

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

Him the forgiveness of all our sins, and that new nature which He alone can impart, and which we can neither create nor win, but must simply accept. Then, after that, come the field and the time for our efforts put forth in His strength, to array our souls in His likeness, and day by day to put on the beautiful garments which He bestows. It is a lifelong work thus to strip ourselves of the rags of our old vices, and to gird on the robe of righteousness. Lofty encouragements, tender motives, solemn warnings, all point to this as our continual task. We should set ourselves to it in His strength, if so be that being clothed, we may not be found naked—and then, when we lay aside the garment of flesh and the armour needed for the battle, we shall hear His voice welcoming us to the land of peace, and shall walk with Him in victor's robes, glistening "so as no fuller on earth could white them."

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH.

V. RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES.—CHAP. VII. VIII.

FOR two years Zechariah saw no visions. Nothing came into his mind which he could honestly communicate to the people as a fresh word of God. To those who enjoyed his visions and waited for them more impatiently than we wait for an important speech from a leading statesman or a new poem of the Laureate, this was disappointing; and strong pressure must have been put upon the prophet to discharge his function. Matters were all the while emerging which it was a strong temptation to decide by an oracular utterance. Questions must often have been put to Zechariah concerning affairs of which he had his own private opinion, and he would not have been human had

he never been tempted to utter this as if it were authoritative; but Zechariah seems to have been an honest man, and a man whose honesty cleared his inward sight so that he could not mistake what was God's voice in him for his own imaginings or opinions. The people must, therefore, have gradually come to understand that prophecy was of no private instigation or the mere imaginings of the individual prophet, but that the prophet was then only a prophet when he spoke as he was moved by the Holy Ghost.

At length after two years of silence Zechariah was thus moved to speak. The men of Bethel sent a deputation to Jerusalem, to enquire of the priests and prophets whether it was advisable to continue the Fast in the fifth month. This fast had been appointed to commemorate and bewail the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, who in this month "burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house he burnt with fire," so that from the seventh to the tenth of the month the city was all in flames. It suddenly struck the men of Bethel that this fast was out of place now, when the city and temple were daily assuming more promising proportions. They were intelligent and honest men, who felt that a religious service which did not express present feelings, but was a mere antiquated observance, was worse than useless. At the same time they had too much respect for ecclesiastical authority to take upon themselves to abolish the fast-day. And besides, they had as much patriotic feeling as forbade them to move in this matter irrespective of their fellow-citizens and of the ideas that might prevail in other towns.

The answer to their question expresses some essential principles of religious service: 1. That it is reasonable to revise continually all our religious observances, with a view to ascertain if there still remains the same reason for their

continuance as there was for their institution. The Jews, in common with Eastern nations generally, were excessively bound by tradition. Yet these men of Bethel suddenly awoke to the absurdity of wearing sackcloth and casting ashes on their heads in mourning for a city which every day was becoming more beautiful and prosperous. They felt that they were false, exhibiting a grief which had long since passed away. The lamentation and confession which were most appropriate while the people were in banishment, were out of place now that they were restored to their land. The course of time, the progress of events, had antiquated this fast.

And it is always a reasonable and necessary question to put regarding every religious observance which has had an incidental origin, whether it is not now antiquated and an encumbrance; whether what was most appropriate a hundred years ago is not inappropriate and mischievous now; whether what God appointed for the last generation He may not desire to abolish in this. In our religious observances there is what is essential and unchangeable. That Christians should meet together to worship the Father and to encourage one another in the faith, that they should celebrate Baptism and the Communion, these are necessities of the Christian life, and are of perpetual obligation. But those observances which at one time did not exist in the Church, but were suggested by some special occasion or particular need or emergency, may become obsolete. The need may pass away, the occasion lose all its urgency by lapse of time, and it is therefore the duty of the Church to enquire and determine whether the observance should or should not be continued. Forms of worship which were adopted during the reaction against Popery become inane when the Church's danger lies in another direction. Fasts and feasts which were heartily instituted by men whose feeling was stirred by great calamities or by valuable

benefits, become meaningless burdens when the events are overlaid by matters of greater present consequence: Revision, therefore, of all observances and forms of worship is one of the standing duties of a Church.

