists this daily humiliation, first by a frontal attack, and later by hiding itself under the words of the Spirit (i.e., in the name of “evangelical liberty”). We claim liberty from all legal compulsion, from self-martyrdom and mortification and play this off against the proper evangelical use of discipline and asceticism; we thus excuse our self-indulgence and irregularity in prayer, in meditation and in our bodily life. But the contrast between our behavior and the word of Jesus is all too painfully evident. We forget that discipleship means estrangement from the world, and we forget the real joy and freedom which are the outcome of a devout rule of life.⁵

Joy in God is the strength to walk with Jesus from the wilderness to the cross and into eternal life. But maintaining that joy against its most subtle and innocent rivals is a lifelong struggle. And in that struggle, fasting—the humble, hungry handmaid of faith—is an emissary of grace. She comes to every fast with the same words:

*Though the fig tree should not blossom,
And there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail,
And the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold,
And there be no cattle in the stalls,
Yet I will exult in the LORD,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*
—Habakkuk 3:17-18

*And when you fast, do not look dismal,
like the hypocrites for they disfigure their faces
that their fasting may be seen by men.
Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.
But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,
that your fasting may not be seen by men
but by your Father who is in secret,
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

—MATTHEW 6:16-18, RSV

He loves Thee too little
who loves anything together with Thee
which he loves not for Thy sake.

—ST. AUGUSTINE
*The Confessions*¹

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

—J.C. RYLE
*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*²

FASTING FOR THE REWARD OF THE FATHER

Jesus' Radical God-Orientation in Fasting

Carl Lundquist was the president of Bethel College and Seminary for almost thirty years. He died in 1991 from skin cancer. In the last decade of his life he devoted a lot of energy to studying and promoting personal spiritual devotion and the disciplines of the Christian life. He even established what he called the “Evangelical Order of the Burning Heart” and began to send out a periodic letter of inspiration and encouragement. In the September, 1989, letter he told the story of how he first began to take fasting seriously.

My own serious consideration of fasting as a spiritual discipline began as a result of visiting Dr. Joon Gon Kim in Seoul, Korea. “Is it true,” I asked him, “that you spent 40 days in fasting prior to the evangelism crusade in 1980?” “Yes,” he responded, “it is true.” Dr. Kim was chairman of the crusade expected to bring a million people to Yoido Plaza. But six months before the meeting the police informed him they were revoking their permission for the crusade. Korea at that time was in political turmoil and Seoul was under martial

law. The officers decided they could not take the risk of having so many people together in one place. So Dr. Kim and some associates went to a prayer mountain and there spent 40 days before God in prayer and fasting for the crusade. Then they returned and made their way to the police station. “Oh,” said the officer when he saw Dr. Kim, “we have changed our mind and you can have your meeting!”

As I went back to the hotel I reflected that I had never fasted like that. Perhaps I had never desired a work of God with the same intensity. . . . His body is marked by many 40-day fasts during his long spiritual leadership of God’s work in Asia. Also, however, I haven’t seen the miracles Dr. Kim has.

Dr. Lundquist told about one of the “Burning Heart” retreats that he was leading when he saw a seminary senior not eating. He asked him if he was all right and learned that the student was near the end of a twenty-one-day fast as part of seeking God’s leading for the next chapter of his life.

Dr. Lundquist said that in the later years of his ministry he found a modified fast very helpful in his life and work. He said,

Instead of taking an hour for lunch I use the time to go to a prayer room, usually the Flame Room in nearby Bethel Theological Seminary. There I spend my lunch break in fellowship with God and in prayer. And I have learned a very personal dimension to what Jesus declared, “I have had meat to eat ye know not of.”

I take this to mean that forfeiting food through fasting proved to be a great profit for Dr. Lundquist. In giving up his midday meal to meet with God another way, he found meat to eat in the fellowship of Jesus. “I have meat to eat that ye know not of” (John 4:32 KJV). It seemed that in the Flame Room Carl Lundquist experienced personally the fulfillment of Revelation

3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.” In forfeiting physical food Dr. Lundquist found another kind of feast in fellowship with Jesus. He went into his closet away from presidential praise, and the Father rewarded him.

Not If, but When You Fast

One of the texts that moved Dr. Lundquist in those latter years of his life was the one we look at in this chapter, Matthew 6:16-18.

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

The thing that gripped him from this text were the words in verse 16, “Whenever you fast . . .” Like so many others, Dr. Lundquist noticed that it does not say, “*If* you fast,” but rather, “*when* you fast.” He concluded, as I do, and as most commentators do, that “Jesus takes it for granted that his disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting.”³ Jesus assumed that fasting was a good thing and that it would be done by his disciples. This is what we saw in Chapter One. It’s what Jesus underlined when he said in Matthew 9:15, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then *they will fast*.” So in Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus is not teaching on whether we should fast or not. He is assuming we will fast and teaching us how to do it and, especially, how *not* to do it.

