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Godliness. Reverence. Obedience. Worship.

GR W

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growth in faith and service to God



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From the Editors...

Autumn is a beautiful time of the year. The harvest has come with a wonderful variety and abundance of fruits and vegetables. We are witness to the Lord's paintbrush on the canvas of fall leaves. But soon the leaves will fall and the time to prune trees in preparation for winter comes. Winter is a challenging time and plants need to be prepared for it.

Sometimes we will face a metaphoric winter in our lives – difficulties and trials close in on us and bring great challenges to our faith. To endure through these times and GROW as a result of them, we need to prepare ourselves beforehand, we need to receive the Lord's pruning (John 15:1-8). And as we hunker down through the stormy and troublesome times, know that we are not alone – God is with us, and it is His desire to see us GROW strong through the struggles we face (James 1:2-4).

We are thankful for the time and effort our writers have given. It is our earnest hope to help in some small way towards the spiritual GROWth of our subscribers. This issue encourages us to be people of integrity and to be careful about false teachers; it will focus on the great relationship we have with our spiritual family and encourage us to support one another in the difficult times; and it will urge us to devote ourselves to the Lord, both in our personal worship and through sharing His word with others.

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Now, come GROW with us!

Cordially,
Sean P. Cavender, chief editor
William Stewart, editor & designer



Balaam – The Prophet for Profit

WILLIAM STEWART | KINGSTON, ONTARIO

In Numbers 21, we follow the children of Israel as they make their approach towards the promised land. The writer gives a lengthy list of sites where they camped. Their journey was not without event. Passing through the Negev, they were attacked by the king of Arad (21:1). Coming to the territory of Sihon the Amorite, Israel asked permission to pass through on the King's Highway. Not only did he refuse to allow passage, but he fought against them (21:21-23). And finally, coming to Bashan, they were attacked by Og and his forces (21:33). As troubling as all this could have been, the Lord gave His people victory over every enemy who rose against them (21:3, 24, 35). These events serve as the backdrop to the story of Balaam.

In Numbers 22, we are introduced to Balak, the king of Moab. Having seen neighbour after neighbour fall before the people of Israel, he was understandably afraid. He could prepare his troops for battle, but there was no reason to think he would fare any better on the battlefield than his contemporaries. It seems he understood there was a supernatural force behind the Jewish victories, so he pursued a supernatural course himself. Balak, along with the elders of Midian, sought to hire Balaam, the son of Beor to curse the people of Israel.

Many of the prophets, magicians, mediums and such among the pagan nations were nothing more than charlatans. The smoke and mirrors of the Egyptian magicians at the time of the Exodus soon failed to keep up with the power of God displayed by Moses. In Elijah's day, no matter how much the prophets of Baal cried out or cut themselves, their idol would not answer. And the woman of En Dor who was enlisted by King Saul to contact the deceased Samuel reminds me of Whoopi Goldberg's character in



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the movie "Ghost." She was completely shocked and dismayed when a ghost actually appeared – that kind of thing had never happened to her before!

Balaam was different. He was authentic. He was a non-Israelite prophet or soothsayer (Joshua 13:22) who lived in Pethor of Mesopotamia (Deuteronomy 23:4). He had a reputation as a successful diviner. Balak testified concerning him, *"...I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed"* (Numbers 22:6). His reliability as a seer was so respected, Balak was willing to entrust the future of his kingdom to Balaam's tongue.

Receiving the messengers from Balak, the prophet invited them to stay the night, saying, *"...I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me"* (Numbers 22:8). This was not some attempt to stall or delay things; he legitimately sought God's instruction on what to do. The LORD spoke with Balaam that night, saying, *"You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed"* (Numbers 22:12). The next morning, he informed Balak's messengers he would not be going with them, for the LORD refused to permit him to do so.

There are some great lessons for us here.

1. Seek God's will. Balaam didn't immediately jump to an opportunity presented to him. He took time to see whether it was God's will or not. Let us take time to consider the decisions we make. Is it in agreement with God's will? What are the spiritual implications, if any, of this decision? Seek God's will and then live accordingly.
2. Serving God must be more important than the pursuit of money. They brought a diviner's fee for Balaam – he would be richly paid for his services, but he refused. May we not value the temporal above the eternal.

The king of Moab did not give up. In response to Balaam's refusal to come, Balak sent messengers who were "*more numerous and more honourable*" (Numbers 22:15) with an offer of more money. In fact, Balak offered a blank check, "*...I will do whatever you say to me*" (Numbers 22:17). Balaam's response is exceptional, at least the first half. He affirmed, "*Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more*" (Numbers 22:18). What a great statement of faith! It mattered not how many honourable princes showed up at his door; he would do what God said. It didn't matter how much money they offered, even if the king offered his palace and all his wealth, Balaam would not go beyond God's word.

At this point, Balaam should have closed the door, sending the men back to Moab. Thanks, but no thanks; end of story. But notice verse 19, "*Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.*" He was tempted by the prestige and prosperity offered. God had already spoken on the topic, but what harm could there be in asking again?

There is no harm in studying a topic again to make sure what we believe is what God's word says. However, that was not what Balaam did here. God was very clear, "*You shall not go*" (Numbers 22:12). But Balaam wanted to go.

He didn't seek an answer from God – he'd already received that. He sought a different answer from God.