But the men of Bethel must be imitated not only in their inquiry, but in their manner of making it. They recognised the importance of unanimity and of submission to authority. They did not abolish the Fast in Bethel and leave Jerusalem to follow suit. And their moderation was rewarded. They had the satisfaction of carrying the whole Church with them. Moved by two balancing principles, respect for authority and the exercise of private judgment, they proposed their question.

2. The answer they received was not direct. The best answer, the only sufficient answer, to religious inquiry is often indirect. Men wish for rules, God gives them principles out of which they can frame rules for themselves. Men ask for superficial instruction: God penetrates to the root of their difficulties. In this instance the reply virtually was: "There is no need of saying *when* you should fast, unless you first of all know what true fasting is. There is no call for any new deliverances on the subject. If you ponder what has already been said by the former prophets, you will be able to determine this point for yourselves." This is a rebuke administered to the frame of mind that craves special and infallible guidance in matters regarding which the mind of God has already been sufficiently indicated. This frame of mind has two roots. The one is a disinclination to act in the manner which has already been identified as coincident with God's will. Men profess to be seeking for more light; but they are really seeking for something which may dim and darken the light they have, and allow them to be doubtful whether they should make the sacrifice or do the duty demanded of them. And when in this frame of mind, asking for more light because already they see

too clearly for their own comfort what their duty is, they are always unusually sanctimonious, and redundantly rich in religious expressions and ostentatiously earnest in consulting every one who can advise them. The other root of this disposition is a timorous distrust of one's own judgment. Even in men who have some experience of religion, there remains an unworthy fear of God, which causes them to shrink from carrying out their own conclusions in matters of religion. Men act as if God might be angry with them for using the judgment He Himself has implanted in them, as the chief instrument of their education and progress.

3. The answer to these men of Bethel cautions us especially against a self-interested observance of religious ordinances. "When ye fasted and mourned, did ye at all fast unto Me?" Frequently men engage in religious ordinances because they have a dim expectation of some good that is thereby to accrue to them. These observances of theirs are not the spontaneous outpouring of souls that love God, and worship because they are inwardly rapt and adoring. Self-interested worship may be much more elaborate than that of the sincere worshipper. The flatterer who has an end to gain will word his address to you in much more elaborate phrase than the friend who speaks direct from the heart. But of such flattery you say, with God, "I cannot away with it." To these men of Bethel, and through them to all formal worshippers, God says: Why consult Me about these services? What have I to do with them? It was not Me you had in view, but yourselves, in performing them. If you like them, continue them. If they are a weariness to you, how much more to Me. So long as you merely wish to please yourselves, or to secure yourselves against some imagined danger, devise whatever services you think will best suit yourselves.

Our whole idea of religious service, then, is wrong if it

proceeds mainly from an expectation that good will thereby accrue to ourselves. If we sing God's praise under the impression that this is required of us and that we must do it, God meets us with, Who has required this of you? Nothing can be more intolerable and repulsive to Him than such fictitious homage. What He seeks is the outpouring of the full heart that delights in Him and cannot forbear praising, or at all events finds real satisfaction in doing so. When the worship of God becomes to us a mere duty the performance of which we feel incumbent upon us that we may not lose God's favour; when we enter upon it without heart, or even with some repugnance or distaste, God cannot recognise that as worship of Him, but only as the service of our own superstitious and ignorant self-seeking. We seek the company of our friends, not that we may ingratiate ourselves with them, but because we are happier there than elsewhere; such is the worship which God delights in.

4. Of fasting itself our ideas are apt to be confused. On the whole we are perhaps too ready to dismiss it as a mere old-fashioned or monkish observance. But certainly, both in the Old and New Testament, some importance is attached to it. And naturally enough, we begin to fear lest in parting with fasting we may also be parting with some spiritual benefits which fasting communicated. Now what fasting does is, first, to bring our acknowledgment of sin, and our humiliation on account of it, into a distinct bodily form. We confess sin not only by word of mouth, but by act, by abstinence. We allow this fact of our sinfulness to regulate our bodily condition. We take so much account of it, and ascribe so much reality to it, as to allow it to appear in and to sway our outward demeanour. Men who have felt their sin deeply have not taken to fasting as a right thing to do. They have been driven to it. As a heart bleeding from bereavement cannot

turn to food as if there were the same charm in living as ever; so those in whose conscience sin has been asserting its importance, cannot but turn from the world and from their usual pursuits and nourishment in extreme bitterness of spirit. "My *sin* is ever before me."

