

THE POWER OF FASTING

SO WE FASTED AND PETITIONED OUR GOD ABOUT THIS, AND HE ANSWERED OUR PRAYER
– EZRA 8:23

What is Fasting?

Webster's Dictionary from 1828 defines it as, "to abstain from food, beyond the usual time; to omit to take the usual meals, for a time; as, to fast a day or a week; to abstain from food voluntarily, for the mortification of the body or appetites, or as a token of grief, sorrow and affliction; to abstain from food partially, or from particular kinds of food; as, the Catholics fast in Lent."

In simple language fasting means to voluntarily abstain from what is needed in the physical for what is needed in the spiritual. Biblically, this "physical need" is commonly referenced to food that nourishes the body (Luke 2:37 and Acts 14:23). By laying aside our needs we declare our dependence upon the eternal God who desires to provide for the cries of our hearts. We take on a posture of humility and brokenness seeking the favor and direction of the Lord (Ezra 8:21-23). This discipline *must be* initiated in the heart and then carried out in the flesh. Our motivation must be set on the Lord to carry out the fast's ultimate intention.

Why should we Fast?

As followers of Christ, Jesus Himself declared that we would fast (Matthew 9:15). It is birthed out of a love for the Lord and the mission in which He has entrusted the Church (Matthew 28:19). We must cultivate a lifestyle that allows free access for the Holy Spirit to minister to and through us. What is absolutely essential for this to take place is that we must be dependent upon Him for everything. The sacrifice of our "need" is only minimal in comparison to the willing spirit that is molded and shaped for His good pleasure through a fast. A yielded vessel He will use, but to make this applicable every possible reliance upon ourselves must be crucified.

As a member of the "American Church" we have rejected God and His commandments. Because of our impurity and unrepentant hearts God truly has no other choice but to bring judgment. In this gloomy picture we can cry out along with the words of Gerry Fry, "In Your wrath, remember mercy."¹ Like the children of Nineveh who believed the preaching of Jonah, we too can turn and repent and God will relent His anger and have mercy on our land.

We have the opportunity to participate in a discipline that shaped our Savior's life and set a standard in which His Church was to operate on earth until His Second Coming. Christ and His early followers understood the power behind the discipline of fasting. They had power encounters with the spiritual world (Matthew 17:1-6), saw powerful signs and wonders through their hands (Luke 10:17-20) and carried out the mission of destroying the works of

the enemy (Acts 10:38). Peter *personally* never healed anybody.² But Peter, a mere fisherman, submitted to the desires of the Lord Jesus Christ and saw amazing feats through His hands. Peter was dependent upon the Lord for every part of his existence. The early Church, led by leaders like Peter, had a custom of fasting two days every week. Tremendous fruit marked the power released through the Spirit of God in the early Church.

Fasting through the Years

Esther and the Possible Eradication of the Jewish people

Esther is a book of the Bible that does not even mention the name of the Lord, yet clearly it was book designed by the Spirit and discloses the covenant promises of God. The promises that God made to Abraham's descendants were tested and found to be true within the scroll of Esther.

The Lord declared to Abraham, "I will bless them that bless you, and curse him that curses you"(Gen 12:3). Haman, the enemy of the Jews in Persia during the reign of King Ahasuerus, was told by his wife and trusted aids this same simple truth when the truth of Esther's uncle, Mordecai's Jewish roots were discovered. "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish origin, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him"(Esther 6:13). The Lord's covenant to protect the Jewish race from complete eradication was fulfilled and the curses Haman laid upon the Jewish people were heaped upon his own head.

Even though this small book between Nehemiah and Job does not mention the Lord's name, it does show the power of fasting to a God that loves to answer His children's petitions.

In Esther 4:16, Queen Esther declares a three day fast for all Jews in Susa including her maid servants before she risked her life by inappropriately approaching the King without being summoned. Esther and all of the Jewish people sought God for favor with the King and complete deliverance from their impending destruction. The Jews understood that God's favor and direction was the only possible solution to the state of the Jewish people. They did not only quote a couple of Bible verses about God's covenant faithfulness and called it a day, but they earnestly sought His favor agreeing with the will of the Lord declared throughout the Old Testament.

God met them in their need. Through their dependence upon the Lord, He brought about the impossible: Haman, the second in command in the Persian Empire, was hung upon the gallows he prepared for Mordecai (Esther 7:9), a corresponding edict was issued to all of the provinces allowing the Jews to assemble and defend themselves against their enemies (8:11-13), Mordecai was elevated to become the "top prince" under the King in the vast empire (8:2) and many people became followers of the God of Israel as a result of God's favor being poured out on His covenant people (8:17).

American Presidents

At least three presidents that I know of called for days of fasting to be observed by all Americans to besiege God's mercy. Abraham Lincoln issued a *Proclamation of a National Fast-Day* on March 30, 1863. He declared:

"... It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announcing in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord..."