How Not to Fast

If Christian fasting should become a part of our lives, as a way of seeking “all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19), then we need to know how not to do it. This does not mean mainly being aware of physical tips on how to avoid headaches, but rather being aware of spiritual dangers that haunt the space of every holy act. The Bible has virtually nothing to say about the physical dangers of fasting. It leaves that secondary matter to our inspection and discretion. But great are the biblical concerns for the spiritual dangers of this sacred deed.

Jesus warns us in Matthew 6:16 not to be like the hypocrites: “Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men.” So the hypocrites are folks who do their spiritual disciplines “to be seen . . . by men.” This is the reward the hypocrites desire. And who has not felt how rewarding indeed it is to be admired for our discipline, or our zeal, or our devotion? This is a great reward among men. Few things feel more gratifying to the heart of fallen man than being made much of for our accomplishments, especially our moral and religious accomplishments.

This craving had infected the religious leaders of Jesus’ day in great measure. Concerning the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus warned the people that they “like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, [and that they] devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers” (Mark 12:38-40). Oh, how strong is the love of the praise of men! We will dress for it (“long robes”), and strut our status in the marketplace for it, and posture ourselves for it at parties, and take up an important pose at church, and even lengthen our prayers to cover our heartless love of money with

religious camouflage. All of this we are prone to do because of our seemingly insatiable appetite for the praise of men. We want to be made much of. We want people to like us and admire us and speak well of us. It is a deadly drive. Jesus warned us, “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:12).

In Matthew 6:16, Jesus says that if this reward from other people is what you love, this is what you will get. “Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.” In other words, if the reward you aim at in fasting is the admiration of others, that is what you will get, and that will be all you get. In other words, the danger of hypocrisy is that it is so successful. It aims at the praise of men. And it succeeds. But that’s all.

Why Is It Hypocrisy for People to Know What You Are Doing?

But there is a problem here. Why is this hypocrisy? Here you have religious people. They decide to fast. Instead of concealing that they are fasting, they make it plain that they are fasting. Why is that hypocrisy? It would seem to be the opposite of hypocrisy. Why isn’t it hypocrisy to fast, but to anoint your hair and wash your face and not let anybody know that you are fasting? Isn’t the definition of hypocrisy: trying to look different on the outside than you are on the inside? So these religious folks are letting reality show, right? Why are they not the opposite of hypocrites? They fast, and they look like they fast. No sham. Be real. If you fast, look like it.

But Jesus calls them hypocrites. Why? Because the heart that motivates fasting is supposed to be a heart for God. Fasting, in Jesus’ way of seeing things, is a hunger for God, or it is worse than nothing. But the heart that motivates their fasting is a hunger for human admiration. So they are being open and transparent about what they are doing, yes, but that very openness is

deceptive about what's in their heart. If they wanted to be really open, they would have to wear a sign about their necks that said, "The bottom-line reward in my fasting is the praise of men." Then they would not be hypocrites. They would be openly, transparently, unhypocritically vain. But as it is, they hide their vanity and cloak it with fasting. This is their hypocrisy.

So there are two dangers that these fasting folks have fallen into. *One* is that they are seeking the wrong reward in fasting, namely, the esteem of other people. They love the praise of men. And *the other* is that they hide this with a pretense of love for God. Fasting means love for God—hunger for God. So with their actions they are saying that they have a heart for God. But on the inside they are desperate to be admired and approved by other people.

How Then Shall We Fast?

In Matthew 6:17-18, Jesus gives an alternative to this way of fasting—he describes the way he wants it to be done. He says, "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face, so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

Does Corporate Fasting Contradict the Word of Jesus?

Now there are all kinds of *public* fasting in the Bible, including the New Testament. For example, in Acts 13:1-3 and 14:23, Paul and Barnabas fast in a way that could not be kept secret. Were they disobedient to Jesus' commandment here? Does Jesus mean that the only fasting that is permitted is private fasting that nobody else can know about? Practically this would almost put fasting out of existence, since even private fasting is nearly impos-

sible to keep secret if one is married or ordinarily takes meals with others.

But there are several contextual reasons for thinking that Jesus was not excluding corporate fasting. One is that the earliest church, including the apostles, practiced public fasting (for example, Acts 13:3). Another is that this section of Matthew 6:1-18 begins with the warning “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men *to be noticed by them*.” The point of the whole section is not that public righteousness “before men” is bad, but that doing it “to be noticed by them” is bad. This is confirmed by the fact that even though he said, “When you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret,” nevertheless he himself practiced public prayer (Luke 3:21; 11:1; John 11:41). The motive for praying and fasting is what matters, not whether the acts are public or private.