It will, however, be said, Well then, let those who are thus driven to fasting, fast, but do not ask it of men who have no such feeling about their sin, who can eat and drink and go about their usual employments with gusto and relish, whose appetite has never been spoiled by sorrow for sin, whatever else may have interfered with it. But I am not sure that this is sound reasoning. For even where fasting is not the natural expression of sorrow for sin it may produce a state of mind in which the evil of sin is more truly appreciated. Many whose natural grief is so slight that it would never dictate to them to clothe themselves in mourning, have their grief increased when they conform to the usual custom. And those whose grief is bitter find it increased by funereal gloom and all the sad appurtenances of woe. So any little grief we have for sin might be materially aided by what has been in some its natural expression.

It is to be feared that at the bottom of the modern shrinking from fasting lies the feeling that to fast for sin is making rather too much of it, and so giving it a prominence and substantial recognition in our lives which is exaggerated and unseemly. We are willing to acknowledge sin and ask forgiveness, but to prolong our humiliation and allow a spiritual concern to put aside any ordinary arrangement of our life, is going too far. If so, it is a most unreasonable superiority with which we presume to look down upon those true souls who have so keenly felt their sin as to mourn for it as truly as ever they grieved over an earthly loss. They were at least in earnest. And whether we fast or fast not, it is essential that we have

that genuine grief for sin which in other days produced, and in other men produces, fasting as its natural expression. If we see sin to be the root of evil, this perception will find expression in our lives, if not in fasting, then in some outward result as distinctly perceptible.

But fasting has a second function. It is an unmistakable expression of willingness to abstain from whatever might serve as fuel to sinful passion, and to reduce the spirit to a chastened and humble frame. Paul himself was careful to "keep his body under." So far from allowing it comforts and pampering it with indulgences, he used severity towards it. And when one reads of men who have followed his example, the question always arises: Did these men know less about the means of resisting sin than we do, or did they know more of the inveteracy and danger of sin? Were they more ignorant or more in earnest? This at least is obvious, that they were willing to do what they could towards destroying sin, no matter what uncomfortable lives they had to lead in consequence. They showed a determination to be holy; a determination that the spirit should be the absolute master of the body, and should not be prevented from communing with God even by what might seem the most necessary occupations. And whether by fasting or by other methods, we also must gain this mastery over the body, this superiority to such considerations as the flesh suggests. If we cannot bear to forego accustomed comforts, if we cannot step aside from familiar ways, if we fear to give the spirit final and complete advantage over the flesh, we have not the temper of those who fast. Yet without this temper we hope in vain for sanctification. Without times of true spiritual exaltation, and of detachment from bodily cravings and appetites, we cannot attain any high measure of holiness. If there is a degree of holiness which we regard with dread as precluding carnal enjoyments, we

have not the spirit of those who fast. We are called to be "saints," and if we decline to be saints there is no second-rate, inferior calling we can fall back upon. We must learn to find our joy in God if the pleasures of sin are to lose their attraction. If we are to be delivered from dangerous sin, we must be willing to be delivered from all sin. If we are to keep sin out of the life it must be kept out of the heart; and it can be kept out of the heart only by filling the heart with holy purposes and spiritual desires.

But perhaps the most important truth of all which was elicited by the question from Bethel is that, in common with all religious service, fasting is meaningless and displeasing to God unless accompanied by holiness of life. Zechariah, as well as the older prophets, points out that the truest and most acceptable fast is abstinence from wrong-doing, from oppression of the widow, the fatherless, the stranger, and the poor. If sin makes such an impression on the conscience that the sinner cannot eat, the appropriate result of such impression is in conduct. Lowliness of spirit before God inevitably takes the form of loving and meek demeanour towards men.

Some persons carry this principle to an extreme, and say that all worship should take the form of work, and that apart from active beneficence there is no worship worthy of the name. We best show our worship of God when we accommodate ourselves to His appointments in life and do our duty where He has set us; and the Church perfected will be simply a society of men perfectly discharging the duties of their several callings. But this is only half the truth. As God is personal, there must be that interchange of thought and direct expression of feeling which constitute the charm and the strength of all personal intercourse. The good son emphatically utters his reverence and love for his parents while silently toiling for their support: but this

reverence and love are sustained by the look of affection, by the loving talk in the evening hour, by direct personal intercourse of one kind or other.

