



CHURCHONMAIN

INTRODUCING

FURTHER READING

*"Some have exalted
religious fasting beyond
all scripture and reason;
and others have
utterly disregarded it.
" The balance, as always,
lies in the truth contained
in God's words.*

JOHN WESLEY

WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is a scriptural discipline that all Christians will be involved in at some stage in their Christian walk. Here is a simple and practical definition:

F A S T I N G
IS ABSTINENCE FROM
SATISFYING VARIOUS
PHYSICAL APPETITES
FOR THE SAKE OF
PRAYER AND SEEKING GOD.

This could include abstaining from solid food, liquids, body lotions, marital relations or any combination of these things listed. The importance of the phrase, 'for the sake of prayer', found in the definition above is that fasting is not dieting for legalistic purposes nor is it hunger striking. Further, it must be clearly pointed out that fasting can not be used as a means to twist God's arm. Rather, it is to quicken spiritual perception and enhance one's prayer life; this being in obedience to God's word.

W H Y S H O U L D W E F A S T ?

Jesus deals with fasting during his sermon on the mount (Matt 6:16-18). He spoke of fasting here in the same context as prayer and almsgiving. We know that these things are part of the righteous person's lifestyle. Of course, righteousness comes not from our works but our faith in Jesus. However, it does appear from the context that Jesus expected His followers to adopt some form of fasting in their lives.

In Matt 6:16 Jesus said

“WHEN YOU FAST.. ” AND NOT

“IF YOUR FAST.. ”,

the inference being that his disciples would have a lifestyle incorporating fasting.

H O W S H O U L D W E F A S T ?

The pattern of fasting in Scripture can be divided into three types:

N O R M A L F A S T

N O S O L I D S

(LUKE 4:1-2)

More accurately, no food nutrients whether in solid or liquid form. Most scholars agree that to the Hebrew interpreter of scripture this would be a water-only fast. Some, however, see it as a liquids-only fast; in other words, including various drinks with food nutrients in them.

P A R T I A L F A S T

N O D E L I C A C I E S , meat, wine or lotions for three weeks (Dan 10:2-3); or abstaining from marital relations by mutual consent for the sake of prayer. (1 Cor 7:3-5)

A B S O L U T E F A S T

N O F O O D O R W A T E R .

(Usually up to three days, never any longer). (Ezra 10:6; Esth 4:16; Acts 9:9)

NB! On the issue of absolute fasting Richard Foster, the author of *Celebration of Discipline*, writes: "It must be underscored that the absolute fast is the exception and should never be engaged in unless one has a very clear command from God, and then for no more than three days."

WHEN SHOULD WE FAST?

Three basic guidelines are useful in helping one determine when to fast:

1. CALLED BY THE SPIRIT TO FAST

(LUKE 4:1-2)

We see here that Jesus was led by the Spirit into His time of fasting, hence we should be open to the Spirit leading us into our times of fasting.

2. CALLED TO FAST BY CHURCH LEADERS

(2 CHRON 20:3-14)

3. CHOOSING A DATE AND SETTING IT ASIDE AS PART OF THE DISCIPLINED LIFE- STYLE OF A FOLLOWER OF JESUS.

(MATT 6:16-18)

Caution should be exercised here especially for those who have ascetic and legalistic tendencies.

CAUTIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR FASTING

- Fasting includes within it the component of prayer. Abstinence from food without prayer is hunger striking, not fasting.
- Fasting is only part of the disciple's lifestyle. An important part, but only a part.
- To get started, one should try shorter partial fasts. One can build up to extended water-only fasts.
- If there is any medical reason why you should not fast (e.g. pregnancy or diabetes), or if you suspect any medical reason why you should not fast, then get qualified medical advice .
- A lifestyle of fasting has wonderful spiritual benefits and some healthy physical benefits too.

Advice for those embarking on longer fasts:

- In preparing for a long fast one should exercise caution in the cutting out of solids from one's diet. As a general guideline one should cut out the following foods, in the following order:
 - o Complex proteins (red meat and fish)
 - o Dairy and eggs
 - o Cereals (rice and wheat)
 - o Vegetables and salads
- Those who are embarking on a longer fast for the first time should be warned that toxins are expelled from the body; mild dizziness and headaches are normal symptoms. This is simply part of the detoxification and the faster should not be alarmed.