Another confirmation that not all public fasting is wrong and that what matters is the motive is the fact that Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before men in such a way *that they may see your good works*, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” Here he goes beyond saying there are some kinds of righteousness that are public and cannot be concealed (like the ministry of the good Samaritan), but rather he says that the disciples should *want the world to see* this practice of righteousness so that God would be glorified. “Let your light shine before men in such a way *that they may see your good works*.” So the motive at stake is not simply whether you want your acts to be known by others, but *why* you want them to be known—that God be glorified, or that you be admired.

I conclude, therefore, that if someone finds out you are fasting, you have not necessarily sinned. The value of your fast is not destroyed if someone notices that you have skipped lunch. It is possible to fast with other people—say, our church pastoral staff fasting on a planning retreat to seek the Lord together—and yet,

in that corporate fasting, *not do it* “to be seen by men.” Being seen fasting and fasting to be seen are not the same. Being seen fasting is a mere external event. Fasting *to be seen by men*, as Jesus means it here, is a self-exalting motive of the heart.

As usual Jesus is testing our hearts, not just regulating our behavior. He says that when we are fasting, we should not have a heart that wants men to take notice of this discipline and admire us. In fact, he goes beyond this and says that we should make some efforts in the other direction, namely, *not* to be seen fasting. Fix your hair and wash your face so that, as far as possible, people will not even know that you are fasting.

Fasting to Be Seen by the Father

Then he adds the positive counterpart: do all this “so that [you may be seen] by your Father who is in secret.” In other words, fast to be seen by God. Fast with a clear intention of being seen by God. As Jesus teaches it, fasting is an intensely Godward act. Do it toward God, who sees when others don’t.

Jesus is testing the reality of God in our lives. Do we really have a hunger for God himself, or a hunger for human admiration? O, how easy it is to do religious things if other people are watching! Preaching, praying, attending church, reading the Bible, acts of kindness and charity—they all take on a certain pleasantness of the ego if we know that others will find out about them and think well of us. It is a deadly addiction for esteem that we have.

The Horrible Horizontalizing of Holy Things

But that is not the only defect in the motive of wanting others to see. There is something that assaults God even more directly. It is the subtle sense that grows in us, usually unconsciously, that

the real effectiveness of our spiritual acts is at the horizontal level among people, not before the face of God. In other words, if my children see me pray at meals, it will do them good. If the staff sees me fasting, they may be inspired to fast. If my roommate sees me read my Bible, he may be inspired to read his. And so on.

Now that's not all bad. Jesus' public prayers certainly inspired the disciples (Luke 11:1). But the danger is that all of our life—including our spiritual life—starts to be justified and understood simply on the horizontal level for the effects it can have because others see it happening. And so God subtly and slowly can become a secondary Person in the living of our lives. We may think that he is important to us because all these things that we are doing are the kinds of things he wants us to do. But, in fact, he himself is falling out of the picture as the focus of it all. And this registers in the motives of our hearts so that we feel satisfied when others are watching, but feel unmotivated if no one knows what we are doing—no one but God!

What Jesus is doing with these words in Matthew 6 is testing our hearts to see if God himself is our treasure. He is pressing fasting from the external to the radically internal, and making it a sign of our true Godwardness. "To Judaism, a fast was an *outward* sign of an inward condition. To Jesus, a fast was an *inward* sign of an inward condition."⁴ He is testing to see if the admiration of other people or even the spiritual effect on others of our piety has become the God-supplanting food that entices our soul. How do we feel when nobody else knows what we are doing? How is it when no one is saying, "How goes the fast?" Are we content in God when no one but God knows that we have done what we ought to have done?

Jesus is calling for a radical orientation on God himself. He is pushing us to have a real, utterly authentic, personal relationship with God. If God is not real to us—personally, vitally real to us—it will be miserable to endure something difficult

with God alone as the one who knows. It will all seem very pointless, because the whole range of horizontal possibilities will be nullified since no one knows what we are going through. All that matters is God, and who he is, and what he thinks, and what he will do.

What Reward Should We Seek in Our Fasting?

Which brings us to the last part of verse 18 and the promise Jesus makes about what God will do for those who focus vertically on him and do not need the praise of men to make their devotion worthwhile. He says, “And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” It is good and right to want and to seek the reward of God in fasting. Jesus would not have offered this to us if it were defective to reach for it. I have argued for decades that seeking the reward of the Father is not sub-Christian or unloving or contrary to true virtue.⁵ As C.S. Lewis said:

There are rewards that do not sully motives. A man’s love for a woman is not mercenary because he wants to marry her, nor his love for poetry mercenary because he wants to read it, nor his love for exercise less interested because he wants to run and leap and walk. Love, by definition, seeks to enjoy its object.⁶

Doing right “just because it is right” is not the Christian ideal. Doing right to enlarge our delight in God is. So here again the question arises: shall we hear Jesus and learn, or shall we bring our philosophy from outside the Bible and silence him again?