If we come to God's word with an agenda or bias, we will typically find exactly what we are looking for. It is not that God's word changes with the ebb and flow of human desire; His word is firm and unchanging. Peter spoke of those who twist and turn the Scriptures to their destruction (2 Peter 3:16). Paul said those who do not love the truth would easily be deceived and deluded (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12). With enough misapplication, misinterpretation, and ignorance, one can come to just about any desired conclusion on any given topic. The muddled religious world which surrounds us reveals this to be the case. And unfortunately, our brotherhood is not immune.

Let us go back to our text in Numbers 22. Balaam wanted a different answer from the LORD, and it would seem from verse 20 he got just what he wanted. The LORD said, "*...rise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you – that you shall do.*" He must have been elated. His persistence had been rewarded, and now, he was headed to Moab and would be richly paid for his services there.

He saddled his donkey and set out with the princes of Moab. However, Numbers 22:22 states, "*...God's anger was aroused because he went...*" What? Why? God said it was okay for him to go, didn't He? No, God's will hadn't changed. He revealed His will the first time Balaam asked Him, and He plainly said, "No!" Balaam persisted, he nagged, he balked at God's command, much like the teenager who defiantly tells his parents he's going to the party whether they like it or not. The parents' last words might be, "Go ahead, do what you're going to do." Have they given permission? Is it their will for him to go? No, it is an expression of their frustration. When God says, "*He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still...*" (Revelation 22:11) He is neither commanding nor condoning the unjust and filthy; it is an acknowledgment they will do what they want despite God's will (and be judged

accordingly). Numbers 22:20 was not God saying, “Yes, I want you to go,” it was God saying to a rebellious Balaam, “Go ahead and do what you’re going to do.”

The events over the next 10 verses present a comical scene with a very serious message. Balaam’s donkey, typically a well-behaved animal, was acting strange that day. First, she turned aside from the road into a field. Then she squeezed against a wall, crushing Balaam’s foot. Finally, she just laid down under him and refused to continue. Each time, the prophet whipped the animal for her insolence. The donkey could see what the prophet could not – the Angel of the LORD was standing in the way with His sword drawn. After being struck the third time, the LORD opened the donkey’s mouth, and she spoke: *“What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?”* (22:28) Any onlookers (maybe the Moabite princes, v 21 & 35) must have thought the prophet had lost his marbles. There he was, stopped on the road, arguing with his donkey. The apostle Peter, commenting on the exchange says, *“...he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man’s voice restrained the madness of the prophet”* (2 Peter 2:16).

After opening the donkey’s mouth, God opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD. He rebuked the prophet, *“...your way is perverse before Me...”* Then He commended the donkey, *“...if she had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, and let her live”* (22:32-33). Notice the contrast between Balaam and his beast. She saw the LORD, but he was blinded by greed. She was faithful to her master, but his way was perverse and disobedient to his Master. This humbling scene resulted in Balaam confessing his disobedience to the LORD and offering to return to Pethor of Mesopotamia. The LORD permitted him to go on to Moab but warned him only to speak as he was instructed by God (22:35).

Upon arriving in Moab, Balaam spoke to Balak, *“...have I any power at all to say anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak”* (22:38). Balak had sent for him and was ready to pay whatever price necessary, but the

prophet’s tongue is not for sale. His duty as a prophet was to speak what God said, not what Balak wanted to hear. This responsibility which Balaam acknowledged belongs to every child of God. We are commissioned to speak God’s word (1 Peter 4:11). Paul warned the Galatians *“...if anyone preaches any other gospel ... let him be accursed”* (Galatians 1:9). Some have tried to make God’s word more palatable to a sin-sick world. To do so would be akin to inviting people from a sinking ship to find safety in a hole-ridden lifeboat. All such efforts are futile and lead to death. We have no right to add to, take from, or change God’s word in any way.

Three times Balak took Balaam to high places from which he could see and pronounce curses on the people of Israel. At the first location, Balaam asked, *“How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?”* (23:8), and then he proceeded to pronounce a blessing upon the people. A bewildered Balak questioned his hired seer, *“What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully!”* (23:11) Balaam reminded the king of his duty to proclaim what God revealed (23:12). From the second location, Balaam spoke about the purity of Israel and indicated the nation *“...shall not lie down until it devours the prey...”* (23:24).

Again, Balak was beside himself. He pleaded for his hired prophet to stop talking – *“Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all!”* (23:25). He couldn’t do so; he was bound to speak what God gave him to say (23:26). On the third occasion, the inspired writer tells us *“...when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery...”* (24:1). What does that mean? Twice he had tried to curse Israel for his benefactor, but both times, the LORD directed his mouth. This time, he would set aside any attempt at sorcery. How did it work out? Numbers 24:2 says the Spirit of God came upon him, and in verses 3-9, he uttered blessings for the people of God, even citing the blessing bestowed to Abraham when he was called out from Ur of the Chaldees (Numbers 24:9; cf. Genesis 12:3). An enraged Balak suggested Balaam should flee – he had done the

exact opposite of what he had been called to do. Balaam reminded the king what he had said all along – *“What the LORD says, that I must speak”* (24:13). Balaam gave a fourth prophecy, this one unsolicited (24:14-25). It was a curse, but not against Israel. He spoke against the nations (Moab, Edom, Amalek, the Kenites), for Israel would beat their brow, take possession of them, cause them to perish and carry them away.

This would be a great way for the story of Balaam to end. Though it started as a rocky road, he redeemed himself by speaking blessings upon God’s people and curses upon their enemies. Sadly, this is not how his story ends. Numbers 25 makes no mention of Balaam. We read about a plague among the Israelites because they had committed harlotry with the women of Moab. They also sacrificed to the Moabite gods. Why would they do such a thing? Where would such an idea come from? Numbers 31:16 states, *“...these women caused the children of Israel,*

through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor...” He was unable to earn his wages by cursing Israel, so he *“...taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality”* (Revelation 2:14). He did not curse them but was able to bring a curse upon them by tempting them to disobey the commandments of God.

