

FASTING AS A HEALTH FACTOR.

[By H. T. WHITFORD, in the "Church Eclectic."]

No one is likely to realize a truth who is unable to recognize a fundamental principle lying at its base. Experience as well as science teaches us the necessity for restraint and abstinence. Rest as well as activity is a fundamental law or principle of created life. Good and evil, life and death, both are set before us. Success or failure depends upon the recognition in time of the law of health; and rest is essential to health. The prolongation of life to extreme old age is impossible to the man whose 'god is his belly,'^a who fares 'sumptuously every day'^b: a perpetual feast involving a strain of ceaseless activity upon the organs of digestion. On the other hand science admits that 'there is certainly no physiological reason why the ages assigned to the patriarchs before the flood should not have been maintained.'^c Let so much be admitted; then survey the situation. Where are we? It is evident we are in captivity. When we open our eyes and move about we can easily discover the chink in the wall of our prison house. The fallacies common to fallen humanity may be seen floating about in overwhelming numbers. The perplexities of human life can be unravelled by those alone who will admit the full rays of Divine light by taking down the shutters in the cell. The history of the past is recorded on the face of one shutter, the problems of philosophy are stated on another. The fair complexion of nature outside ourselves will raise our hopes and make us long for the fresh air of liberty. Tradition and heredity are responsible for our captivity; it is important that we should master the evil and try to find the way of escape.

It seems impossible to learn some lessons without the force of bitter personal experience. When nature raps us on the knuckles the pain is sure to open our eyes. This is particularly the case with respect to the natural appetites and desire for food. The snare of the table can be recognized best by those who have been caught and suffered the most. It is so easy to be led into temptation when the fruit appears to be good for food and designed to make one wise.

Unless we are to look upon the account of the fall as a myth, we must believe that abstinence was the first test of obedience. The Law revealed the same principle. May we not reasonably expect to find the idea further developed and inscribed on the foundations of the present Dispensation? 'It is not God's way to destroy. He carries the bud into the flower, the germ into the fruit, the child into the man, the shadow into the substance; the one is done away because it is fulfilled in the other.'^d The New Testament which has been handed down to us as being the true record of the days of Christianity has many references to the subject of health, and its associates, food, rest, and longevity. Dives and Lazarus are familiar types. . . . A man who has provided his good things and fares 'sumptuously every day'^e can not see the advantage for fasting even on the day of atonement. He makes a great mistake. The act of disobedience stifles the conscience. Self-discipline is imposed upon all and cannot be dispensed. 'Never to have known hunger, never to have suffered from thirst is fatal to

the full understanding^f of the Divine law. He is apt to doubt the authority for the command to abstain from that which is designed to nourish the body. He is easily convinced that neither Moses nor the Prophets appointed a set time for fasting, and feels that it 'is not required of any man . . . to weaken (himself) by the pangs of actual hunger.'^g If perchance he believes in the inspiration of the Bible he will interpret the command 'afflict your souls' as referring to pleasures other than those of eating and drinking. Besides, he has always been considered a moderate eater. Fasting from sin is the great idea which all are bound to recognize. There is no virtue in depriving oneself of the food which is necessary to sustain the bodily functions. I must eat to live, says he, (quite unconscious that he has lived to eat.) The desire for food is the demand of a natural appetite. He knows no limit to its gratification. Are there no limits? There can be no law without a penalty for its breach. The penalty for neglecting the day of atonement was very severe. 'Whatever soul it be that shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people.'^h Separation and suffering are results of disobedience.

Abstinence is as old as the hills. It is a law of nature. The whole creation needs its seasons of rest. . . . Reason and nature are indeed important witnesses; antiquity, the records of our forefathers, the Bible, the lives of the saints, have their testimonies to offer. Seeing the present general neglect of fasting, it would be a mistake to neglect looking at the subject in the light of past experience. Among early writers who gave fasting a large share of their attention the following names occur: Irenæus, Justin Martyr, Victor, Tertullian, Polycrates, Dionysius of Alexandria, Constantine the Great, Basil the Great, Gregory, Nazianzen, Epiphanius, Ambrose, Jerome, Chrysostom, Prudentius, Augustine, Cyril, Theodoret, Leo the Great, Chrysologus, Aurelius, Cassiodorus, Isidore, Gregory the Great, Joannes Moschus, Venerable Bede, Theodolphus of Orleans, Joannes Damascenus, and Andrew of Crete. Omitting altogether the vast number of writers in the interval and coming down to recent times, even so late as the last century, the Wesleyan movement began with strict rules respecting fasting,ⁱ and the Salvation Army at the present time recognizes the advantage of abstinence as an act of discipline. The strength of combination, the point of direction, the force of enthusiasm, and the weight of numbers, may be seen in the large contributions which the order to 'fast and give' produces in the 'army.' Thus the poor can deny themselves as well as the rich. It may be harder for the latter to do so owing to the apparent absence of any necessity, the former by bitter experience know what it is to fast and feel the effects of involuntary hunger and thirst.