Jesus says, “[Fast not to be seen by men but] by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” The English word “repay” (NASB) is probably a mislead-

ing translation because of the mercenary connotations of the word. It seems to suggest that fasting is a kind of performance we render for God that then obliges him to pay us wages or some honorarium. But the Greek word (*apodōsei*) does not carry that necessary connotation. It may refer to paying back financial debts (for example, Matthew 5:26), but not always. It was the word used for Pilate's giving the body of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:58), and Jesus' handing the scroll back to the synagogue leader after reading it (Luke 4:20), and Jesus' returning the healed boy to his father (Luke 9:42), and the apostle's giving witness to the resurrection (Acts 4:33), and God's giving Paul a crown of righteousness (1 Timothy 4:8). The word itself does not imply a business transaction of work and wages.

How then should we think about God's rewarding those who fast not for the praise of men, but to be seen by God? God sees us fasting. He sees that we have a deep longing that is pulling us away from the ordinary good uses of the world in order to fast. He sees that our hearts are not seeking the common pleasures of human admiration and applause. He sees that we are acting not out of strength to impress others with our discipline, or even out of a desire to influence others to imitate our devotion. But we have come to God out of weakness to express to him our need and our great longing that he would manifest himself more fully in our lives for the joy of our soul and the glory of his name.

How to Make a Cuckold out of God by Fasting

And when God sees this, he responds. He acts. He rewards. What is the "repayment" or the "reward" that Jesus promises from the Father in these verses? In a perverse way, one might even wonder if the reward God promises is "the praise of men"—as if God said, Since you did not seek it by public fasting but looked to me,

I will give you this longed-for wish of human praise. If we hoped for this, our fasting would make a cuckold out of God.

This is what James 4:3-4 makes clear. James pictures prayer as a petition to our heavenly husband. Then he ponders the possibility that we would actually ask our husband to pay for our visit to the prostitute. “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?” The word “adulteresses” is the key here. Why are we called “adulteresses” in praying for something to spend on our pleasures? Because God is our husband and the “world” is a prostitute luring us to give affections to her that belong only to God. This is how subtle the sin of worldliness can be. It can emerge not against prayer, but in prayer—and fasting. We begin to pray and fast—even intensely—not for God as our all-satisfying husband, but only for his gifts in the world so that we can make love with them.

No, the reward we are to seek from the Father in fasting is not first or mainly the gifts of God, but God himself. Where in the context might we look for the reward that the Father encourages us to seek? I think a reliable guide would be the prayer that Jesus just taught us to pray in Matthew 6:9-13. It begins with three main longings that we are to hope for from God. First, that God’s name be hallowed or revered; second, that God’s kingdom come; and third, that his will be done on earth the way it’s done in heaven. That is the first and primary reward Jesus tells us to seek in our praying and our fasting. We fast out of longing for God’s name to be known and cherished and honored, and out of longing for his kingly rule to be extended and then consummated in history, and out of longing for his will to be done everywhere with the same devotion and energy that the indefatigable angels do it sleeplessly in heaven forever and ever.

Wanting What Is Not God for God's Sake

To be sure, God gives us our daily bread—and many other things through prayer and fasting. And it is not wrong to seek specifically for his help in every area of our lives. But these three petitions—that his name be hallowed, that his kingdom come, and that his will be done—test and prove whether all the other things we long for are expressions of our hunger for God, or whether his gifts are vying for his own place of supremacy and preciousness in our lives. The supremacy of God in all things is the great reward we long for in fasting. His supremacy in our own affections and in all our life-choices. His supremacy in the purity of the church. His supremacy in the salvation of the lost. His supremacy in the establishing of righteousness and justice. And his supremacy for the joy of all peoples in the evangelization of the world.

Seeking from God the reward of God's all-satisfying supremacy puts all other desires to the test. Are they for God's sake? This is the ultimate reason why Jesus called us to fast without wanting to be seen by others. Not just so that we could get worldly desires satisfied from God rather than men (and thus make God party to our spiritual adultery), but so that we would count God himself as our desire, and all else a subordinate spin-off of his enthralling glory.

And so we ask, as we fast and pray, Do we want to conquer bad habits and old enslavements, to remove every obstacle to the fullest enjoyment of God, so that people might see and give him glory? Do we want our prodigal sons and wayward daughters to come home because this would honor God's name? Do we want our churches to grow because the hallowing of Christ's name is at stake among unbelievers? Do we want China and North Korea and Saudi Arabia and Iraq and Libya to open their doors to the gospel for the sake of the advance of the kingship of Jesus? Do

we want upright leaders in government because this world is meant to magnify the goodness and justice of God?

