

Fasting

Fasting: "When," Not "If"

by Don Pruitt

All of us at times are frustrated by our spiritual impotence. Sometimes we know our prayers do not go higher than the roof. We go through periods when we cannot accomplish what we would like to accomplish. Paul experienced this same problem. He said, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom. 7:18-19). We are all familiar with that feeling. The apostle explained that the trouble lies within ourselves. "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Gal. 5:17). We wrestle with our weaknesses. We perform our worship and spiritual duties as though we are simply going through the motions. We lack the ability to focus our lives. The problem most of us have is that we see ourselves as physical beings trying to be spiritual, rather than spiritual beings that have certain physical experiences. One of the best ways God gave us to bring the flesh under control is fasting.

To fast is to abstain from food or to abstain from certain kinds of food for a period of time. There is nothing intrinsically wrong or sinful about food. Nutrition is a physical need. Perhaps the best way to look at fasting is that it is a spiritual means to an end. The Word of God talks about fasting more than seventy-five times. Saints almost never talk about it. Many Christians believe that fasting is an Old Testament practice. Yet, this subject is mentioned in the New Testament nearly three times as often as the Lord's Supper. The brotherhood is informed about the Lord's Supper, but largely ignorant about fasting. I have been a member of the Lord's church for more than thirty years and have never heard a sermon on fasting. I was nearly forty years old before I knew that the Lord intended for me to fast.

Types of Fasts

Three different types of fasts are mentioned in God's Word: the normal fast, the absolute fast, and the partial fast. The normal fast is most often mentioned and occurs when one abstains from all food, but not fluids. "And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered" (Mt. 4:2; cf. Lk. 4:2). These passages show that when the fast was over He was hungry but not thirsty. Physicians tell us that the human body can go long periods without eating but cannot survive more than a

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few days without drinking. On the occasions in the Old Testament when people abstained from fluids for long periods, they must have had some Divine assistance (Deut. 9:9, 18; Ex. 34:28; Jon. 3:1-10).

The absolute fast is one in which the participant neither eats nor drinks. Perhaps the most familiar example was when a blinded Saul was waiting in Damascus. "And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9:9). Also, on the occasion when Queen Esther went before the king to intercede for the Jews who were to be exterminated, she requested fasting since her life was in grave danger. She told Mordecai, "Go gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish" (Esth. 4:16). These passages and others show that an absolute fast is distinguished from other fasts in the Bible by the participants neither eating nor drinking.

The third type of fast mentioned is a partial fast and is found in Daniel 1:12-15. The partial fast occurs when one restricts himself to a certain type of food, such as the vegetable pulse that Daniel ate in this text.

Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.

When, Not If

"Are we commanded to fast?" is a question that has troubled serious-minded Christians for many years. Even though the New Testament gives no such command, it clearly implies that Christians are to fast. Two scriptures stand out as the most critical in seeking the Lord's will in this matter.

In Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus spoke of three religious activities that spiritual people perform. In verse 2 He said, "Therefore when thou doest thine alms . . ." In verse 5 He said, "And when thou prayest . . ." In verse 16-18 He said,

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when

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thou fasteth, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Notice that the Lord does not say "if ye fast," but "when ye fast." He speaks of fasting in the same way He speaks of alms giving and prayer. We are to give alms, pray and fast. When we do them, we are not to be hypocritical in their performance. Why do we practice the first two activities and not the last? Why do we believe alms giving and prayer are New Testament responsibilities, but that fasting belongs in Old Testament times? In this text it is obvious that Jesus assumes that spiritual people fast, but they need instruction on how to do it properly.

Another passage that seems crucial in understanding the necessity of fasting is Matthew 9:14-15.

Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.

The Pharisees fasted ritualistically. One said, "I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (Lk. 18:12). The followers of John the Immerser were fasting regularly, too. But on this occasion, the disciples of Jesus were not fasting. When criticized, Jesus explained that while the Bridegroom was with them it was a time for feasting, not fasting. However, He said there would come a time when His disciples would fast. When is that time? Was it during the legalistic system of Moses? No! Was it while Jesus was on the earth? No! Will His disciples fast after He has left the earth? Yes! The only sensible way to view this passage is to understand that the Lord's disciples would fast during the New Testament age—in the church! Jesus makes this clear as He continues in verses 16-18.