Balaam is a valuable warning for us today. Having a ready knowledge of God and His word is of no benefit if we are going to condone, encourage, and participate in sin. To speak one thing and practice another is hypocrisy. The New Testament writers identified Balaam as a false teacher who loved profit and unrighteousness more than God and His will. Balaam disqualified himself before the LORD. May we not follow his example (1 Corinthians 9:27; 2 Corinthians 13:5).

The Church As A Family

JOHN HAINS | SMITHVILLE, ONTARIO

Just a few minutes ago, I was on the phone, long-distance, with my sister – my adopted sister. Even though she is adopted, I consider her to be my “real” sister. (We were both adopted. While we are not biologically related, we really are connected in a unique way.) We were reminiscing together because today was the wedding anniversary of our adoptive parents. Although both of our parents are gone now, it’s a joy for us to remember them! We miss them. They were dear folks who took us into their hearts and home and wanted us to call them Mom and Dad – even though we’d all previously been strangers! And you know, even though strangers, in the presence of their beautiful love for us, we bonded together as a real family. Each of us, as individuals with separate heritages, were brought together in love. And that illustrates a spiritual matter of extreme eternal significance.

In a far greater sense, adoption into a spiritual family is what the majestic God in heaven offers to us through His love. He adopts us, so we become His children and call Him “Father!” When people come to know the Lord, understand His truth for salvation, and submit to His gospel in loving obedience, then they’re raised to walk in newness of life. Their old sins are gone and along with the gift of eternal life comes a new family of adopted brothers and sisters in Christ. Members of this spiritual family are all saved by God’s mercy. All have been adopted by His amazing love to become part of His eternal spiritual family! Please stop to read and enjoy Ephesians 1:1-6.

Many years ago, I baptized a man who understood and valued that new-found spiritual family bond. He’d been heavily involved in his denomination. After his



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conversion to Christ, he went through a time of heavy friction, both from his extended physical family and people from his former church. None of them were too happy about his decision. I hope I’ll never forget the Thanksgiving day that followed his conversion: he invited the whole church to come over to his home for the Thanksgiving meal. Except for his immediate family, he had no earthly family or friends present that day because he felt he’d lost them all. Before we prayed for the meal, with tears in his eyes and a choked voice, he said to all of us present: “You are my family now.”

Many of us can relate to that. Becoming a Christian can be very costly – even severing us from family and former friends who disapprove of our new life.

Do you remember the Lord warning this would happen to many who chose to follow Him, in Luke 12:51-53? *“Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division ... father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against*

her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” How amazing then that the Lord blesses us with this spiritual family, which is a beautiful gift that should never be taken lightly. Especially when it was born out of significant loss and pain: God’s and Christ’s!

In the face of this pain and loss, God creates something so exceptional for us. He gives us a loving, nurturing, caring spiritual family. It’s mindboggling for those of us who’ve obeyed the gospel when we suddenly begin to realize that we have family all over the world. We have family in Canada and in the United States, Russia, Romania, India, Jamaica, and every nation in the world where people obey the Lord’s truth. People, taken from every physical nation under heaven, make up the nation of God. Thus, we become a part of a greater nation than the physical nation in which we were born as citizens. Philippians 3:20 states: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...” Such is the portrait of the family of God – a great family picture that I love being in!

As we study the Bible and read about the interactions between members of God’s family, we see a picture of beauty. No, not because we are particularly handsome or attractive family members. It’s an ugly picture where some of us have our hats on backward, or some have forgotten to check the mirror to comb our hair. Still, yet, others have scars from the past that are hard to hide. Others aren’t sure they’re ready for the adoption of God because it’s too costly a commitment and maybe they want out.

In truth, the portrait shows we’re not at all perfect. What unites this family photo is that we are trusting in God’s grace to cleanse us, having repented of past sins. The family picture reveals brethren who, for the most part, are trying to be like our Father and walk in His steps. Christians ought to make their family resemblance to Him ever stronger, and that’s what makes the family

portrait truly a picture of beauty! “...He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,” Ephesians 1:4-5. Is that your goal?

It’s also a family portrait of care and love. If a brother or sister is hurting, everyone hurts with them. If one rejoices, all rejoice with that one. If one is in need, others come to provide for the lack. Sounds much like what we read in Acts 2:44-45, doesn’t it? “Now all who believe were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.” Behaving like the early Christians will cost us something. We must ask ourselves: “Am I willing to pay it?”

What are other special features that make up a family?

Ephesians 4:1-3 answers the question –

“I ... beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Love, peace, patience, care, and compassion, all wrapped up in humility, play a significant role in cementing a strong family. It’s God’s design! And it’s essential we behave properly, so that we do not dishonor the glory of our adopted Father, or hinder those outside watching us who might come to Him. Ephesians 4:32 admonishes, “...be kind to one another, tender-hearted...”

Also, we are not related by physical blood since we are an adopted family. We are united by something better – the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ. Because of this, we have the same Father as Jesus does.

In the spiritual family, have you ever seen the Scriptures in action where God’s teachings are carried out by human hearts and hands? For example, have you received chicken soup or a meal when sick or grieving? If you have, then you know how loved that made you feel. You

glorified God through that kindness, and your spiritual family bond was made stronger. Have you never received a meal from a spiritual sister or brother? I'm sorry. But now, YOU can be that person who shares your love and kindness with another brother or sister in need.

