

## *REMEMBER...*

Jesus said “when you fast” not “if you fast” so He seems to be saying that fasting should be done at least occasionally. It is not about being legalistic and feeling commanded to fast but when we fast for spiritual reasons, we show God that we are serious in desiring Him more than food. To have a hunger for God is like a person’s desire for food when they are hungry. Like David wrote “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1). This is a deep sense or desire to long for the things of God and for God Himself. The picture is of a deer that has been running for his life and stops and is dying of thirst and pants for water because they are desperately thirsty. That is the type of desire God wants us to have for Him and fasting can help us achieve that type of deep, longing desire that is like a fierce hunger for food or a dying thirst for water.

[From the Christian Crier]

## PASSAGES RELEVANT TO THE PRACTICE OF FASTING

The following Scriptures passages comment directly and indirectly on the practice of fasting. Reflect on them to help you center your fasting before God.

- **Isaiah 58** reveals God's displeasure with fasting as an empty human ritual of religious performance, divorced from a life-changing relationship of obedience that results in intimacy with God and ethical integrity in our individual and communal relationships.
- **Zechariah 7:5-6** addresses the motives and underlying purpose of fasting. (Read 7:1-8 which gives a sense of what God wanted his people to turn away from, and what he wanted to do in their lives.)
- **Matthew 4: 1-4** records Jesus' profound statement, when the devil challenged him during his fast in the wilderness, regarding the provision of God. See also John 4:31-34 (Note that Jesus combined fasting and solitude as a way of strengthening himself for the coming trial of temptation.)
- **Matthew 6: 16-18** records Jesus' corrective for religious people who corrupt their spiritual practices by using them as tools for achieving personal pride and social status.
- **Acts 13: 1-3** cites an instance of group fasting, in combination with other disciplines, in the context of commission for ministry.

- **Galatians 5: 13** is a reminder that freedom in Christ is not a license for indulgence, but an opportunity for serving in love.

## The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting

### **1. Jesus expected His followers to fast. In fact, He gave specific instructions for how to fast.**

#### ***Matthew 9:15***

*The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.*

#### ***Matthew 6: 16-18***

*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full, But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

### **2. The church fasted in order to hear from God.**

#### ***Acts 13:2-3***

*While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

### **3.The church fasted on behalf of their leaders and those in service.**

#### **Acts 14:23**

*Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*

### **4.When more power is called for, fasting is required.**

#### **Mark 9:29**

*He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.”*

<b>What can you expect during a fast?</b>
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1. Hunger – your physical body needs food and is trained to expect food. You will probably experience both a physical and psychological craving for food (or for the food groups you are fasting from).
  - a) Turn hunger and craving into prayer. “Father, as my body craves food, I crave Your presence.”

*Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:31-32).*

- b) Your hunger and food-craving will remind you to turn to God and to keep your mind stayed on Him. Consider hunger a positive feeling because it will turn your heart to the Father.

*I have treasured the words of your mouth more than my daily bread (Job 23:12).*

- c) Hunger and food-cravings will give you the opportunity to present an offering to the Lord. Each time you deny your craving for the sake of your fast, you are placing a sacrifice on the altar. **The offering is not the food, but your obedience.**

\* *Keep in mind that the physical aspects of a fast become easier with each obedience.*

2. Crucifixion moments – God is always in the process of breaking the strength and power of your flesh (human nature disconnected from the Spirit's power). During a fast, as the Spirit of

God sensitizes you to spiritual things, you may be confronted over and over again with your flesh's primary sin patterns.

- a) Recognize these moments for what they are: God's doing, not Satan's.
  - b) Recognize what God is revealing: the root of unrighteousness in your flesh that continues to grow a fruit called sin.
  - c) Be aware of the potential in these moments: to be progressively freed from attitudes that have long bound you.
  - d) Act on God's provision for these moments: flesh MUST submit to Spirit (Read Romans 8:2).
3. An increasing desire for the things of God – God will begin to create in you a spiritual craving that only He can satisfy. In this way, He will draw you deeper and deeper into the Spirit's life.
4. An increasing awareness of the Spirit of God in you – you will find yourself putting less and less confidence in your flesh. In fact you will become so aware of the emptiness and foolishness of your flesh, that you will cry out to God day and night to expose your flesh and crucify it.

## **What should I do during a fast?**

1. Set aside a daily extended time for prayer and listening to God. If you are fasting a certain meal, consider making that meal time your prayer time.
2. Keep a journal. *(Make notes about your experience, prayers answered, what the Lord speaks to you etc.)*
3. Consider partnering with someone for accountability, encouragement and sharing thoughts.

## **What are we corporately fasting and praying for?**

For God's perfect will and His whole plan to be accomplished...in the life of the church.

Psalm 138:8

Matthew 6:10

Although God will be dealing with each of us individually, our lives will flow together, like tributaries feeding one river. The Spirit's work

flows through the Body. God's people, unified in extraordinary prayer, are the most powerful force in the universe.