No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.

An honest hearer cannot escape the force of the Lord's teaching in these passages. He made it very clear that He expected His disciples to fast. Even though we do not fast with the ritualistic regularity of the Pharisees in the Old Testament dispensation, New Testament saints must fast in this age! When Paul looked back over what was involved in being a servant of Christ,

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one of the many things he listed was "fastings often" (2 Cor. 11:27; 2 Cor. 6:4-5). We need to be like Anna, a widow of over one hundred years of age, who "served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Lk. 2:37).

Benefits of Fasting

Most of us want to know, "Why should I fast? What is in it for me?" We can be assured that the Christian receives a number of benefits when he fasts properly. We learned earlier in the Sermon on the Mount that we can fast improperly and for the wrong reasons. Fasting is a great deal more than a weight-loss program. Dieting is a physical activity. Fasting is a spiritual one. In Zechariah 7:4-6, the people of God were fasting, but it was not anything spiritual and God was not pleased. He said, "When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?" Fasting must be God centered!

First of all, fasting is a discipline that will help us to grow in personal sanctity. One of the obvious reasons we have trouble being spiritually-minded is the appetites of the flesh are so strong. The body controls what we do and when we do it. We usually do not eat because we are hungry. We eat because it is time to eat. We have been taught that we must eat three good meals each day. We have taught ourselves to snack between meals and before bedtime. The world has lined the streets of our cities with fast-food places to satisfy every varied taste. One of the sins of Sodom listed in Ezekiel 16:49 was "fullness of bread." Even in the church we are driven to the table. We cannot seem to have the preacher to our house unless we feed him. If you start to invite someone over after worship, the lady of the house says, "Not tonight, I don't have anything fixed to eat." Every "get-together" of saints is built around refreshments. And then there are those all-day dinners. We used to have "dinner on the grounds and singing on Sunday." Now it is just an all-day dinner! The only time Christians come together is to eat or worship. And even while we worship, we watch the clock because if it lasts too long, lunch will burn! We must get the flesh under control and the spiritual man in charge! Paul said, "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others I myself should be a castaway" (1 Cor. 7:5). Even our sexual appetites are to be controlled by the spiritual man. "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency" (1 Cor. 7:5).

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David speaks of "when I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting" (Ps. 69:10). Psalms 35:13 says, "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting: and my prayer returned into mine own bosom." I do not understand a great deal about the chemistry that occurs in the human body during a fast, but I do know that we are humbled. Humility is a vital part of Christianity. It is the soil in which the Christian graces grow. Brethren, since humility is a basic ingredient of true holiness, it is needful from time to time to humble our souls with fasting.

Secondly, fasting will also change your prayer life. Many of us simply do not pray as we should. And when we pray, it seems so lackadaisical, repetitious, and self-centered! We must pray fervently. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16). This word fervent means "zealous, intense, hot or boiling." That is the kind of prayer that will avail much. But does that sound like a description of our prayer life? In Jeremiah 19:13, God said, "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." There is a seeking and searching for God that is to be done with commitment. How do we seek God with all our hearts? The prophet said in Joel 2:12-13, "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 your God."

Notice again the connection of fasting and humility. When we combine our prayers with fasting, it increases the urgency with which we seek God in order to be heard on high. When Ezra and the people of God were returning to Jerusalem from the captivity of Babylon, he said,

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him. So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was entreated of us (Ezra 8:21-23).

When Saul of Tarsus was waiting in Damascus to be told what he must do to please God, he spent three days in blind darkness, fasting and praying. Over and over again we can see in the work of God the undeniable connection of humility, fasting, and prayer. There is tremendous power in the combination of these three.

