

# ***Fasting Fundamentals***

## **INTRODUCTION**

Fasting is a Biblical reality. It was a regular practice of most of the major characters in the Old and New Testaments. It was an intrinsic part of the life of Jesus and the early Church. It has a long and honoured history in the development of Christianity through the Centuries. It is a means of blessing and spiritual development but is largely ignored by Twenty First Century Christians. We read of fasting but do not discern it, largely because of our traditions and preconceptions. We give it mental assent as being in the Bible, but do not give it reality in our lives. When the Holy Spirit brings this truth to the fore it assaults our traditional views and prejudices.

Many people view fasting as the province of the fanatic or perhaps the especially holy, a relic of a bygone age in Christianity. 'We have progressed from such mindless deprivations', they say. Perhaps those in great peril should do it to 'gain God's attention', but we in the West need not, for we have a different relationship with God, not requiring such ascetic disciplines. This reflects the spirit of our age with its hedonism and materialism. Some have trouble with the idea for more practical reasons. They fear harmful results from this 'starvation'.

Jesus speaks of fasting in the context of "when", not if. In Matthew 6:16 Jesus says, "When you fast ..." Jesus did not consider fasting optional. If we follow Jesus then authentic discipleship means we will fast. It is not a matter of choice; it is a matter of discipline and obedience. Earlier in Matthew 6 Jesus says, "you pray" (v. 6) and "when you give to the needy" (v. 2). These are held as important non optional values in the faith. We should hold fasting with the same strength.

Jesus also speaks of a time of fasting for his disciples when the bridegroom has left, Matthew 9:15. Acts 13:2-3 records the early Church fasting.

Fasting, in a Biblical context, means "to abstain from food." Practising self denial or generally stopping things that hinder our communion with God may be spoken of as fasting, but Biblically, both the Hebrew and Greek words translated 'fast' mean, "to abstain from food."

## **TYPES OF FASTS**

There are various types of fasts and they can be held in various contexts. The following discussion details four types of fasts; Normal, Absolute, Supernatural and Partial.

### ***NORMAL FASTS***

The normal type of fast suggests that fasting was to abstain from all food, solid or liquid but not from water - consider Jesus' fast in the wilderness in preparation for His ministry. Matthew 4:2 says, "He was hungry, but not that He was thirsty" - Luke 4:2 says, "He ate nothing" but not that He drank nothing. Satan tempted Him to eat, but not to drink - by omission this suggests that Jesus drank during His fast.

In the Jewish world a fast was normally from sunrise to sunset. An evening meal was eaten! The

pattern of eating no meals, though now common, was not normal in Biblical times.

### *ABSOLUTE FASTS*

The second type of fast recorded in the Bible is the absolute fast. In Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9, absolute fasting is observed. All food and drink is abstained from. In these cases the Scriptures indicate a short time, no more than three days. An absolute fast is an exceptional measure for exceptional circumstances.

### *SUPERNATURAL FASTS*

There are records of absolute fasts being considerably longer than three days. Moses - twice up on the mountain with God. Elijah - fed by the angel under the Juniper tree and then... got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb the mountain of God" 1 Kings 19:8. However, these fasts were of a supernatural character. They must have been, for no sooner had Moses completed his first that he went back and did it all again!

### *PARTIAL FASTS*

The Bible also records partial fasts where the emphasis is upon restriction of food intake rather than complete abstinence. Daniel 1:11-15 records that Daniel and his friends refused the rich diet offered to them, preferring a simple diet of vegetables and water. Whether by supernatural intervention or by the simplicity of the diet, they were better looking after this diet than those on the king's rich food. It is a commonly accepted fact of dietetics that a simple and wholesome diet is far more beneficial than a rich and elaborate one.

The value of a partial fast is not purely in the physical realm. Daniel 10:2-3 records an incident where Daniel held a partial fast for three weeks as he sought God for understanding of a vision, which he subsequently received.

Partial fasts have two primary forms. The first partial fast is when a person abstains from one, or perhaps a number of types of food. This usually involves extravagant foods, as in the case of Daniel, and is practised by some during Lent in the traditional Church. Secondly, some hold partial fasts by omitting one meal per day. The time released is devoted to prayer or some other spiritual discipline and should not be followed by excessive eating at a subsequent meal.

Partial fasts are of great value for people who are busy, elderly or whose state of health prevents a normal fast. They require self discipline, and can be used as a stepping stone in fasting if one is unfamiliar with the practice. They also have the advantage of being able to be conducted over a long period of time.

1 Absolute fasting is not recommended by the Pastors of the church without prior consultation with one of the Pastors

## CONTEXTS OF FASTS

Fasts can be conducted in three different contexts: Personal, Congregational and National.

### *PERSONAL FASTS*

Today, fasting is most commonly practiced personally. It is a personal response to a crisis, at the request of the Lord, or as a regularly practiced spiritual discipline. It is ordinarily accompanied by prayer.