This is what Jesus is calling us to—a radically God-oriented living and praying and fasting. So for the sake of your own soul, and in response to Jesus, and for the advancement of God's supremacy in all things for the joy of all peoples, comb your hair, and wash your face, and let the Father who sees in secret observe how hungry you are for him with fasting. The Father who sees in secret is brimming with rewards for your joy and for his glory.

*Anna . . . never left the temple,
serving night and day with fastings and prayers.
. . . She began giving thanks to God,
and continued to speak of him to all those
who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

—LUKE 2:36-38

*In the future there is laid up for me
the crown of righteousness,
which the Lord, the righteous Judge,
will award to me on that day;
and not only to me, but also to all
who have loved His appearing.
. . . Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*

—2 TIMOTHY 4:8; REVELATION 22:20

Do you love the Lord's appearing? Then you will bend every effort to take the gospel into all the world. It troubles me in the light of the clear teaching of God's Word, in the light of our Lord's explicit definition of our task in The Great Commission, that we take it so lightly. . . . His is the kingdom; He reigns in heaven, and He manifests His reign on earth in and through His church. When we have accomplished our mission, He will return and establish His kingdom in glory. To us it is given not only to wait for but also to hasten the coming of the day of God.

—GEORGE LADD

*The Gospel of the Kingdom*¹

4

FASTING FOR THE KING'S COMING

How Much Do We Miss Him?

Fasting is a physical expression of heart-hunger for the coming of Jesus. We have seen in Matthew 9:15 (Chapter One) that Jesus pictured himself as the Bridegroom of the Church. He explained that his disciples were not fasting because the Bridegroom is present. But then he said, “The days will come when the Bridegroom is taken away from them, and they will fast.” So Jesus connects Christian fasting with our longing for the return of the Bridegroom. Therefore, one of the most important meanings of Christian fasting is to express the hunger of our hearts for the coming of our King.

Fasting and the Lord's Supper

Fasting is a future-oriented counterpart to the past-oriented celebration of the Lord's Supper. Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). By eating we remember the past and say, Jesus has come. He has died for our sins. He has risen from the dead. Our guilt is removed. Our sin is forgiven. Our condemnation and punishment have been transferred to Christ. Our

acquittal is sealed. Our reconciliation with God is accomplished. Our bondage to sin is broken. Our enemy has been put to naught. The sting of death is removed. The destiny of hell is averted. Eternal life has been given. The Lord has come! Let us feast on these great realities and establish our souls on the great foundation of God's grace in the death and resurrection of Christ.

That is what we say in our eating of the Lord's Supper. But by not eating—by fasting—we look to the future with an aching in our hearts saying: "Yes, he came. And yes, what he did for us is glorious. But precisely because of what we have seen and what we have tasted, we feel keenly his absence as well as his presence. The Bridegroom has gone away. He is not here. He was here, and he loved us to the uttermost. And we can eat and even celebrate with feasting because he has come. But this we also know: he is not here the way he once was. As Paul said, "While we are at home in the body we are *absent from the Lord*." And his absence is painful. The sin and misery of the world is painful. The people of Christ are weak and despised—like sheep in the midst of wolves (Matthew 10:16). We long for him to come again and take up his throne and reign in our midst and vindicate his people and his truth and his glory.

I do not mean to claim that the Lord instituted fasting with the same formality and finality that he instituted the Lord's Supper. Never did he say concerning fasting, "Do this until I come." Nevertheless, he did say, "The days will come when the Bridegroom is taken away from them, and they will fast." It is not a command or an instituted ordinance. But it is a prediction. It is a statement of what will seem normal for those who love the Bridegroom and miss him.

Crying for Him Day and Night

Fasting poses the question: do we miss him? How hungry are we for him to come? The almost universal absence of regular fasting

for the Lord's return is a witness to our satisfaction with the presence of the world and the absence of the Lord. This is not the way it should be. In Luke 18:7-8 Jesus says,

"Shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

The point of these verses is that the Son of Man is coming again. When he comes, he will bring about justice for his elect. They will no longer appear as "the scum of the world, the dregs of all things" (1 Corinthians 4:13), but will "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43). While the faith of many will fail and the love of many will grow cold (Matthew 24:12), the Son of Man, when he comes, will find his elect persevering with faith and love to the end (Mark 13:13).

But notice the condition of these elect who are vindicated when he comes. Jesus says that they "cry to him day and night." This is what is missing in the comfortable Christian Church of the modern world. Where in the West do Christians cry to Christ day and night that he would come and bring about justice for his elect? Where is there that kind of longing and aching for the consummation of the kingdom? It is no surprise then, that the question of *fasting* for the coming of the Bridegroom is scarcely asked. If the cry itself is not there, why would one even think of expressing it with fasting?

Come, Lord Jesus!

