

FASTING - THE ALMOST FORGOTTEN DISCIPLINE

Fasting generally means to refrain from taking nourishment from food or food drinks. Matthew 4:2 states that Jesus “fasted forty days and forty nights.” Luke 4:2 describes His fasting with the words, “In those days he did eat nothing.” Before Jesus fed the multitude who had followed Him for several days, He said, “I will not send them away fasting,” meaning, or course, that He would not send them away without giving them some food to eat (Matt 15:32).

The Bible has a good bit to say about both feasting and fasting. God enjoys seeing His children feast from the table loaded with the benefits He daily bestows upon us. He gave us our taste buds and a lot of different flavored foods to fill “our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). “Out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food” (Gen 2:9).

God is especially pleased and glorified when we realize our dependence on Him for “our daily bread” and respond with grateful hearts and loving loyalty to Him.

On a number of Bible occasions, God was honored by His people rejoicing in feasting and fellowshiping together (Neh 8:9-12; Est 9:17-19). The physical feasting together of God’s people often symbolized the spiritual feast we can enjoy when we sit together in heavenly places and feast on His holy Word.

The purpose of this message, however, is not to emphasize the importance of physical feasting. That really needs no emphasis. Without being taught that we must eat to live, most of us consume far more food than what we need. Our obesity often tells tall tales about us. There may be more truth than humor to the saying that “one third of what we eat keeps us alive, and the other two-thirds keeps the doctors alive.”

The purpose of the following lines is to point out that while it is true that God can be honored by giving us “our daily bread” and by our consumption of it (1Cor 10:31), He also wants us to honor Him at times by our crucifying those physical enjoyments for the more valuable spiritual benefits He is wanting to bestow upon us.

Fasting is one of those areas of self-denial and self-discipline that the Bible frequently brings into focus for the purpose of our obtaining special help from God.

By looking up the word fast, we do not find any direct command in the Bible for its practice. However, the word afflict is used in a number of Scriptures to describe fasting. In Ezra 8:21, Ezra said, “I proclaimed a fast there ... that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones.” In Isaiah 58:5, afflict is used again to describe fasting. In Leviticus 16:29-31, Israel was commanded to afflict their souls on the great day of atonement. In Leviticus 23:27-29, Israel was again told to afflict their souls on the annual day of atonement. The penalty for violation was to “be cut off from among his people.” If to “afflict your souls” did embody fasting, and the soul in violation was to “be cut off from among his people,” then fasting was indeed one of the more serious commands of God for Israel to observe.

In the New Testament, we do not find a direct command to fast. It is indisputably assumed and taken for granted. However, it is to be practiced more on a somewhat voluntary basis.

In Matthew 6:16-18, where Jesus gives some teaching on motives in fasting, He does not say, “If ye fast,” but rather, “When ye fast.” In this discourse Jesus uses the same approach to fasting as He does in His teaching on the giving of alms and on prayer. It is not “if ye give alms” or “if ye pray” or “if ye fast,” but when ye give, pray, or fast. His emphasis on each of these three Christian virtues is basically the same. There is no hint of an optional choice in the matter. No one doubts the need for, and the spiritual value of, giving and praying, but many times we have a problem taking fasting seriously. In some of His other references to fasting, however, Jesus indicates that fasting does not carry with it the same degree of importance as does prayer. In Matthew 9:14-15, Jesus said of His disciples that they would wait until He was taken away from them to fast. He never said they would wait until that time comes to pray. rather, He declared “that men ought always to pray” (Luke 18:1).

The length of fasting periods in the Bible varies from part of a day to as long as forty days. The three forty-day fasters—Moses (Ex 24), Elijah (1Kin 19), and Jesus Christ (Matt 4)—may have been given special divine endurance for their prolonged abstinence from physical nourishment.

In John's gospel, chapter 4, Jesus appears to have abstained from food in a one-meal fast as He waited for the Samaritan crowd to come to Him at Jacob's well. In acts 10:30, Cornelius informed Peter that "four days ago I was fasting until this hour," suggesting a part-day fast. In 1Samuel 7:6 we read that Israel "fasted on that day," suggesting a one-day fast. Esther 4:16 records for us a three-day fast. First Samuel 31:13 tells of a seven-day fast. a fourteen-day fast is seen in acts 27:33. Daniel shares his experience of a three-week fast in chapter 10, verses 2 and 3.