This reply regarding Fasts closes with the assurance that the fasts shall be turned into feasts, that days of uninterrupted gladness are approaching, days in which God shall so manifestly bless Israel that all nations shall observe and turn towards Jerusalem. "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: In those days it shall come to pass that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." This is the ultimate attraction, the presence of God. This gradually approves itself as the most powerful determining influence in the life of nations and of individuals. It is this that secures the well-being and felicity here described. And the prediction that the Divine presence among the Jews would attract men to the race, has been fulfilled so far as the Western world is concerned. It is as manifested in the history of the Jews and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth that God has been recognised and worshipped by Christendom. After all the earnest pondering and anxious inquiry, after all the philosophical and scientific investigation which men have undertaken in every age to find out God, it is still the skirt of the Jew that forms the most hopeful hold in this great search.

Every one whose thirst for God compels him to meditate on such themes will inevitably ask: Why was such special, contrived, supernatural revelation required? Might it not have been expected that above all other equipment of our nature, we should have enjoyed a natural sensitiveness to God's presence and power of distinctly apprehending Him? All men have as their birthright the instincts and faculties which enable them to live a healthy physical life: might it not have been expected that each man should have been

furnished by a loving God with the consciousness of His presence and with a clear knowledge of God? Why confine for the longer part of this world's history the knowledge of God to one small, very small, portion of our race?

The doubts which such questions imply are relieved by several considerations. We are especially to consider that spiritually we are diseased, and are not in a position to say how distinctly a healthy spiritual nature might testify of God or how clearly it might see and know Him. Our nature has physical appetites which teach us how to maintain ourselves in physical life: but if these appetites are abused they cease to guide us safely. Besides, it is impossible to conceive how God could have revealed His nature and His will regarding us in any other way than through and in human history, culminating in the personal manifestation of Himself in Christ. For this personal manifestation the necessary preliminary was a gradual process of enlightenment, running parallel with a gradual growth of the human capacity for apprehending God and living for Him.

In our own day there is much honest perplexity about God, and one is sometimes tempted to desire a fresh revelation suited to the wants of our time. One always longs for some disclosure of God which would bring immediate conviction to all men. We cannot learn that spiritual things are spiritually discerned. When we look for God in nature He seems to evade us, and from the personal and responsive Being we look for He seems to become an impersonal force, which is indeed no respecter of persons, and which hears no broken-hearted entreaties. When we look for God within ourselves, we seem at times to see something of a holy Lawgiver who helps those who strive to keep His law; but there is much also which bids us believe we have to do with a system of nature which somehow favours, those who live in the way we call right-

eous. But in Christ we find one who is as personal as ourselves, and as Divine as we can conceive or as our needs require. In Him we find one whom instinctively we worship; one able to respond to and satisfy our faith; the Master of nature, unappalled in presence of its most terrific moods, overcoming its most overwhelming ills; one who is transcendent also in the moral world, alone upon earth unsullied by temptation, in the world and yet neither weakened, misled, nor lowered by its tone, and stretching His hand as from a position above all possibility of failure to all who crave His help. Whatever God is, that is God as we have to do with Him, God in human nature revealing Himself personally.

There are indeed those who own no need of a personal God, but find nature enough; who believe that as by a prudent use of this world our physical life may be enjoyable, so also by using wisely the moral laws which disclose themselves to us we can become all that is morally possible to us. They feel that much that is said of man's need of God arises from a timid selfishness that fears to stand alone, or at all events that it is exaggerated, and that in point of fact men do live happily without recognising God, and that to fear the future is unreasonable. But what are we to make of Christ? What is the significance of this unique phenomenon? We feel foolish when we even compare Him with any other man. What then ought a candid man to make of this? What is the *true* account of it—not only the account of it which looks plausible, but that which stands examination? Has not Christ in past ages proved His power to lead men to God, to strengthen the human spirit, to lift men out of what is degrading? Must we not lay hold on the skirt of this Jew if we are to find God and life eternal?

MARCUS DODS.