What is the cry? What was the cry of the early church? The cry of the early church was, "Come, Lord Jesus!" It is no mere coinci-

dence that the very last words of the Bible are first the words of the Lord, “Yes, I am coming quickly,” and then the response of the church: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20). This is the cry that the whole Bible is meant to leave in the hearts of the elect.

One of the few Aramaic words that the first-century Greek-speaking church preserved from the treasured language of Jesus and his earliest followers was the word *Maranatha*. In 1 Corinthians 16:22 Paul closes his letter by saying, “If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. *Maranatha*.” The word means, “Our Lord, come!” There is little doubt that the word was preserved in its original Aramaic for the same reason “Amen” has been preserved, in its Hebrew form without change, in almost every language of the world: it was a constantly used form. “*Maranatha*” was the ever-present heart-cry of the early church. “O Lord, come!”

Jesus had taught his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10). And he had taught them that the kingdom would come in its fullness when he himself comes again “in the glory of His Father with His angels” (Matthew 16:27). Therefore the prayer, “Thy kingdom come,” was virtually identical with the prayer, “*Maranatha*!” “Come, Lord Jesus!” We can see how central this heart-cry was to the early church. These are not peripheral concerns. They are central to the whole ethos of the body of Christ. The Bridegroom left on a journey just before the wedding, and the Bride cannot act as if things are normal. If she loves him, she will ache for his return.

Do We Love the Appearing of the Lord?

In fact Paul speaks of *loving* the appearing of the Lord and makes it a test of authentic faith. He says, at the end of his life, “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and

not only to me, but also to all who have *loved His appearing*" (2 Timothy 4:8). The crown of righteousness is not a reward for only some that divides the elect into righteous and unrighteous. It is the crown that all God's people receive. It is the "crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (James 1:12) and are faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10). Therefore, *loving* the appearing of the Lord is not an optional Christian act that may earn more rewards. It is what true Christian faith does: it loves Christ and longs for the Bridegroom to come. Saving faith says, "Thy kingdom come! Come back, O precious Bridegroom. Come, reign as King. Come, vindicate your people. Come, marry your bride."

What Anna Teaches Us About Longing

In foreseeing that the Bride would fast for the coming of the Bridegroom (Matthew 15:9), Jesus was not imagining something unheard of. The precedent for fasting for the kingdom of God was known among the saints of his day. Luke gives us a glimpse of it in Luke 2:36-38.

And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. And she never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. And at that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Mary and Joseph had just brought the infant Jesus into the temple. Luke tells us about two very old people—Simeon and Anna—who recognize who he is. What marks both of these people is that they were yearning and longing for the coming of the

Messiah. In verse 25 Luke says that Simeon was “looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.”

In verse 37 he tells us that Anna virtually never left the temple and was serving the Lord “with fastings and prayers.” In other words, she was just like Simeon—she was longing for the Messiah to come; she was fasting and praying night and day because she was looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

In verse 38 she comes at just the right moment to see the Messiah-child, and she gives thanks to God and speaks of him to all who were “looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” In other words, God gave a special glimpse of the King’s glory to those who were yearning and longing and looking for “the redemption of Jerusalem.” For Anna that yearning meant a life of *fasting* and praying, decade after decade—probably sixty years since her husband died—as she ministered in the temple.

I think Luke tells us about Simeon and Anna to illustrate the way holy and devout people feel about the promise of Christ’s coming, and how God responds to their longings. They see more than others see. They may not understand fully all the details about how the Messiah is coming—Simeon and Anna surely didn’t—but God mercifully gives them, before they die, a glimpse of what they so passionately wanted to see.

Shall We Long for Him Less?

Now here we are on the other side of the King’s coming. He has come and gone away again. He has revealed his glory. He has shed his blood for our sins. He has risen from the dead. He has ascended into heaven to sit at the Father’s right hand until he puts all his enemies under his feet. He has sent his Holy Spirit to regenerate us and sanctify us and indwell us. He has commissioned his church to disciple the nations. And he has promised in John 14:3, “I will come again.”

How does our situation compare to Anna's? Her hopes were based on the promises of God like ours are. But oh, how much more we have seen than she had seen. How much more of the Messiah we know and can hope for! She had never seen the years of compassion and power as we have. She had never heard the words of authority and wisdom and love as we have. She never saw the blind receive their sight and the lame walk and the lepers cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead raised and the poor evangelized the way Jesus did it. She never saw him consecrate himself in Gethsemane, or be crucified for our sakes on Golgotha. She never heard the merciful words, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," or the triumphant words, "It is finished." She never saw him risen from the dead triumphant over sin and death and hell. And yet from what she knew of him in the Old Testament, she yearned for him and fasted with prayers night and day awaiting "the redemption of Israel."