The length of a fast period may depend on the urgency of the need or the weight of the burden resting on the heart of the faster in relation to a need. One's physical condition may need to be taken into consideration as well. For instance, a lengthy fast for a diabetic could be physically hazardous. Other physical conditions and old age may well limit one's length of fasting.

Fasting may be practiced singly in personal life as in the case of Jesus, Moses, Elijah, Paul, Anna the prophetess, and others. Fasting may be engaged in collectively as in Ezra 8:21-23. In Joel 2:15, the prophet cried, "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly." Early church leaders were together as a group for prayer and fasting in Acts 13:1-3.

Fasting may be spontaneous, or it may be planned and called for. David fasted spontaneously when he declared, "My heart is smitten ... so that I forget to eat my bread" (Psa 102:4). Jesus at Jacob's well is another example of spontaneity. Paul engaged himself "in fastings often." The example in Ezra 8:21-23 and the reference in Joel 2:15 are examples of the value of calling an assembly for an occasional period of fasting.

Many different reasons for fasting come into focus as we look at the fasters of the Bible and observe the purpose for which they fasted.

Cornelius fasted while seeking salvation (acts10:30). God wrought miraculously to meet his need. Israel expressed repentance through fasting (1Sam 7:6). God thundered out of heaven and saved them from their enemies. Jehoshaphat called for a national fast for protection from the ammonites and Moabites. The enemies were destroyed without his army even entering into combat (2Chr 20:3,22). Esther and Mordecai fasted under the threat of annihilation. They were preserved, and their avowed destroyers were themselves destroyed (Est 4:16). Ezra ate no bread and mourned because of the transgressions of those who had taken strange wives. The result? repentance and one of the most astounding restitutions of the Bible (Ezra 10). Nehemiah prayed and fasted over the affliction and reproach of Jerusalem (Neh 1:3,4). The people of Nineveh fasted and were spared from the destruction God had pronounced upon them. Jesus fasted in preparation for the subtle temptations of the devil and also in preparation for the matchless and powerful ministry He was about to begin in the world. Early church leaders fasted before the calling and ordaining of Paul and Barnabas to a Holy Ghost directed itinerant world evangelism (Acts 13:1-4). Paul and Barnabas "prayed with fasting" as they ordained elders in all the churches (Acts 14:23).

More Bible examples could be given. The foregoing illustrations should emphasize the important place fasting can have in personal life and in church life. It should help us to see the many areas of life in which we may benefit by exercising ourselves in a fasting discipline.

Most of the above cases of fasting were associated with prayer. Where prayer is not mentioned, it is assumed. Perhaps the overall purpose of fasting with prayer is to prove our sincerity, our fervency, our earnestness, and our helplessness in prayer. Eating food is basically for physical enjoyment and physical benefit. When we discipline ourselves to refrain from that which the flesh desires the most, we give evidence of an earnestness and a fervency that availeth much with God.

From Bible examples we may well conclude that the prayer of the righteous accompanied by fasting does help to move the loving heart of God and makes bare His mighty arm in behalf of whatever the need of the hour might be. There are no limitations with God. He will never be embarrassed over failure to do what He purposes to do for His people. As the saying goes, "He will never be out foxed."

Are we troubled with pride, selfishness, envy, bitterness, unkindness, etc.? We can get help by following the example of David when he "humbled [his] soul with fasting" (Psa 35:13).

Are we fearful of enemies seeking to destroy us? Proclaim a fast like Jehoshaphat did (2Chr 20:3), like Esther and Uncle Mordecai did (Est 4:16-17). Do we need more Holy Spirit power to help the enslaved captives all about us? The formula of Jesus to his failing disciples in Matthew 17:14-21 was that "this kind [of power] goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." Through faith, fasting, and "the effectual fervent prayer of [the] righteous," we would most assuredly be better able to help ourselves and the needy souls about us.

Abstinence from food for a season, especially if our digestive system is working well, calls for strong self-discipline.

May God help us to give ourselves in a new way to the almost forgotten discipline of fasting with prayer. "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children.... Let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep ... let them say, Spare thy people, O LORD, and give not thine heritage to reproach ... wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God?" (Joel 2:15-17).

~Aaron M. Shank