Have you ever been discouraged, lonely or afraid, and received a call or card with a loving word of encouragement? How did that affect your heart? Did it give you courage?

If you've never received that type of love from your Christian family, then YOU can be the person who shows kindness to the needs of your spiritual family. You can reach out tangibly to give support – call, write, pray, and let them know they matter and that you care. There is a myriad of ways to strengthen the family bonds that we have in Christ. We can share outings; everyday experiences; favors given in love to the children for ice cream; offering to help someone move; babysit; cleaning someone's home, etc.. We must strengthen the tie that binds our hearts and souls. It is a wonderful blessing to be a part of a family like this!

Because the church is a family, we have a shared heritage. Peter declares, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). We have a shared goal which is our living hope!

Since we share a common hope, our church family needs to work together as a team. We need to be encouraging, comforting, edifying, and correcting each other. We're accountable before God and to one another, helping each family member on the journey toward our

eternal home! Satan is trying to block our journey and destroy the church's "family unit." We must be on guard!

How would it have been growing up in your physical family, if you didn't show up at home? Would days go by before someone might notice that your bed was unused and you missed family events? Not likely! We need to be watchful, always with gentleness and love, toward those who are struggling spiritually. Is anyone missing or hurting? YOU can be the one to look around the family of God and initiate prayer, Bible reading, or study with those who are needing extra attention! YOU can make that difference! "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another" (James 5:16).

Do you have an earthly family watching out for you, who will warn, rebuke, or correct you if you veer off the path? If so, you're blessed! How much more than that do we need to help one another in the spiritual family? Satan is at work through temptations and sins, which flirt for our soul's attention. Oh, that we'd have courageous brothers and sisters who'd love us enough to stand in our way, and gently lead us back to safety! YOU can be that brother or sister who will dare to pray and get involved! Paul says, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2).

In the church family, God provides a great source of help, love, and encouragement for us (Hebrews 10:23-25). Are you a part of the family? Then dive right in and demonstrate it by your love for the Lord and His children, letting the family resemblance to the Lord to show in YOU and through YOU!

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Fasting

MARSHALL McDANIEL | WENTZVILLE, MISSOURI

Fasting is an uncommon activity in our modern, Western culture. People tend to associate it with cultic and Eastern religions, ancient mysticism, medieval monasticism, or non-traditional health management. Obviously, there are misconceptions about fasting. Yet the Bible portrays fasting as an acceptable and spiritually beneficial practice. Biblical fasting is often linked with prayer. In this study, we will survey the nature and application of fasting in the Bible and its relevance today.

In the Old Testament, several Hebrew and Aramaic words are related to fasting. These include the Hebrew verb *tsum*, meaning “to fast” (that is, “to abstain from food”), and the noun *tsom*, meaning “fast(ing).” Another Hebrew word *nazar* (verb) is sometimes translated as “to abstain” but fundamentally means “to consecrate”; it is the root of the word Nazarite; interestingly, Nazarites were to abstain from various kinds of drinks (see Numbers 6:2-3). The Hebrew words *taanith* (noun) and *anah* (verb) are also indirectly linked to fasting; these words mean “humiliation” and “to humble oneself” and, by implication from certain contexts, “by means of fasting.” Lastly, the Aramaic word *tevath* is translated “fasting” and seems to bear the idea of “twisting in hunger.”

In the New Testament, the Greek words are nearly identical in meaning to the Hebrew and Aramaic. The Greek verb *nesteuo* means “to fast”; there seems to be more of a religious connotation attached to this word than to its Hebrew counterparts. The root of this verb is the Greek adjective *nestis*, which means “hungry.” Finally, the Greek noun *nesteia* means “fast” and describes voluntary or forced abstinence from food.



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Regardless of the word that is used, fasting is simply abstaining from food, though typically it is done for spiritual reasons (more on the reasons for fasting below).

Examples of fasting abound in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, Moses fasted for a period of forty days and nights while he received the Law (Exodus 34:28). The Israelites fasted during times of war (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6). They also fasted for seven days following the death of King Saul (1 Samuel 31:13). David fasted and prayed for his sick child (2 Samuel 12:16; see Psalm 35:13). Jehoshaphat fasted when threatened by Edom (2 Chronicles 20:3). Ezra fasted before a dangerous journey, asking God for safe travels (Ezra 8:21). Nehemiah fasted and prayed after he heard that Jerusalem was lying in ruins (Nehemiah 1:4). Esther and the Jews fasted after they learned of their imminent annihilation (Esther 4:3, 16). Joel called for a communal fast during a pestilence (Joel 1:14; 2:15). The Ninevites held a city-wide fast in response to the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3:5-9).

In the New Testament, Anna fasted regularly (Luke 2:37). Jesus began His ministry with a forty-day fast (Matthew 4:2). The disciples of John

fasted often, and it is implied that the disciples of Jesus would do the same when it was appropriate (Matthew 9:14-15; see 6:16-18). Cornelius fasted and prayed to God, and an angel was sent to him in response (Acts 10:30). As the early Christians ministered to the Lord and made important decisions, they also fasted (Acts 13:2; 14:23). Fasting was obviously a common and valued practice for God's people.

Yet the fasts in the Bible are not identical. Sometimes fasting was natural because food was unavailable or because individuals were grief-stricken (see 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27; 2 Samuel 1:11-12). The extent and duration of fasts were typically determined by the individual (or the group) and were contingent on the immediate circumstances.