President Lincoln followed a biblical pattern set forth in the Scriptures of leaders calling their people to fast and pray (2 Chronicles 20:1:29; 1 Samuel 7:6, Ezra 8:21). Both Presidents John Adams (May 9, 1798) and James Madison (January 12, 1815) called the United States to fasts at critical times in her history. These national days of prayer and fasting show the historical fulfillment of Isaiah 65:24: "And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." Four days before the day of fasting was to be held, the United States won a decisive victory over the British in New Orleans and the Congress requested that Madison turn the day of fasting and repentance into a day of thanksgiving!

Biblical Directives

"Fasting is mentioned throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament. In Joel 2:12,13 the Lord commanded: 'Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God...'

In the book of Ezra, Ezra calls a fast to seek God's protection for the Jews returning from Babylon to Jerusalem: 'There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before God and ask Him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions' (Ezra 8:21).

Coursing through the Bible, there are many other examples of how fasting can change the course of events. Moses twice fasted forty days (Deuteronomy 9:9,18) till his face shone with the glory of God. The Bible records all of Israel fasting in the time of the Judges and the time of Samuel (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6). King David fasted on many occasions, including before he was crowned, when his child was ill, when his enemies were ill (Psalm 69:9-10). Elijah, Ezra, Esther, and Daniel all fasted in times of need."³

In the New Testament the discipline/practice of fasting continues as a regular practice within the Jewish body. John the Baptist's disciples and the Pharisees fasted (Mt 9:14) and Jesus confirmed the validity of the practice

through His 40-day fast that began His ministry in the desert (Luke 4:1-13). At a time of failed demonic deliverance by His disciples, Jesus drives out the demon and then instructs His followers that this type of demon comes out through prayer and fasting (Mk 9:18, 28-29). The old prophetess Anna from the tribe of Asher, "never left the Temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying⁴," was in tune with the Spirit of God and was used as a vessel to declare a young child's destiny as the promised redeemer of the Jewish people. Paul and Barnabas were set aside by the Spirit of God through fasting and prayer for a ministry that the Lord was going to reveal to them (Acts 13:2). The Apostle Paul said in 2 Cor 11:27 that he was "in fasting often." The practice was not to fulfill some old ritual that carried over from Jewish tradition, but was understood by Jesus and the early disciples as a discipline that allowed the Lord to freely use them as vessels for His good pleasure.

The motivation of this lifestyle of prayer and fasting modeled in the Old Testament and the New is not to be done begrudgingly out of some sort of obligation. It is to be birthed out of one's passion for God and desire for His manifested presence to move powerfully through His Bride (the Church). A fast motivated from the heart brings forth fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). A keenness and openness to the Spirit is developed and carried out in the life of a believer through fasting.

Question and Answer

Doesn't Jesus say in the Bible not to fast?

This fear of fasting is usually linked with fear of praying in public because the Christian does not want to bring attention to themselves. The passage usually quoted by people with this fear is in Matthew 6 when Jesus is sternly rebuking the Pharisees calling them hypocrites. If a person looks closer at these passages though, it would show one of the best examples of how and why one should fast. Verse 16 begins with, "when you fast," and taken in context Jesus was teaching His disciples how to fast with the right heart. Jesus uses stern but justly given language toward the Pharisees because their hearts were set on receiving the praise of men rather than the expressed purpose of being completely dependent upon God. Jesus clearly states in Matthew 9:15 that His disciples would fast after His death and bodily resurrection. And that includes all of us today who have a personal relationship with the Lord.

Can I fast things other than food?

In most cases in Scripture we find that the common form of fasting is abstaining from food. Some fasted both water and solid food (Jesus in Luke 4:2 and Moses in Deuteronomy 9:9), others drank only water, while Daniel ate only vegetables to avoid meat possibly sacrificed to demons (Daniel 1:8).

It was not just to starve their bodies but rather to set aside the body's needs for superior needs. It was a conscious decision to limit oneself to see the Lord's presence manifested on the earth. In today's culture people will set aside certain forms of entertainment (example TV or video games) as part of a fast. Obviously, there was no TV that we know about in Bible times but fasting is first and foremost a matter of the heart. In these modern forms of fasting they may not have Scriptural credence but if our hearts are molded by the Lord His purpose is accomplished.

Can unsaved people fast and receive power through it?

Something must be said up-front in response to this question. Even though people do religious things "to please or get God's attention," it does not make the practice right. A Hindu in "worship" is giving themselves completely over to false gods that are puppets set up by demons to receive worship (Rev 9:20-21).⁵ This religious practice even though it sounds Christian or may even look like it; has a contrary purpose behind it. The purpose is not for the God of the Bible to be exalted and worshipped. So, a person that performs a fast from food for 12 days to be able to see visions and dreams but is calling upon a dead wican priest for this insight and power is not a biblical fast!!