### *CONGREGATIONAL FASTS*

Fasting can also be congregational. The Old Testament records a number of congregational fasts. The Day of Atonement is the only regular fast given in the Mosaic Law. There were also regular fasts associated with four events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem, Zechariah 8:19. Jeremiah 36:6 refers to “a day of fasting”, the context suggesting there were more than one.

These fasts are ordinarily accompanied by prayer but not exclusively. Acts 13:2 records the Apostles worshipping and fasting and later praying as a result of their fast and worship.

The combined nature of a congregational fast can be a powerful witness to God of a congregation’s sincere devotion to Him and the issue they are seeking His wisdom about.

The early Church had regular days of congregational fasting on Wednesday and Friday.

### *NATIONAL FASTING*

Some nations have called fasts in times of great need. Here in Australia around the turn of the century the nation had a declared day of fasting.

Wherever in Scripture we read of a public emergency being met by a national call to fast, we find, without exception, God responded in deliverance.

In Richard Foster’s book *Celebration of Discipline* he records the following incident on page 44; “In 1756 the king of Britain called for a day of solemn prayer and fasting because of a threatened invasion by the French.” John Wesley recorded in his journal on February 6: “The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen since the restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquillity.”

In a footnote he wrote, “Humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French was averted.”

## **BIBLICAL FOCUS OF FASTING**

Fasting should be focused on God. We need to ensure there is purity in our motives when doing anything for the Lord and fasting is no different. Jesus spoke against the hypocrites who had made their fasting into a side-show more than a rightly motivated spiritual discipline, Matthew 6:16-18. If you approach fasting with the attitude of “What will I get out of it?” You immediately expose the self centeredness of your heart. Fasting, like all spiritual disciplines is not for you but for God - for His glory with benefits coming to you as a by-product.

In some circles, fasting is spoken about as personally beneficial for spiritual growth and answered prayer. Fasting does help in these things greatly, but our motive must be toward God.

Isaiah makes some strong statements on purity of motive in fasting, suggesting that Israel did not fast with a focus on God, Isaiah 58:3. They were self-interested and so their fasting achieved nothing, except the self-gratification that comes from self-interest.

It's easy for us to fast to gratify personal desires. These errors should not dissuade us from fasting. Each of us will have some amount of impure motive in all we do. It is important that God deal with this, indeed God may use our fasting to deal with our flesh in these areas. It is a spiritual discipline that impacts greatly the physical body and its appetites and consequently the soul.

The following discussion looks at various Biblical motivations for fasts.

### *FASTING AS AN EXPRESSION OF HUMILITY*

Fasting commonly reveals just how great and powerful are the appetites of the flesh within us. We are brought to our knees in humility before God because of the lack of submission to God that is exposed. Indeed fasting used to humble oneself is important in the context of personal holiness and was common used for this purpose in Biblical times, see Ezra 8:21.

### *FASTING TO CONSECRATE ONESELF*

Fasting can also be a means of setting yourself apart to the Lord for His service. Jesus went on a forty day fast immediately prior to the commencement of His ministry, Luke 4:1-2. Paul and Barnabas were set apart during a time of fasting, Acts 13:2-3. Other occasions include, when faced with some besetting sin, when God is dealing with us in depth, when we are experiencing personal revival, or when faced with a task for which we feel ill-equipped. These are all good times to prepare our heart by means of fasting.

### *FASTING AND SEEKING GOD*

The Bible records many instances of fasting where the motive is seeking God and a desire that we be heard by Him. Our motive needs to be pure; Isaiah 58:4 says “Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your

voice to be heard on high.” This suggests that their manner and motive meant that God would not hear them. Yet fasting clearly can help in the process of God hearing our prayers.

Seeking God with all our heart is a common theme of the Bible. There is no doubt that at times to show the sincerity of our seeking, we should fast.

Prayer is our fundamental means of approach to God, yet fasting also adds to our prayers. There is a sense of greater desperation and devotion to the will of God in fasting. Joel 2:12 says “Even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart with fasting and weeping and mourning”; suggesting that our coming to the Lord should at times, include fasting.

We must not think that fasting somehow forces God's hand to do what we want. He will only do what He wants and no amount of prayer, fasting or anything is going to change that. Yet we should also remember that prayer is warfare. There are opposing forces. Biblically, fasting was often the culmination of a time of prayer.

Some have prayed persistently and fervently and there seemed to be no answer. Then they fasted, and the answer came. There are times when we are facing an important decision and we need to fast to ensure we hear God better with less flesh in the way. Ezra 8:21, 23, 31 recorded a time when Ezra needed God's protection. He called a fast and God provided the protection.