Some fasts were partial, removing only certain items from the diet (see Daniel 10:2-3; 1:12); normal fasts, on the other hand, abstained from all food but allowed the drinking of water (see Luke 4:2, 4); the extreme total fast, however, refrained from food and drink altogether (see Acts 9:9; Esther 4:15-16). Moreover, the fasts of the Bible varied in length: one day (see Judges 20:26), three days (see Esther 4:16), seven days (see 1 Samuel 31:13), and even forty days (see Exodus 34:28). The particulars of fasting were rarely mandated in Scripture.

Fasting is clearly not an isolated or rare activity in the Bible. Fasting is not specifically commanded in the New Testament, but it was important to first-century believers. So why does it seem that fasting is frequently ignored by modern Christians? Perhaps it is because we simply do not recognize its value (or because we have not spent time learning about it).

What, then, are some of the (spiritual) benefits of fasting?

First and foremost, fasting intensifies our prayers. Let's consider the example of Daniel. While seeking an explanation of Jeremiah's prophecy, Daniel wrote, "So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayers and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:3). Daniel wanted God to know that he was serious about approaching Him, so he fasted. Similar stories include Ahab (1 Kings 21:27), Ezra (Ezra 8:23), and Paul (Acts 9:9). In the Bible, desperate times called for desperate measures, and fasting was sometimes deemed necessary. Moreover, fasting adds fervency to prayer (see James 5:16). It humbles us (see Ezra 8:21; Psalm 35:13) and teaches us self-control (see 1 Corinthians 7:5). Fasting demonstrates our reliance on the Lord (see 2 Chronicles 20:3). It meets His approval (see Matthew 6:18). There are indeed great rewards associated with fasting, especially when it is coupled with prayer.

Can we fast today? Yes, we can! Should we? That is an individual decision that requires awareness of oneself and his or her circumstances. We need to identify our motivations and determine how effective fasting will be for us personally. If we simply want to try something new and different, we may be disappointed. But if we realize the spiritual benefits associated with fasting, it may prove profitable. Regardless, we must only fast to the glory of God (see Zechariah 7:5; Matthew 6:17-18). When we do so, God will reward us.

NOTE – this article was originally written for the book, "[Devoted to Prayer](#)," published by One Stone. It has been printed here with permission of both the author and publisher.

Carnality and Conformity – The Way of Balaam in the New Testament

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It is never a proud moment when an animal outwits you. Even more embarrassing, is when the animal is a donkey, which is proverbial for its dullness and stubbornness. But the shame piles up when you are someone who is known for your perceptiveness and knowledge but is still bested by the slow-moving, hee-hawing, four-legged creature. In 2 Peter 2:15-16, Peter alludes to such a story in Numbers 22-25 where Balaam is commissioned to curse Israel by Balak, king of Moab. On the surface, Balaam says all the right things because he refuses to speak anything other than what the LORD tells him. His willingness to flirt with Balak betrays his true motivations. The New Testament writers, as well as Jewish tradition, identify this as an insatiable, carnal lust for wealth (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11). But as the story progresses, it accentuates that Balaam's carnality is seen not only in what he seeks but also in what he sees, or better, what he refuses to see. As Balaam journeys to meet Balak, a spiritual being stops him. Though Balaam is in some sense a prophet, he cannot see the spiritual being in front of him. The one who should see does not see. Adding insult to injury, his donkey not only sees the angel but also rebukes Balaam for his lack of insight (2 Peter 2:16).

It is easy to see why Balaam became an obvious analogy for the New Testament writers to describe false teachers. They, like unreasoning animals, are characterized by carnality. These false teachers react instinctively and impulsively rather than introspectively (2 Peter 2:12; Jude 10). Seeking after carnality under the guise of



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spirituality, they deceive so that they might gain (2 Peter 2:1-3, 13-14; Jude 4). They claim special revelation and knowledge but at the end of the day are blabbering fools, peddling pretense for pleasure, prestige, and prosperity (Jude 8; 2 Peter 2:18). It is bad enough that these “Balaams” are out there making messes of their own lives, but they also have a propensity to deceive, taking others with them down the path of destruction (2 Peter 2:1-3, 12-15, 18-19; Revelation 2:15).

The New Testament writers are clear, the fate that awaits the “Balaams” of this world and those who follow them is swift destruction. It is no coincidence that Jesus is described as the One who has a two-edged sword in His mouth (Revelation 2:12) in His message to the church at Pergamum, a community conforming to the way of Balaam. Christ opposed all who had conformed to the carnal culture around them (Revelation 2:16), just as the angel of the LORD stood with a sword ready to strike down Balaam for his carnal rebellion. Balaam and those who followed him were ultimately slain with the sword;

all who follow in their steps likewise face destruction.

How could anyone follow these false teachers, who were characterized by carnality and destined to destruction? Why would we want to? What would cause us to conform?