But we have seen all these things. We know the Savior a hundred times better than Anna did. And now this one, whom we know so well, is gone. We walk by faith and not by sight. The Bridegroom whom we love was taken away. The wedding party was broken up. It is as though the wedding march had started and we were walking down the aisle to him, and at the last minute he disappeared.

Shall we long for him less than Anna longed for him? Does the fact that we have watched him live and love for three years and even now have his Spirit—does this make us feel Anna's longing less or more? Oh, what an indictment of our blindness or our dullness if the answer is: less.

Fasting's Freedom from the Sensualizing of the Soul

One of the great effects of fasting is that it assists what it expresses. I mean that fasting is mainly an expression of the soul's

hunger for God. It is not a contrived means to make us love God. We love him and long for him. And then fasting rises up as a way of saying earnestly with our whole body what our hearts feel: I hunger for you, O God. Fasting expresses, rather than creates, hunger for God.

Nevertheless, it is also true that the very nature of fasting makes it an assistant to this hunger for God. The reason is that hunger for God is spiritual, not physical. And we are less sensitive to spiritual appetites when we are in the bondage of physical ones. This means that fasting is a way of awakening us to latent spiritual appetites by pushing the domination of physical forces from the center of our lives. John Wesley expressed this as well as anyone I have read. What he calls the “sensualizing” of the soul is a great hindrance to our longing for Jesus to return. Therefore fasting assists the very experience of hunger for God that it also expresses.

Fullness of bread [increases] not only carelessness and levity of spirit, but also foolish and unholy desires, yea, unclean and vile affections. . . . Even a genteel, regular sensuality is continually sensualizing the soul, and sinking it into a level with the beasts that perish. It cannot be expressed what an effect a variety and delicacy of food have on the mind as well as the body; making it just ripe for every pleasure of sense, as soon as opportunity shall invite. Therefore, on this ground also, every wise man will refrain his soul, and keep it low; will wean it more and more from all those indulgences of the inferior appetites, which naturally tend to chain it down to earth, and to pollute as well as debase it. Here is another perpetual reason for fasting; to remove the food of lust and sensuality, to withdraw the incentives of foolish and hurtful desires, of vile and vain affections.²

I do not mean to belittle the good gifts of God, as if eating were an evil or even a hindrance to spiritual sensitivity. Together with Wesley I simply mean to say that most of us run the risk of being overly “sensitized” simply by having every craving satisfied and rarely pausing in a moment of self-denial to discover if there are alive within us spiritual appetites that could satisfy us at a much deeper level than food, and that are designed for the honor of God. Such is the appetite for the coming of King Jesus.

The Master Comes to Serve!

Consider how the New Testament describes the hearts of believers as they lived in the shadow of the Lord's coming. They recalled the words of the Lord Jesus, from one of his most stunning parables: “Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks” (Luke 12:35). I refer to this as a stunning parable because it portrays the returning Christ as a “master” who nevertheless “will gird himself to serve, and have them [his servants] recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them” (Luke 12:37). This takes the breath away. The one we wait for, who will come in the clouds with the holy angels and the glory of his Father and terrify the nations—this one will magnify his greatness in mercy and servanthood and make himself the servant of our joy forever. Not even after the second coming will he be “served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25).

So the early Christians recalled the words of Jesus that we are to “be like men who are waiting for their master”—and such a Servant-master as this! It is a different image than the Bridegroom, but no less evocative of joy. So they believed that the second coming of Jesus, no matter what suffering they had to go

through, would be an all-recompensing experience of joy and exultation. “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Peter 4:13).

The Passions of an Exile

This hope was so dominant for the early Christians that all of life was lived as the life of an exile. This did not mean that they had no concern for the welfare of their neighbors. On the contrary, it was the lavish freedom from the love of things that gave them the liberty to love their neighbors with abandon. And this freedom came from their otherworldly hope. The sacrificial love of believers for their neighbors was the evidence that their hope came from outside this world order (Colossians 1:4-5; Hebrews 10:32-34). Their common confession was, “here we have no lasting city” (Hebrews 13:14). We are “aliens and strangers” (1 Peter 2:11). And this meant that the great, joyful, love-sustaining expectation was the coming of their king: “Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20).

This “eager expectation” pervades the New Testament and defines what it means to belong to Christ. “Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are *eagerly waiting for him*” (Hebrews 9:28, RSV). “You are not lacking in any gift, *awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Corinthians 1:7). “Deny ungodliness and worldly desires . . . *looking [eagerly] for the blessed hope* and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:13). “Keep yourselves in the love of God, *waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ* to eternal life” (Jude 21).

