



Conducted by
Frank Worgan

The question that faces me this month concerns a subject about which I have no personal experience. Fasting!

The question is: "Should Christians fast?"

My first - (and I must admit, facetious) - response is to say, "*Some certainly should!*" But, of course, when this topic is raised, what the questioner is asking is not if it is *wise* to fast for health reasons, but if the Scriptures *require* Christians to fast. Are Christians *commanded* to fast?

There have always been bodies in so-called 'Christendom' that have imposed fasting on their members. Both of the 'Catholic churches - Roman and Eastern - claim to believe in it and to practise it, although not always with a great deal of conviction, enthusiasm or consistency. Nor do they agree with each other as to *when* their members should fast. There are in the Calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Church, certain periods designated as periods for fasting which the Church of Rome declares, have been reduced to days on which '*flesh-meat and other special foods*' should be avoided, and the Roman Church freely admits that, '*Fasting is far more rigorous and lasts for longer periods in all Eastern Churches.*'

To 'Fast' or to 'Abstain'?

In the theological mind there is a distinction to be made between 'abstinence' and 'fasting'. In a time of 'abstinence' anyone over the age of seven years of age must not eat meat, or soup made from meat. 'Abstinence' is said to concern the *kind* of food, which

must be avoided, whilst, according to Rome, 'fasting' concerns the *quantity* of food that may be eaten, and therefore must be distinguished from abstinence.

'On a fast-day only one meal may be taken, and that after noon.'

Not surprisingly, the rules and regulations are both complicated - and inconsistent. People avoid meat - and eat fish instead. Milk and soup count as food - and are therefore to be avoided! Clearly all this takes us into the realm of man-made law, and has little in common with what the Bible describes as fasting. However, the major period of fasting, about which these Churches are agreed is 'Lent' which is the English name for the period of forty days up to the death of the Lord Jesus. During this period, says the Church of Rome, *'The Faithful must observe the law of fasting, unless dispensed or excused.'*

Fasting in Bible Times

As we read through the scriptures it becomes evident that fasting was a widely accepted practice among the ancient people of God in every period of their history. In the Old Testament the first reference to it occurs as early as the Book of Judges, and the last is found in the prophecy of Zechariah.

As the Jews saw it, fasting served several purposes.

Firstly, they regarded it as a way of attracting the attention of God. They felt that, if a man fasted, God noticed him. They believed that, by fasting, he proved to God that his sorrow was genuine and that when he prayed he meant what he said.

Secondly, they also saw fasting as a way of moving God to action on their behalf. They believed that, if they fasted, He would be prepared to do something about the situation which had led them to fast.

If you consider this second point, you will recognise that when a man believed that his fasting could be effective in moving God to action, he could very easily persuade himself that he was someone special!

Commanded by God?

Here is an important fact which should be borne in mind.

The overwhelming majority of the fasts undertaken either by individuals or by the entire nation were undertaken voluntarily and were not required by God.

After their return from the Babylonian Captivity, the Jews began to observe several National days of fasting. There were four fasts, which commemorated various stages in the siege and fall of Jerusalem, and during one period in their history they observed no fewer than 28 regular fast-days in the year, some of them weekly and others monthly. But the fact remains that the only fast commanded by God and enshrined in the Law of Moses, was the fast connected with the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29) and, until the Babylonian Captivity, this was the only fast which the nation regularly observed.

The phrase 'afflict your souls', used in this verse is a term for fasting.

This means that, although in the time of the Lord Jesus the Jews fasted - some of them often (Matt. 9:14; Luke 18:12), these were all voluntary acts of private devotion.

Indeed, when we turn to the New Testament, it may even come as a surprise to discover that whilst fasting was clearly one of the religious practices upon which the Pharisees and others set great store, the Lord spoke about it only twice. The two occasions are recorded in Matt. 6:16, 18 and Mark 2: 18-22.

Moving on in the New Testament, the only other references to the practice are found in Acts 13:2,3, at Antioch, and Acts 14:23. The first of these references relates to the sending out of Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, and the second with the appointment of Elders in the Churches they established.

Paul, also mentions fasting in 1 Corinthians 7:5, but makes it clear that he is not

imposing it in the Church as a command.

Then, in 2 Corinthians 6:5 and 11:27, he writes about the things he is enduring for the sake of the Gospel, and states that there were times when he suffered hunger. But he is referring to times when he went without food *simply because he had none to eat*, and this involuntary abstinence does not qualify as fasting in the religious sense.

So, what I am saying is this: whilst as a Jew, Jesus, Himself, without doubt, observed the annual fast on the Day of Atonement as imposed by God's law, He did not impose any other fast as a religious duty, on others. He neither approved of the practice, nor did He disapprove.

In this connection it is interesting to look at Matt. 6:16, where in His 'Sermon on the Mount' the Lord speaks about fasting. Notice that He does not introduce the subject with the formula which He used so often in that discourse, '*It was said by them of old . . . but I say to you,*' because the fasting He was discussing had no parallel in the Mosaic Law and was not covered by it. It was something, which the people had imposed upon themselves as an act of personal piety.

(To be continued).

(Questions to: Frank Worgan, 5 Gryfebank Way,
Houston, Renfrewshire, Scotland. PA6 7NZ.)

WHICH IS IT?

Is it "made Himself of no reputation" or "emptied Himself"?

(Philippians 2:7)

In King James version (AV) rendering of that beautiful passage, Philippians 2:1-11, which portrays as the example for us, the depth of love the Lord Jesus exercised on our behalf, we read that He **"made Himself of no reputation and took upon Him the form of a servant."** Whereas the Revised and the American Standard versions read **"emptied Himself taking the form of a servant."** Even the first copies of the New King James Version broke away from the AV rendering and had **"emptied Himself"** but later editions reverted to the AV wording, **"made Himself of no reputation."** The question arises, is this a problem and if so which is correct?

The revisers were right to correct "and took" to "taking" (Gk. *labwn*, aorist participle) but it does not seem logical to say that He emptied Himself by "taking." We empty things by removing - not taking in. This puts a question mark against the translation "emptied Himself."

Also, if it is telling us that He emptied Himself then took on the form of a servant we will want to know of what He emptied Himself. This has given rise to much speculation. For example - did He empty Himself of deity? This, of course, would contradict such statements as **"For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily."** Colossians 2:9. So there is a problem.

If on the other hand it is saying that the Lord Jesus made Himself of no reputation by taking on the form of a servant then there is no problem and it leads smoothly to the next thought **"being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself"** v.8.

THE FORM OF A SERVANT

So, which is correct? Is it "made Himself of no reputation" or "emptied Himself?"

The phrase "made Himself of no reputation" is from the Greek word "*kenow*" which lexicons do define as "to empty" but it is not that simple because every time the AV translates "*kenow*" figuratively. These are all the occurrences of "*kenow*" and their AV renderings:-