First of all, “Balaams” do not operate openly. It is striking how many times the hidden nature of false teachers is mentioned (2 Peter 2:1; Jude 4, 12). Balaam could not defeat Israel from without, so he did it from within. He appealed to their appetites and desires and in so doing cause them to be unfaithful to the Lord. But he didn’t start by encouraging the Israelites to denounce YHWH outright and worship other gods. That would have been too obvious. Instead, he placed a stumbling block before them by convincing the Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men (cf. Revelation 2:14). Once the relationships were in place, then the trap of unfaithfulness was set. It is that middle step that is overlooked. False teachers often begin by introducing and encouraging something that seems innocuous enough in itself. Hollywood knows this tactic all too well. Slowly but surely, they use humor and entertainment to spread agendas and legitimize practices that otherwise would not be tolerated. We must be aware of the hidden agents through which false teachers work. For those in Pergamum, this intermediate step was likely the trade guilds. Though they had refused to give in wholesale to the influence of culture (Revelation 2:13), they were in danger of conforming in more subtle ways (Revelation 2:14). Trade guilds dominated city life in Asia Minor. Failure to participate in them would endanger one’s economic power and ostracize them socially and economically. These guild activities, like virtually everything in the Greco-Roman world, were tied to the worship of pagan deities. Still, false teachers would have pressed heavily on their “necessity” convincing many Christians

that they were permissible or even good. While we don’t want to commit the slippery slope fallacy and become immobilized in the process, it is always worth asking where an action or thought might lead. What are its implications? Is there a chance that this is not as innocent as it seems?

Secondly, on the surface, men like Balaam appear knowledgeable. Balaam was a prophet and a pretty well-known one at that. He had the pedigree and a reputation for being able to foretell the future. Likewise, Jude mentions that false teachers relied on their dreams (Jude 8). They at least feigned that they had some special revelation. It can be easy to blindly depend on the knowledge of others with more experience or education, whether formal or informal. After all, why wouldn’t we listen to those who know more than us?

Moreover, false teachers often have a knack for plausible arguments (Colossians 2:4). Perhaps the “Balaams” in the church at Pergamum comforted their fellow Christians with words like, “We’re just here for the business associations.” Or they might reason, “We know that an idol is nothing.” They might even go so far as to say, “It’s okay to feign allegiance to a pagan deity; after all, God knows your heart and what you believe.”

Finally, their message is typically appealing (2 Peter 2:18). Peter says “they promise freedom” (2 Peter 2:19). They say things like “this will enrich your life,” “this will make you happier,” “you will never be successful without this.” Perhaps they might even appeal to other virtues or Christian ideals. Consider the temptation to compromise with the trade guilds. it would be easy to see how one might argue, “You have to work and provide for your family. What kind of father would you be if you forfeited your business? How would you feed your kids?” Sadly, little too late do we realize the cup of promise they hold out to us is full of vomit, and

the bed of comfort they have laid is covered in muck. Foolish animals are we who follow them (2 Peter 2:22).

How do we avoid being enticed by the “Balaams” we meet? Because false teachers operate on the level of desire, we must shape our desires, or else we will be shaped by them (Proverbs 11:6). Are we filled by a desire to please God, or do we leave ourselves open to fulfill every passing pleasure (Psalm 37:4)? As the Proverb writer says, “one who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet”

(Proverbs 27:7). There are two phrases that Peter uses to describe false teachers that might help us: “they have eyes full of adultery” and “hearts trained for greed” (2 Peter 2:14). Our hearts and desires are conditioned by what they “look” at (Proverbs 6:25). Will we spend our time looking, dwelling, and thinking on primarily carnal things? How much of our life revolves around the things of this life? How much of our lives revolve around seeking to know and reflect on God? Are we shaping our desire for Him? With what will Balaam entice us?

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Give Me One Good Reason to Be A Christian

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Door-knocking can introduce you to a wide variety of characters. There are the kindly, elderly ladies who gingerly walk to the door, slowly crack it open, patiently listen and then say, “Thank you for stopping by, honey, but I’ve been going to my church for years and don’t plan on changing.”

Then, there’s the young 20-something’s who are agitated they had to get up from their video games and open the door quickly and say, “I’m not interested. Don’t come back.” As you begin to open your mouth to respond the door is swinging closed in your face.

Then, there is the baby boomer I met one day after he had just gotten home from work who said, “I’ve worked hard and paid for all of my kids’ colleges, been married to the same women my whole life, never been arrested and try to be a good neighbor, so you give me one good reason why I need to be a Christian!”

To be transparent, the question really stumped and startled me when he first asked. After all, this guy gave the impression he just had it all together without needing Jesus at all. For a quick moment, he made me doubt why I was there as well. But, after thinking about it, there was a great answer to his question. A simple answer.

You see, he was viewing Jesus as just an earthly self-help tool. And, truth be told, that can be the impression the church leaves with people when our only focus is on self-help sermons and how to live “Your Best Life Now.” When people view Jesus solely as a person who can help you get our life together and the church as just His mechanism for doing so, they may be tempted to think like this guy. They are tempted to think, “I’ve already got my life together. So, why do I



need Jesus?”

Now, don’t get me wrong. The church is a place where we can help rehabilitate lives, help marriages, conquer addictions, provide family counseling, and offer a deeper level of joy and fulfillment in this life. But, if that is all Jesus is to us, then we may be tempted to think like our baby boomer door-knocking prospect in Exhibit C above. We may be tempted to think, once we have it all together, we do not need Jesus anymore. We can de-commit ourselves from the church. We may begin to think we would be better off on our own or working through some other resources offering self-help (and there are many other self-help resources). But, the one good reason you need Jesus is far greater than any earthly quick fix.

C.S. Lewis once said, “Our Lord is like the dentist. If you give Him an inch, He will take them all. Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of ... or which is obviously spoiling daily life (like bad temper or drunkenness). Well, He will cure it all right; but He will not stop there. That may be all you asked; but if once you call Him in, He will give you the full treatment” (*Mere Christianity*,

Book IV). C.S. Lewis was right on one account. Some people only see Jesus and the church as a resource to fix some immediate problem in their lives. Those who do not think they have problems will often think they do not need Jesus. When we begin to reason like this, it exposes our short-sightedness and our lack of understanding of why Jesus truly came to this earth!