This “eager waiting” of the early church for her

Bridegroom to come explains why she prayed the way she did. You can't really long for something as intensely as she longed for Christ and not cry out to God. So she cried out and prayed, "Lord, thy kingdom come!" "*Maranatha!*" "Come, Lord Jesus!" Surely, this hunger for Christ needs to be restored in the comfortable church of the prosperous West. The absence of fasting is indicative of our comfort with the way things are. No one fasts to express how content they are. People only fast out of dissatisfaction. "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matthew 15:9). The absence of fasting is the measure of our contentment with the absence of Christ.

Fasting for the King Is Not a Pacifistic Discipline

But it would be a great mistake to think that the awakening of desire for the Bridegroom would produce a wave of monastic withdrawal into the fasting and prayer of passive waiting. That is not what the awakening of desire for Christ would produce. It would produce a radical, new commitment to complete the task of world evangelization, no matter what the cost. And fasting would not become a pacifistic discipline for private hopes, but a fearsome missionary weapon in the fight of faith.

The reason I say this is simple. If we really long for Christ to return and the kingdom to come, then we will pour our lives into completing the prerequisite to his coming, namely, Matthew 24:14—"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come." The end will not come until every nation (= every people group)³ receives a credible testimony to the gospel of Christ. "We must humbly admit that only God will know when this sign will have been completely fulfilled."⁴ That it will be ful-

filled rests on him who said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

He Will Not Come Before the Work Is Done

George Ladd was one of my professors in seminary, and it amazed me that few things stirred him more deeply than the failure of the church to see the connection between world evangelization and the return of the Lord.

God alone, who has told us that this Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations, will know when that objective has been accomplished. But I do not need to know. I know only one thing: Christ has not yet returned; therefore, the task is not yet done. When it is done, Christ will come. Our responsibility is not to insist on defining the terms of our task; our responsibility is to complete it. So long as Christ does not return, our work is not done. Let us get busy and complete our mission. . . . Do you love the Lord’s appearing? Then you will bend every effort to take the gospel into all the world. It troubles me, in the light of the clear teaching of God’s Word, in the light of our Lord’s explicit definition of our task in The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), that we take it so lightly. . . . His is the kingdom; He reigns in heaven and He manifests His reign on earth in and through His church. When we have accomplished our mission, He will return and establish His kingdom in glory. To us it is given not only to wait for, but also to hasten the coming of the day of God (2 Peter 3:12).⁵

In other words, there is a direct correlation between loving the Lord’s appearing and laboring for the cause of world evangelization. This simply deepens the connection between fasting and the coming of Christ. We will see in Chapter Five how fasting has turned the course of world history precisely in unlash-

ing the first great missionary thrust in Acts 13:1-4. This fits with Jesus' words that his disciples will fast out of longing for the Bridegroom. For the Bridegroom will not come until the gospel is preached to the nations, and the nations are reached through spiritual breakthroughs that come by fasting and prayer.

Prayer and Preaching, Intensified by Fasting

So there are at least these two ways that the Church—the Bride—is to express her longing for the Bridegroom: first by prayer (“Thy kingdom come . . . *Maranatha* . . . Come, Lord Jesus!”) and second by world evangelization (“This gospel will be preached to all the nations . . . then the end [the Lord!] will come”). And since Jesus said, “when the Bridegroom is taken away, [we] will fast,” it is not surprising that fasting is connected with precisely these two things in the New Testament: prayer (Luke 2:37; Matthew 6:6-18) and world evangelization (Acts 13:1-4). Fasting is the exclamation point at the end of “*Maranatha*, come, Lord Jesus!” It is the modest, voluntary embracing of what it will cost to finish the Great Commission: pain. By it we go—or join with those who go—and say, “O, make me a means of your conquering the nations and your coming again!”

Let us long for him and look for him with more intensity than Anna and Simeon. Shall we have less devotion than these pre-Christian saints? We have beheld his glory. Glory as of the only begotten of the Father. And shall we hunger less for his appearing? Are we settled into the world so comfortably that the thought of fasting for the end of history is unthinkable?

Let Us Do It for the King!

What about you older people? Can you taste the glories of the presence of the King better because they are nearer? Do you turn

that taste into fasting for the King's coming? What about you younger people? Do you love Jesus so much that his coming would be the greatest thing you can imagine? Or is he a kind of weekend topic of religious talk that sometimes helps you with a bad conscience, but isn't someone you would want to interrupt your life? What about the middle-aged among us? How do you feel about being told that fasting for the King's coming may reflect how much you want the Bridegroom to come? Do your plans for that long-awaited retirement fill you with stronger desires than does the prospect of Christ's coming? Does Anna's passion for the Messiah appeal to any of us at all? Do we want the appearance of Jesus more than we want to finish our career and family plans? Or our next meal?

Should we not fast for the coming of the king? This is not some strange new devotional practice. It is simply saying with our hunger: This much, O Lord, we want your work to be done and your kingdom to come. This much, O Lord, we want you to return!