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That brings us to the final benefit that I will mention in this treatise. Fasting and prayer are used in Scripture to change the mind of God. The mind of God is awesome. He lives and rules in the lives of men. This is our Father's world. He has revealed for us His unchangeable Word. We must live in obedience to His divine will. Concerning His providence and some of the everyday affairs of our lives, there are occasions in which we seek to change the mind of God. We are concerned about events in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones. We pray for the sick. We are commanded to pray for the sick. We pray believing. When someone is gravely ill and it appears God has determined their end, we pray and ask Him to spare that life and return their health to them. When King Hezekiah was sick unto death, God sent Isaiah to tell him to "set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live." God had made up His mind. The king would die. But Hezekiah wept and prayed, and God changed his mind! Even before the prophet left the king's palace, God told him to return and tell the king that he would be healed, and his life increased fifteen years (2 Kgs. 20:1-7).

When David sinned with Uriah's wife, God said "the child that is born unto thee shall surely die." When the child became sick, David knew the verdict. The mind of God had been revealed. 2 Samuel 12:16 says, "David therefore besought God for the child: and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth." He laid there for seven days and fasted. When David heard the child was dead, the record says in verses 20-23,

Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat. Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.

While David was trying to change God's mind he fasted and wept for seven days. But when God did not change his mind, there was no animosity. David got up and bathed, changed his clothes, and went to worship the Lord. Then he broke the fast. Also we must see that there was no anger toward David from God for trying to change his mind.

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When Jonah finally got to Nineveh he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Jonah 3:5-10 says,

So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that in their hands. Who can tell God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did not.

When this destruction was at hand, these people proclaimed a fast, repented, and cried unto the Lord. As a result, the Lord changed his mind! God spared the very city he had doomed.

In each of these occasions, these ancient people who faced an emergency situation called upon the Lord with fasting. These passages demonstrate there is tremendous power at the Christian's disposal. The combination of humility, fasting, and prayer can be a great force in a Christian's life. It can even change the mind of God. We need to utilize that power. Before we can change the world by the power of the Gospel, many of us must change ourselves and grow in these Christian disciplines.

We can see from this study that the Lord intended for His people in this age to practice the discipline of fasting. He taught us to fast. He taught us how to fast. And he taught us the benefits of fasting. It is this writers hope that Christians everywhere will seriously consider this Bible subject.

Practical Suggestions

If you have never fasted, may I offer some practical suggestions.

1. If you have serious health problems such as diabetes or heart disease or are advanced in age, please check with a physician. I do not wish to discount what I have taught from the Word of God, but I do remind

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you the people of the Bible had fasted all their lives. Their bodies were used to what would be a real adjustment for your body.

2. Do not begin with a long fast. Try a fast that lasts for twenty-four hours. Then perhaps the next week or so you might fast thirty-six hours. Build up to a forty-eight hour fast. You may get uncomfortable, or dizzy, or feel weak. When this occurs, at the beginning you might drink a small amount of unsweetened fruit juice. Grape juice is my favorite. But as you continue to fast and gain more experience, you should leave off the juice and drink only water. You will probably have headaches when you begin to fast. These are largely caused by not having coffee or tea in your diet. Do not be concerned about them. They will soon pass.
3. After you have fasted for forty-eight hours on several occasions, you might wish to fast four to seven days or even longer. You will discover after the first few days the hunger will pass and you will experience a sense of euphoria. Your energy level will increase. Your mind will become clearer and more focused. Be very attentive to what your body tells you. Depending on your body make-up, somewhere between 21 to 40 days your body will run out of its reserves and begin to feed on important body tissue. When this happens, you will become hungry again, and that is the time to break the fast.
4. Let me remind you again that it is physically dangerous if one goes more than two or three days without the intake of fluids.
5. Do not eat large meals before or after a fast. An extended fast should be broken with fruits or juices. The digestive system has been inactive for a long period. Be careful not to overeat.
6. Read some books about fasting. Look at this subject from both the spiritual and physical standpoints.
7. Be in charge of yourself!

509 E. 14th, Ada, OK 74820