So, let's answer the question. What is the best reason you need Jesus? If you were to say, "give me one good reason why I need the Lord," what would be the top reason? Here it is...

YOU ARE GOING TO DIE!

Pretty simple, right? But, scary too. You are going to die and seeing the fact of death all around us should be sufficient enough to caution us of its impending reality. Of course, God's Word does provide such admonitions. Hebrews 9:27 says, "...it is appointed for men to die once..." The verse does not stop there. It states, "...but after this the judgment..." (NKJV).

So, who do you know who can change your eternity and impact the decision Christ will make when you "*appear before the judgment seat of Christ*" (2 Corinthians 5:10)? Your life insurance agent can give your family coverage on earth after you die, but they will not help you face eternity once the soul has departed from the body (James 2:26). No other founder of any world religion has proven they can help you once your life is over. Jesus is the one person who has died and lived and had witnesses to tell us all about it! In every New Testament sermon, the resurrection is the centerpiece argument in the apostles' preaching.

Unfortunately, many do not like to think much about death. Their focus is on the here and now. Like those "in the days of Noah," they are too busy "eating, and drinking and giving in marriage" to think about any judgment to come (Matthew 24:37-38). The world is in denial about

death's reality. Read the following verses in Genesis 5, and you will find a common phrase among the descendants of Adam: "and he died" (5:5, 8, 14, 17, 20, 27, 31). Go back into the family tree of any family in this world, and you will find the same commonality – our ancestors have died too. We can deny reality all we want, but death will still one day come knocking on our door (Job 30:23; Psalm 89:48; Ecclesiastes 8:8). We cannot avoid it.

Thankfully, Jesus allows us to change how we might view death. Without Jesus, we may regard death as a loss. Some joke and say, "Today was a good day. I didn't read my name in the obituaries." Some morbidly fear death to the point they want to avoid funerals, and even the very thought of our loved ones dying.

Conversely, Paul could write, "*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain*" (Philippians 1:21). John could write, "*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on*" (Revelation 14:13). They seem to have such a strange attitude towards death in contrast to most in the world!

So, why is it these men could consider death a "*gain*" and look at it not with fear but with joy? This question is the primary reason the death, burial and, resurrection of Jesus is called the "*gospel*." First Corinthians 15:1-4 says, "*Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you ... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen...*" The word "gospel" means "good news." Why is the death and resurrection of Jesus "good news"? Quite simply, it takes death out of the loss column and places it in the win column.

Jesus, by His death, burial, and resurrection, proved a human could overcome the grave. His resurrection from the dead is the very basis for our hope. It is the reason why Paul could reflect upon the resurrection of Jesus and mockingly

laugh at death and write, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? ...thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). It is this resurrection hope Peter is referring to in 1 Peter 3:15 when he writes, “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (cp. 1 Peter 1:3).

So, when challenged, “give me one good reason why I need to be a Christian” go ahead and tell it straight: you are going to die. It is part of the curse placed upon mankind since the fall of Adam. So, you need to turn to the risen Jesus Who could rightfully say, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live”* (John 11:25).

How do you turn to Jesus? You need to *“obey the gospel”* (1 Peter 4:17). Notice what that involves according to Romans 6:3-6, “...do you

not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.” The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is not just good news for Jesus. It is good news for all those who will bury the “old man” of sin in the waters of baptism and be *“raised to walk in newness of life”* with Him.

So, yes, it is true. You are going to die. But, because of Jesus, you can also live and the new life He offers to all doomed sinners is the “one good reason” you need to be a Christian. So, will you?

I Don't Know What To Say

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Over the past year, the congregation that I am a member of has been plagued with a number of tragedies. I couldn't help but think of Romans 12:15, where it reads, *"weep with those that weep."* When we hear sad news, we face the dilemma of, **"I don't know what to say."** Does the word of God provide any help in this area? The answer is yes. Here are lessons that will help us to know what to do and what not to do. We will do so by looking at Job and his three friends.

Allow People To Grieve

When Job lost his children and his health, the Scriptures say his three friends *"...saw that his grief was very great"* (Job 2:13). Those who are grieving need to be allowed to do so without people pumping them full of questions and requiring them to satisfy our curiosities. There may be questions on our mind, but there will be plenty of time for that later. As caring people, we need to remember that although we share their sorrow – it is still THEIR sorrow!

Let Your Silence Comfort

In the same verse mentioned in our last point, it also states *"...and no one spoke a word to him."* You can say more by saying nothing because your presence speaks volumes. If there is ever a time one needs to apply James 1:19, in being slow to speak, it would be when you are visiting someone who has suffered a great loss.

Let Your Emotions Show

When Job's friends first saw him, it says, *"And when they raised their eyes from afar, and did not recognize him, they lifted their voice and wept"* (Job 2:12). The idea that "I want to be strong around them, so I won't show any



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emotion" is just plain wrong. If you feel genuine pain for another's loss, how can you not show that? I am not suggesting that one has to reveal streams of tears. However, when showing sympathy, it will show on one's face.

Remember The Goal – To Comfort

There was a purpose to Job's friends getting together and coming to see Job. When they heard the news of all of Job's calamities, it states, *"For they had made an appointment together to come and mourn with him, and to comfort him"* (Job 2:11). Some people might feel it is best to ignore those who are hurting – thinking that it is a very private thing, and one should mind one's own business. The truth is, the sorrow of another is our business. We want to help others get through this trying time. The last thing we need to do is act childish and feel that our kindness isn't appreciated enough. When that happens, the goal of comforting is gone.