#### *FASTING AS AN EXPRESSION OF REPENTANCE*

Jonah prophesied God's judgment against Nineveh. The King called an absolute fast and the nation cried out to God and asked Him to change His stated intention. They repented of their sinful ways and God relented, Jonah 3:5-10. This is a difficult concept: Will God 'change His mind' about other things because of a fast?

The Biblical principle is stated in Jeremiah 18:7-8: “If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.” In matters of sin there is judgement. Where there is repentance there is grace, forgiveness and mercy. God does not change His mind on issues at personal whim.

In the case of Nineveh, the fasting signified the nation's sincere repentance. One can reasonably expect his same principle to apply to an individual or Church. However we must also remember that God will commonly allow the temporal consequences of sin to continue.

#### *FASTING AND DELIVERANCE*

Isaiah 58:6 proclaims; “is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen, to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and break every yoke?” Fasting has at times been used in deliverance (that is expelling evil demonic spirit) and people have cited this verse as a Scriptural base. However this verse refers to fasting as an expression of repentance, and through the repentance or the individual/nation freedom is brought to those oppressed. It does not imply a direct link between fasting and deliverance. The will of the oppressed person is involved.

Matthew 17:2 a verse disputed in the Canon of Scripture refers to the deliverance of a person through the activity of prayer and fasting. This is the only verse that draws a direct link between fasting and deliverance. Given the doubt as to whether the verse occurred in the original text, one cannot draw a principle from it.

However, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that fasting is an aid to the person ministering deliverance to someone. This anecdotal evidence provides basis for the belief that fasting is in ministering deliverance to a person, however the Scriptures do not specifically deal with this issue.

### *FASTING AND THE REVELATION of SCRIPTURE*

Fasting also aids the revelation of Scripture. Daniel, when faced with an issue requiring wisdom from God fasted as a matter of course (it would seem).

Daniel 9:2-3, 21-23 records that Daniel, needing revelation about the Scriptures (he had been reading the prophet Jeremiah), pleaded with Him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes God granted the understanding he needed.

In Daniel (1:12, 17, 20) it is said of him and his companions that even though they were on a partial fast, they were ten times better at understanding the questions of the King than all the magicians and enchanters in the Kingdom - This was because "God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds."

### *FASTING AND DEALING WITH FLESHLY DESIRE*

Fasting is also beneficial in disciplining our fleshly desires. Normal appetite is one thing, the inability to say no to certain kinds of food or to food in general after you have had sufficient suggests an improper use of food - dare I say 'a bondage'. Fasting has the ability to deal with the fleshly appetites through self-denial.

The Corinthian church was roundly criticised by Paul for their inability to control their fleshly appetites, including their misuse of food and drink. Peter also says "...for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him." 2 Peter 2:19. Food seems to be very important in dealing with fleshly appetites. God said of Israel "...I supplied all their needs, yet they committed adultery..." Jeremiah 5:7. To the extent that fasting is physically buffeting the body, it's good. Paul says in I Corinthians 9:25-27 "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

### **SOME PRACTICAL ISSUES OF FASTING**

1. Fasting should not be entered into lightly.
2. Fasting should not be entered into by pregnant or breast-feeding women.
3. If you have a medical condition, consult your doctor before deciding whether to fast.
4. If you have never fasted before, try a partial fast first, and build up to normal or absolute fasts.
5. Don't over do it. At the first real sign of a physical problem, not just tiredness or food craving,

stop the fast.

6. Do not fast more than three days first up unless specifically asked to by God.
7. Break the fast sensibly. The longer the fast the less you should eat as you break it. You will find that you cannot eat as much as normal anyway.
8. Remember our western lifestyles have some addictive frameworks, especially with respect to foodstuffs, like caffeine. Fasting will affect this 'appetite of the flesh' and so you may experience some withdrawal. You will need to gauge how you cope with this physically and emotionally but remember dependence on substances is not godly. You may also need to humble yourself before God about such dependencies as you fast.

If you want to read more about the spiritual discipline of fasting, the following books will be of assistance:

God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life by Denis Whitney

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster

Fasting by Derek Prince

## **SCRIPTURES REFERRING To FASTING**

### *Old Testament*

JDG 20:26; 1 SA 1:6; 31:13; 28A 1: 12; 12:16, 21 -23; 1 KI 21:9, 12, 27; 1 CH 10:12; 2CH 20:3; EZR 8:21, 23; NE 1:4, 9:1; EST 4:3, 16, 9.31; PS 35:13, 69:10, 109:24; ISA 58:3 - 6; JER 14:12, 36:6; DA 9:3; JOEL 1:14, 2:12, 15; JNH 3:5; ZEC 7:35, 8.19;

### *New Testament*

MT 4:2, 6:16 - 18, 9:14 – 15; MK 2:18-20; LK 2:37, 5:33-35, 18:12; AC 13:2-3, 14:23, 27:9