There is *not* a direct passage that I could find that would show that a non-Christian who fasted food would gain power through it. With that said it would strongly be implied that unbelievers did receive power through engaging the spiritual realm. Here are some observations that would bring about this implication:

#1 The magicians of Egypt were able to counterfeit the miraculous signs performed by Moses (Exodus 7). This power came from somewhere in the spiritual realm and the magicians knew it was different from the power that accompanied Moses and Aaron.
#2 Through offering his only son as a burnt sacrifice, the King of Moab released a powerful onslaught in the spiritual realm against the children of Israel. This act of demonic sacrifice dispersed the entrenched armies of Israel back to their homeland without a victory (2 Kings 3:24-27). Spiritual Warfare has two sides.
#3 The unbelieving Jews of Jerusalem desired to kill the Apostle Paul and took an oath not to eat or drink anything until he was killed (Acts 23:14). These unbelievers were seeking what they thought was "God's favor" to destroy the enemy of the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem.

In each of these cases the people either gained power *apart from the Lord* or were trying to seek it. One thing is certain, none of these people received power from the Lord but rather from unseen demons. (Please refer to endnote #5 for further study in this area of demon worship)

What if I have health issues that would not be conducive to fasting?
(As a matter of policy please consult a pastor and/or a physician before pursuing a lengthy fast)

If a person has eating disorders, is a diabetic, malnourished, pregnant or nursing it would not be wise to fast from any foods. If you have any of the conditions mentioned above pursue the Lord through a fast of something other than food and seek help from a person in leadership within the body. For healthy Christians without any of the conditions mentioned above the discipline of fasting is extremely beneficial to both body and spirit.

Reverend Wurmbrant who suffered in Romania under the communist rule in the 20th century told stories of many believers who died when they were sent to work camps because they had never disciplined their bodies to be without food. Those Christians that had lived a lifestyle of fasting survived far better under the same conditions.

Whenever a person goes into a fast the immediate concern for their well being is raised. In several different fasts there are ways to ensure your body is getting the proper amount of nutrients to function. In a juice fast (no solid food) it is important that you do not drink milk (because it is a pure food and breaks the fast) but try to drink broths, 100% fruit/veggie drinks and pure water.⁶ Through a "juice fast" or a liquid fast the body's system actually is cleansed as toxins are released from the body. Initially, in the fast this will make you feel weak and lethargic but this will pass as you continue to press into the Lord through the fast.

Most Christians would agree that the greatest aspect of fasting is the heightened sensitivity to the Spirit of God by their spirit. As the body is fasting the spirit becomes very in-tune with the voice of God and His will. In your fast focus on the health of your spirit and do not fast to "try to lose weight." Remember the fast must be motivated out of the heart and then carried out in the flesh.

Do I have to fast to drive out demons?

This question comes from Jesus telling His disciples in Mark's Gospel that they were unable to exorcise the demon because this kind of demon only came out through fasting and prayer. It is clear that fasting increases one's power in the spiritual realm and in some cases it is needed to drive out certain demons. But I would not take the next step and say that demons will only come out if you fast. Jesus had what seemed to be a daily deliverance ministry but had to have eaten food regularly to live. The answer is "no," you do not have to fast to drive out demons but it is extremely helpful if it is part of the exorcist's lifestyle.

Am I twisting God's arm through my fast?

Do not be afraid of the fact that God is a personal and living God who wants to use you to bring about His will. If you are asking in accord with God's Word you do not have to be afraid of twisting God's arm. You have to realize that God desires to bring revival (2 Chronicles 7:14), see all people saved (2 Peter 3:9) and His Son to be worshipped and adored by the whole

earth (Rev 7:9). To see the blind healed, mountains moved and rough seas calmed we just have to ask ourselves a simple question. Why do we want these things to happen? To have a name, more money, to shame our critics, or is it to have Jesus lifted high for all to see? If it is the last answer, the Lord is happy as can be to finally have a child that believes what He said was true! Remember the prayer Jesus taught us, "on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus is waiting for us to agree with Him, so don't worry about twisting His arm because that is not the case if it is done out of humility and a love for the Lord and the lost.

How do I know the fast that God is leading me into?

Talk with Him about it. Obviously, His desire is for you to have a lifestyle of fasting and prayer so begin where He instructs you. Have accountability to hold your hand through this discipline. Know that Satan hates the children of God who take God at His Word and begin to fast. So prepare your heart and mind and press in!!

Books and References

This paper is to be accompanied with a worksheet (Fasting in the Bible) for believers to discover from the Bible an understanding of fasting that will lead them into a lifestyle molded by fasting.

- 7 Basic Steps to Successful Fasting and Prayer by Bill Bright
- God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis
- The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting – Mahesh Chavda
- A Hunger for God – John Piper
- Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough – Elmer Towns

Compiled by Kaj Martin

¹ Taken from audio cassettes from the Revival School held at Clover Creek Bible Fellowship July of 2000.

² Without the healing power of Jesus flowing through Peter (or any of His disciples) no healing or miracle would have been possible. In Acts 3:6-10, Peter attributes all the glory and honor from the healing to Jesus and not himself. Peter's submission to the will of God enables Him to perform wondrous deeds through Christ.

³ Taken from Campus Crusade's old web page on fasting. www.fastingprayer.com/biblesays.html

⁴ Luke 2:36-37

⁵ For other references that refer to sacrifices and worship to demons see 1 Corinthians 10:20, Psalm 96:5 and Deuteronomy 32:17