B E N E F I T S O F F A S T I N G

In Matt 9:14 disciples of John the Baptist approached Jesus asking Him how it was that they and the Pharisees fasted, but Jesus' disciples did not. Jesus responded by saying that they could not be expected to fast while the bridegroom was with them (referring to Himself). But a time would come when He would be taken away and then the disciples would fast. He was not referring to the three day period that He would be in the grave.

In Acts 13:2 we see that the leaders of the church in Antioch fasted. This indicates fasting after Jesus' ascension.

He (Jesus) is now seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven where He is interceding for us (Rom 8:34) and He expects His followers to enter into the life He taught.

This includes fasting.

Now that we have discussed the fact that Jesus anticipated that his disciples would fast, let us briefly take a look at some of the

b e n e f i t s o f f a s t i n g .

1. FASTING HEIGHTENS SPIRITUAL AWARENESS

From practical experience and from the account of Jesus' fast (Luke 4:1-13) we discover that denying physical appetites creates a greater awareness of spiritual reality. It enhances one's perception of what is going on in the spiritual realm. This, of course, is of great advantage in our prayer life.

2. CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY

Once again from experience and Jesus' fast (Luke 4: 1-13) we see that fasting forces a contact/combat situation with the enemy, or it arises out of a combat situation. This happens because breakthrough is imminent; we are physically weak and therefore vulnerable to temptation and the enemy fears the effects of our prayers. This content often takes the form of a battle in our minds as the enemy assaults our beliefs, accuses us or brings condemnation. As Jesus did in His time of fasting, we are to combat these attacks with the Word of God.

3. SPIRITUAL BREAKTHROUGH

Luke records these words about Jesus' return from His time of fasting and praying in the wilderness:

"Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the spirit and news about Him spread throughout the whole countryside". (Luke 4:14)

Many times when one fasts and prays God releases power into our physical circumstances. In the Old Testament there is an account recorded of God's deliverance of His people in Judah from a 'vast enemy army'. Jehosaphat proclaimed a fast and all of Judah sought the Lord's help. God spoke prophetically through Jahaziel of the deliverance of His people. Thereafter God brought about the breakthrough in the ensuing battle. (Account recorded in 2 Chron 20:3-24.)

I include points (4), (5) and (6) as physical, circumstantial and health benefits to fasting. They are not necessarily directly related to the spiritual benefits but are important to note.

4. FASTING FLUSHES OUT TOXINS

During a time of fasting, especially extended fasting, the body has an opportunity to expel toxins that have built up over months. For this reason one's first extended fast can be quite uncomfortable, which may lead headaches and mild dizziness.

5. TIME GAINED IN YOUR DAILY LIFE

On average humans devote some 2 to 4 hours to eating and related activities each day. During a water-only fast this time can be spent in prayer or reading and studying scripture. On a simple calculation during a week's fasting, assuming one gains 3 hours a day, one gains a full 21 hours of time to be used for prayer and the Word.

6. REST FOR VITAL ORGANS

During a time of fasting the stomach and other body organs are given an often much needed time of respite. This is one of the reasons why doctors say fasting is a healthy practice.



B R E A K I N G T H E F A S T

In breaking the fast one should follow the preparation process in reverse:

VEGETABLES AND SALADS

CEREALS (RICE AND WHEAT)

DAIRY AND EGGS

COMPLEX PROTEINS (MEAT AND FISH)

Note: breaking any fast of 3 to 40 days in an unwise way can be an extreme shock to the system.

FURTHER READING

Many books are available for a fuller appraisal of this discipline of fasting. I mention four here should you desire to embark on further study:

- J. Piper. *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer.*
 - R. Foster. *Celebration of Discipline.*
 - D. Prince. *Changing History through Prayer and Fasting.*
 - A. Wallis. *God's Chosen Fast.*
 - L. Bueno. *Fast Your Way to Health*
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