

THOUGHTS ON FASTING & PRAYER

THOUGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE¹

Isaiah 58:1-12

¹ “Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. ² For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ³ ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, ¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. ¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”

Jeremiah 14:10-12

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says about this people: “They greatly love to wander; they do not restrain their feet. So the LORD does not accept them; he will now remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins.” ¹¹ Then the LORD said to me, “Do not pray for the well-being of this people. ¹² Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague.”

Joel 2:12-17

¹² “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” ¹³ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. ¹⁴ Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. ¹⁶ Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. ¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

¹ Scripture taken from Holy Bible: New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of International Bible Society.

Matthew 4:1-4

¹Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ²After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

⁴Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Matthew 6:5-18

⁵"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹"This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

¹⁰your kingdom come,
your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us today our daily bread.

¹²Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'

¹⁴For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

¹⁶"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Luke 2:36-38

³⁶There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸Coming up to them [i.e. to Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus] at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Acts 13:1-4

¹In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

Acts 14:21-23

²¹They [i.e. Paul & Barnabas] preached the good news in that city [i.e. Derbe] and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,

²²strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

²³Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

THOUGHT FROM OTHER CHRISTIANS²

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 your 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.

MARTIN LUTHER (*German reformer who lived 1483-1546*)

[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 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 wine that their bellies are bloated.

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

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 appears the judgments of the

² Most of these quotations were taken from an appendix in the book *A Hunger for God* by John Piper (Wheaton: Crossway Books, © 1997).

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 say 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.
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 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).*

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*)

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 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 JOHNATHAN EDWARDS, *Vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press 1972), p. 507*

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

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 it 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 our 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.*

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.

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, by 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.*

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.

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.