

Fasting in Times of Danger

Esther 4: 16 - Fasting is in itself a prayer

“It is remarkable that nothing is here said about prayer, but fasting was in itself a prayer; for it was not a form put on from without, but the natural expression of the inner emotion, and as an application to God, it is to be explained much as we do the touching of the Saviour by the woman, who in that way sought her cure. Words are signs, just as fasting is a sign. That which is essential in either is genuineness. God does not look to the words themselves, any more than He does to the fasting in itself. He has regard only to that which the soul expresses, either by the one or through the other. The touch of the soul of the woman went to the Master’s heart through her touching of His garment with her fingers; and the yearning of the soul of Esther, through her fasting, made its appeal to Jehovah, even though she did not breathe His name.” (W. M. Taylor, D. D.)

John Gill says: “...and fast ye for me; that is, pray for her, that she might have courage to go in to the king, and meet with success; for prayer was the principal thing, fasting only an accessory to it, and as fitting for it, and expressive of affliction and humiliation of soul.”

Jonah 3: 6-8

John Calvin says on this: But as to fasting and sackcloth, it is very true, as we have observed in our remarks on Joel, that repentance consists not in these external things: for God cares not for outward rites, and all those things which are resplendent in the sight of men are worthless before him; what indeed he requires, is sincerity of heart. Hence what Jonah here says of fasting, and other outward performances, ought to be referred to their legitimate end, — that the Ninevites intended thus to show that they were justly summoned as guilty before God’s tribunal, and also, that they humbly deprecated the wrath of their judge. Fasting then and sackcloth were only an external profession of repentance. Were any one to fast all his life, and to put on sackcloth, and to scatter dust on himself, and not to connect with all this a sincerity of heart, he would do nothing but mock God. Hence these outward performances are, in themselves, of small or of no value, except when preceded by an interior feeling of heart, and men be on this account led to manifest such outward evidences. Whenever then Scripture mentions fasting, and ashes, and sackcloth, we must bear in mind that these things are set before us as the outward signs of repentance which when not genuine do nothing else but provoke the wrath of God; but when true, they are approved of God on account of the end in view, and not that they avail, of themselves, to pacify his wrath, or to expiate sins.

If now any one asks whether penitence is always to be accompanied with fasting, ashes, and sackcloth, the answer is at hand, — that the faithful ought through their whole life to repent: for except every one of us continually strives to renounce himself and his former life, he has not yet learned what it is to serve God; for we must ever contend with the flesh. But though there is a continual exercise of repentance, yet fasting is not required of us always. It then follows that fasting is a public and solemn testimony of repentance, when there appears to be some extraordinary evidence of God’s wrath. Thus have we seen that the Jews were by Joel called to lie in ashes, and to put on sackcloth because God had come forth, as it were, armed against them; and all the Prophets had declared that destruction was nigh the people. In the same manner the Ninevites, when terrified by this dreadful edict, put on sackcloth proclaimed a fasts because this was usually done in extremities. We now then perceive why the king, having himself put on sackcloth, enjoined on the whole people both fasting and other tokens of repentance.

Ezra 8: 21

Daniel 10: 2-3

Jonah 3: 6-8

Matthew 17: 14-21