*His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3:10-11)*

## **PRACTICING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING**

### Suggested methods of fasting

- ✓ **For beginners:** You feel God leading you to do so; try one brief fast, once per week, of two meals duration - for example, skip lunch and dinner or perhaps you may decide to skip dinner and the following morning's breakfast.
  
- ✓ **For those already experienced with fasting: As you seek God's leading,** consider possibilities such as two brief fasts per week, during which you focus on a particular purpose of central concern in your life right now; or a whole day fast once per week.
  
- ✓ **General:**
  - Engage in a partial fast by abstaining from a particular kind of food or beverage (eg. solid foods, foods with a high sugar content, caffeine)
  
  - Plan periodic fasts around opportunities arising naturally out of your activities or routines, for example—
    - \* during times of personal planning
    - \* in preparation for significant events, projects, challenges or decisions
    - \* to accompany schedule changes or seasonal transitions

- \* prior to worship services or gatherings with a local congregation or small group
  - \* before meeting with a counselor, advisor or mentor
- Fast from activity unrelated to food as a way of breaking a pattern or stopping behavior that is in some way compulsive, unhealthy or problematic. For example, you might feel led to fast from watching TV, going shopping etc.

## Suggested context or focus of fasting

- Reflect on the truth that our deepest need is for God, not for physical or material gratification.
- Clarification and purification of our motives - we can ask God to allow the impurities of our hearts to come to the surface of our minds for conscious recognition, so we can confess them, purge them, and open our lives to the transforming power and work of the Holy Spirit.
- During our fasting we have an excellent opportunity to seek divine wisdom and discernment for greater understanding of ourselves – it helps us to understand why we engage in certain negative patterns of thoughts and behavior, where our vulnerabilities are and how God can use our strengths and weaknesses to deepen our maturity in Christ.
- In Colossians 3: 16 Paul teaches us to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly". Choose a particular Scripture passage to meditate on prayerfully.
- Identify a concern or something you are anxious about ("Be anxious for nothing ... ") that you want to release to God's care. Isaiah 53:4 tells us that the Lord has "borne

our grief and carried our sorrows". This Scripture helps us to imagine the Lord lifting the burdens from our hearts and carrying them for us. As we are fasting and praying, in the midst of our difficult times, God can give us a supernatural experience of peace and joy.

- Set apart your fast for thanksgiving and praise. Reflect on all the good gifts of God in your life right now and write them down as they occur to you. Offer prayers and songs of thanks and praise both in your heart and aloud. Allow this gratitude and joy to spill over to others.
- Since fasting is really feasting on God, focus on receiving the life of God into you. Allow the Scriptures to nourish you and strengthen you. Let listening prayer sustain you.
- Identify a need in your life, in your community or in the world that calls for confession and repentance. Spend the time of your fast in contrition for sins, whether personal or communal (II Chron. 7: 13-14; Romans 3:23) in thanksgiving for God's forgiveness and freedom (Romans 8: 1-2); in seeking a cleansed heart and renewed spirit (Psalm 51: 10-12).
- Practice a form of prayer or meditation that you have engaged in during your journey through the spiritual disciplines and combine it with fasting to deepen and intensify your communion with God.

## More on Fasting

### FACTS

**YOUR STOMACH WILL GROWL** - First, let me mention one important thing about fasting. YOU WILL GET HUNGRY!

**Fasting is not dieting.** The self-control in an effective weight-loss program is not God's idea of power fasting. To be sure, He wants us to avoid gluttony and other physical excesses but He also wants something deeper from us and for us, something infinitely more precious and spiritual - a disciplined, holy lifestyle that gets us as close to Him as we can get: into His mind, conformed to His will, and after His heart.

**Fasting is mentioned over fifty times in Scripture**, so we know it's an important topic. Jesus discussed it in His very first sermon-the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:1, 16-18).

People sometimes are surprised to find how hungry they get when they fast. Even Jesus got hungry when He fasted.

**Fasting enlarges the capacity for faith.** Faith does not come by fasting, but fasting can open your heart wider to receive more faith. Faith comes only by hearing God's Word, but fasting can make you more sensitive to hearing, listening and obeying God's Word.

God changes our mindset and/or desires so that we begin to think and understand things the way God does. We may pray with a specific thing in mind, but with the power of prayer and fasting, we readily say, "Not my will, but thine be done." Prayer with fasting will accomplish much more than simply praying.

## **WHY FASTING WORKS**

Why does fasting work? The answer is found in understanding how God answers prayer.

We must get close enough to hear His voice, know His power and presence, "feel His pleasure".

Ephesians 3:20 clues us in: "Now to him [God] who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, ACCORDING TO his power that is at work within us."

This scripture does NOT promise that God answers our prayers immeasurably more than what we ask. It only says that God is ABLE to do more than what we ask or imagine. The key phrase to understanding this scripture is the phrase "according to his power."

The words "according to" suggest that prayer is answered in proportion to something. That "something" is "God's power that is at work within us." In other words, God will answer your prayers according to the amount of power that is currently at work within your spirit. God uses the power working within you to answer your own prayers!