Saying The Wrong Thing Can Be Devastating

All three of Job's friends eventually started to talk to Job, but what they had to say was wrong. They accused Job of bringing this on himself (Job 4:7; 8:6-7; 11:13-15). At the end of the book, our

God put those three men in their place when He stated, *“My wrath is aroused against you ... for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has”* (Job 42:7). Nothing is worse than for those who think they are comforting but are doing more harm than good. A friend of mine who preaches said he heard someone do a funeral and telling the grieving family that he knew exactly how they felt because he had a dog that died. Folks, we need to think carefully about what we say to those who are full of sorrow. Saying nothing is far better than saying the wrong thing.

A Point For The Grieving

Most of this article is dealing with how to be there for those who are hurting. It is important to be reminded that there is no shame in mourning. Job suffered, and his friends were very much aware of it (Job 21:3). Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes. It might come from death, injury, feeling down and alone, or by others bringing affliction upon us, etc.. Whatever it might be, being a silent sufferer can

make the situation worse. Brethren are admonished to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Bearing each other's burdens is pretty hard to do when no one reaches out for help. Remember brethren can help. They might offer a shoulder to cry on or some advice. It's not a sign of weakness to admit you are having a difficult time with something emotionally.

In line with this, keep in mind that brethren are not mind-readers. We might want sympathy and get upset when it doesn't come because we expected people to know our struggles when there was no way of knowing. If we do not realize the importance of sharing our struggles, then you will add insult to injury by feeling worse for the lack of concern from others when you have such expectations. I know for a fact that when Paul stated that when one member suffers, all the members suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26), it was because it was made known!

Let's be mindful of our Christian duties in extending sympathy and accepting it..

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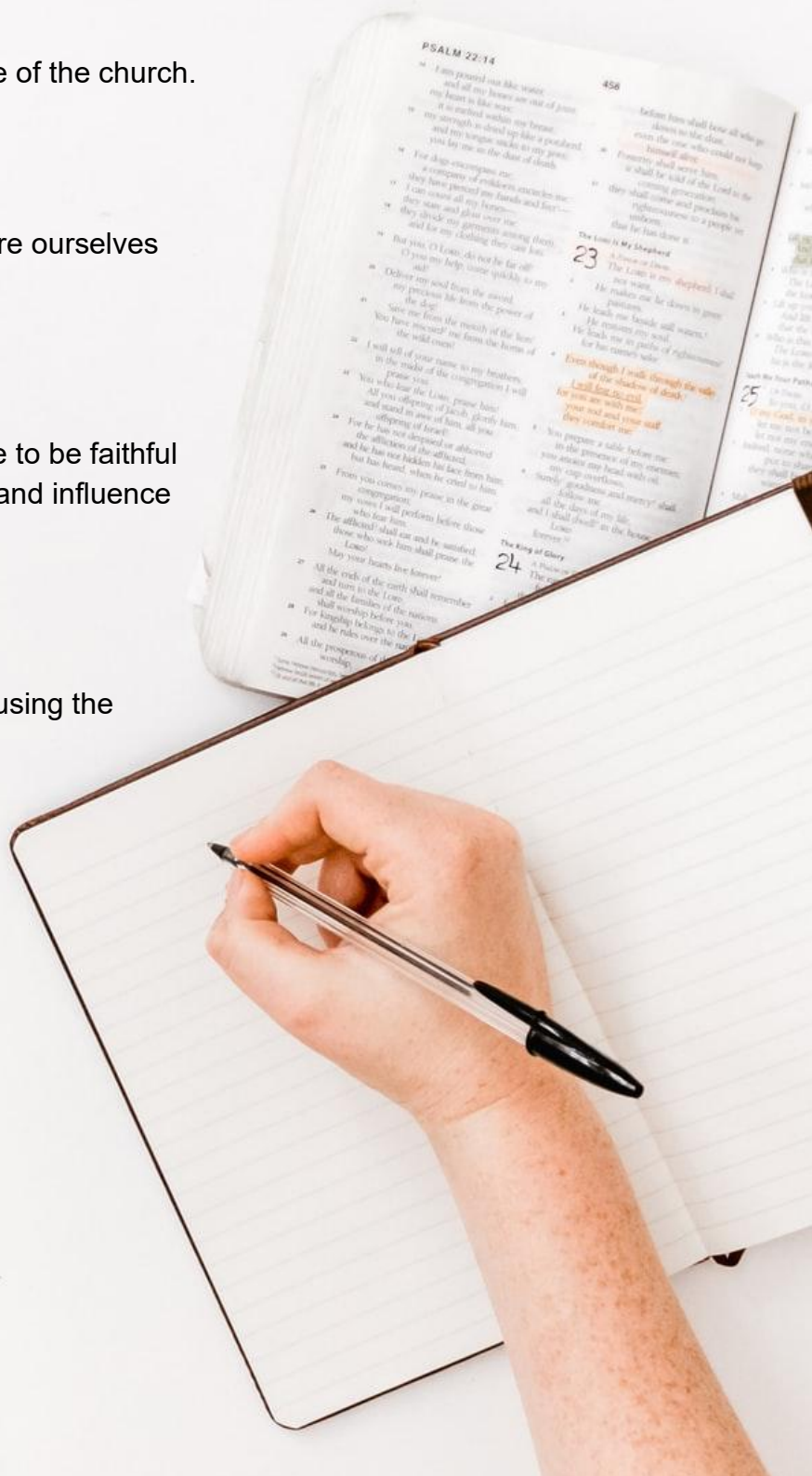
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