What is the definition of fasting? and what degree is beneficial rather than prejudicial to health? These are the two questions which appear to me should take precedence in dealing with the subject. Although fasting is generally considered in its religious aspect, the main idea in this paper will be to demonstrate, so far as a layman can do so, the physical benefit and advantages of the practice.

A noted preacher has asserted that 'an unregulated desire for something to eat ruined the race in Paradise, and an unregulated desire for something to eat keeps it ruined. The world during six thousand years has tried to digest

that first apple. The world will never be evangelized until we get rid of a dyspeptic Christianity.'^j It will be impossible to get rid of the disease until we have ascertained the cause. A leading scientist points out the cause in this fashion: 'I have for some years past been compelled by facts which are constantly coming before me, to accept the conclusion that more mischief in the form of actual disease, of impaired vigour, and shortened life, accrues to civilized man, so far as I have observed in our own country and throughout western and central Europe, from erroneous habits in eating, than from the habitual use of alcoholic drink, considerable as I know the evil of that to be.'^k

Another scientist has been trying to make us 'understand three facts: 1. The exceeding small amount of flesh-forming matter that is called for to make up the waste of the muscular organs. 2. The enormous amount of wasted material which is thrown off or laid by without ever having been applied to any useful purpose in the body. 3. The tremendous measure of living energy that has been expended in throwing off from the body substances which ought never to have been put into it.'^l

These are the conclusions of men having special knowledge. The subject of fasting should be dealt with having the ascertained facts of science as the basis of the argument. Let us hope that our teachers as well in theology as in science will investigate the matter further without bias and unnatural restrictions. Then we shall expect splendid results from their joint efforts, and the rising generation derive eternal benefit through obedience to the laws which they enunciate, for it is plain 'there are virtues and vices which can only be acquired or avoided, in particular cases, by attention to rules of diet which are the discoveries of medical science.'^m

In this pre-eminently luxurious age, when the gifts of nature are brought within the easy reach of the masses, the tendency to over-indulgence in eating and drinking has caused the 'ills that flesh is heir to' to multiply abundantly, and diseases of which our forefathers had no conception whatever are alarmingly common. This generation when compared with the last, truly is weaker, if happily it be wiser. How to correct evil, how to maintain the highest vigour among civilized nations, more particularly that those who come after us may not be crippled by serious natural defect and tendency, is of supreme importance.

Careful study of the subject, therefore, brings fasting within the domain of scientific treatment, and will show, when properly understood, it is a fundamental law of life. Not only does the neglect of proper and due rest of the digestive organs impair and cause degeneration of the human race and produce the greatest havoc with the constitutions of those who indulge their appetite to excess, but the neglect of fasting by the least indulgent prevents them also from realizing the possibilities of prolonging 'the life that now is,'ⁿ to that extent which philosophers, in harmony with scientists, maintain is the ideal, the study of the human body indicates.^p

^j Sermon by Dr. Talmage, reported June 21, 21, 1880.

^k 'Diet in Relation to Age and Activity,' by Sir Henry Thompson, in *The Nineteenth Century*, May, 1885, p. 777.

^l 'Foods for Man,' by Dr. B. W. Richardson, in *Longmans' Magazine*, May, 1888, p. 43.

ⁿ 'Positivism in Christianity,' by Wilfrid Ward, in *The Nineteenth Century*, Sept., 1887, p. 412.

^o 1 Timothy, iv, 8.

^p See 'The Storage of Life,' by Dr. W. B. Richardson, in *Longmans'*, Aug., 1888, p. 383, and 'Principles of Biology,' by Herbert Spencer, p. 85.

(To be continued.)

^a Philippians, iii, 19. ^b St. Luke, xvi, 19.

^c 'The Art of Prolonging Life,' by Dr. Robson Rooso, in *The Fortnightly Review*, June, 1889, p. 558.

^d 'The Last Supper of our Lord,' by J. Marshall Lang, p. 34.

^e St. Luke, xvi, 19.

^f 'Characteristics of Christ's Teaching,' by the Bishop of Llandaff, p. 18.

^g 'Fasting,' by the Ven. Archdeacon Farrar, in the *English Illustrated Magazine*, May, 1890, p. 609.

^h Leviticus, xxiii, 27.

ⁱ 'Wesley's Life,' by Tyerman, iii, 630.