If there is little power working in your spirit, then God does little for you. If there is a lot of power working in you, then God does a lot for you. It's that simple!

The key to answered prayer is having His power working within your spirit!

What does this have to do with fasting? - Your spirit and your flesh are in opposition to each other. One will win and gain control and the other will lose and forfeit control. Either your flesh wins or your spirit wins. If your spirit wins, then you become stronger in spirit. This will enable more spiritual power to work within you. The result is obvious: your prayers are answered.

And how does your spirit get strength? The same way your flesh gets strength - by catering to it.

Your reborn spirit gets stronger when you furnish what the spirit desires. Your spirit desires the Word of God, prayer, holiness, Christian fellowship, etc. The more you give your spirit these things, the stronger the spirit will become. The same is true with your flesh.

The primary desires of the flesh are food, water, sleep--yes, even sex. Satisfy these cravings, and the body will want more.

The flesh gains strength when it gets what it wants. We call this result "habit." A habit is formed by repeating a behavior.

We can develop habits such as eating at a certain hour, sleeping at a specific time, and so forth.

The reverse is also true. The flesh loses strength when it does not get what it wants. This is where fasting can aid you in defeating the power of the flesh. Fasting deprives the flesh of its desires, thereby crippling its strength.

Fasting causes the flesh to lose ground. Add prayer to fasting, and you can readily see the result: The flesh loses ground while at the same time your spirit gains ground.

What's the solution? FAST. Fasting makes your flesh go backwards, while praying will rocket your spirit forward, leaving your flesh way behind.

## **OUR NEED TO FAST**

The writings of Scripture, the church fathers, and many Christian leaders of today offer several biblical insights into the spiritual need for fasting:

- It is a biblical way to truly humble oneself in the sight of God (Ps. 35:13; Ezra 8:21).
- It brings revelation by the Holy Spirit of a person's true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance and change.
- It is a crucial means for personal revival because it brings the inner workings of the Holy Spirit into play in a most unusual, powerful way.
- It helps us better understand the word of God by making it more meaningful, vital and practical.
- It transforms prayer into a richer and more personal experience.

- It can result in dynamic personal revival--being filled with the Spirit and regaining a strong sense of spiritual determination.
- It can restore the loss of one's first love for the LORD.

Throughout the Old and New Testament eras and during the last two thousand years, fasting was a primary means of humbling oneself before God.

In Isaiah 58:5, the prophet describes fasting as a "day for a man to afflict his soul" (NKJV). And in Psalm 69:10, David says he "chastened" his soul with

fasting (NKJV). And in Psalm 35:13, he says he "humbled" his soul by abstaining from food.

Humility is an attitude of the heart. The Scripture says, "A broken and contrite heart--these, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17 NKJV). God will hear us and respond to our cry when we come before Him in humility and brokenness--acknowledging and repenting of our sins, and asking Him to cleanse us by the blood of Jesus and to fill us with His Holy Spirit.

### **THREE KINDS OF FAST**

Before we consider why fasting works, we should first understand the different kinds of fast.

- The first kind is a "**complete fast**." A complete fast is described in Esther 4:16: " ... Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day ... " A complete fast is abstaining from both food and water. Notice carefully

that Esther proclaimed a complete fast for three days and nights. You should never go on a complete fast for more than three days because you cannot go without water for more than four or five days.

➤ The second kind of fast is a **"regular fast"** This is when you abstain from only food. You may drink as often as you like. Some find it helpful to drink juices. You can maintain a fairly long fast this way.

➤ The third kind of fast is a **"partial fast"** - Daniel Fast. This is found in Daniel 10:2-3:

*At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.*

Daniel said that he ate no choice food. This means he ate, but not tasty foods. This is why Daniel could fast for three weeks--a long time. We should not attempt a lengthy fast without some food.

**Forty Day Fast** - The only fasts that were longer were supernatural fasts. Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18), Jesus in the desert (Matthew 4:2), are the famous fasts we think of. But these were supernatural fasts, and we should not attempt these on our own.

## Fasting can result in Fruitfulness

Another oft-quoted verse of Scripture is found in Joel 2. It is a call to repentance and fasting, but while it is frequently read, the exhortation to fasting is seldom reinforced by pulpit proclamation.

*Therefore also now, saith the Lord, Turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning; And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil (vv. 12-13).*

God is saying, in effect, “Show me that you mean business, and I will prove myself gracious, merciful, and all the other things that you so desperately need and desire. Demonstrate that you are seeking me with all your heart,” the Lord entreats, “and you can be sure you will be heard on high.”

It should be emphasized that prayer with fasting is not going on strike designed to force God’s hand and get your own way, but the idea presented here by the prophet Joel is that of expressing our earnestness in a divinely appointed way. *God’s Word says it, I believe it, and I’ll do it.* Such fasting – with right motives – will surely result in fruitful living and, even as the book of Joel demonstrates, God’s response and the keeping of His promises.

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