

FACTS CONCERNING BIBLICAL FASTING¹

Matt. 6:16-18

We hear a great deal about prayer, and there are many books regarding Bible reading, Bible study methods, and techniques for memorizing Scripture. **But one spiritual discipline that has almost been forgotten today is the practice of fasting**, which usually means going without food for a period of time. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on it, and there are very few books that deal with the subject.² That's all the more amazing since the Bible mentions it in both the Old & New Testaments and both OT & NT saints engaged in the practice, as well as many of the greatest men and women of church history!

SOME BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

“Going through the motions of fasting is not as important as concern for the poor (cf. 1:10-17; Matt. 23:13-36). Fasting was [originally] only required on the Day of Atonement each year, but after the defeat of Jerusalem other fast days were instituted... The Pharisees fasted twice a week—conspicuous piety... [though] The required public fasts were only three in number: the Day of Atonement; the day before Purim; and the ninth of Ab, commemorating the fall of Jerusalem... The fast of the fourth month (Zech. 8:19) commemorated Nebuchadnezzar’s entering Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:3-4). The fifth commemorated the burning of the Temple and other buildings in 586. The seventh remembered Gedaliah’s assassination. The tenth recalled the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem in 588 (2 Kings 25:1). All these fasts (see Zech. 7:3 & 5-7) will be turned into feast days when Israel is restored.”³

WHO HAS FASTED & WHO CAN FAST?

BELIEVERS WHO HAVE FASTED:

- OLD & NEW TESTAMENT SAINTS e.g. Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, Nehemiah, Jesus, various Apostles.
- WOMEN AS WELL AS MEN e.g. OT: Hannah & Esther; NT: Anna. Note too in the account in Esther that **not only did she fast, but she requested a group fast (Esther 4:15-16)**
- MANY OF THE GREATEST INDIVIDUALS THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY. e.g. Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, David Brainerd, etc.

WHEN, WHERE, & HOW TO FAST

TYPES OF FASTS:

- a. NORMAL FAST - Refraining from food (solid & liquid), but **NOT** water.
- b. ABSOLUTE FAST - No food or drink. 3 days **MAXIMUM!** For spiritual emergencies. **Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9**
- c. PARTIAL FAST - Restriction of diet, but **NOT** complete abstention from food (e.g. abstaining from certain foods or skipping only 1 meal). This type of fasting is excellent for older people or others who cannot physically withstand full-scale fasts.

¹ Written & compiled by Mike Edwards, Madison, Ohio, revised May 2019

² “*God’s Chosen Fast*” by Arthur Wallis (Christian Literature Crusade, 1980) is a helpful little book on the subject and is the source for much of the material I have given here. As of May 2013 it was available through amazon.com -mwe

³ Charles Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible KJV*, (Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1986, 1994), study notes on Isa. 58:1-7, Zech. 8:19 & Matt. 9:14, pp. 1076, 1372 & 1431

IS FASTING FOR TODAY?

- a. **Mt. 6:2, 5, 16.** Note that Jesus did not condemn giving, praying, or fasting. He simply said that if we do any of those things in pride, or with a desire to show off before the eyes of others, that is wrong. But the practices themselves are good, and even commanded! Yes, fasting can become routine, "humdrum," and nothing more than a habit. But so can praying or giving which the Pharisees also perverted!
- b. **Mt. 9:15; Acts 13:2-3.** The time for fasting has not passed. In fact, the time for real fasting **BEGAN** after Jesus ascended to heaven.

WHY FAST?

- a. **TO GLORIFY GOD & FOLLOW CHRIST'S EXAMPLE!** – Matt. 4:1-2
- b. **TO HUMBLE OURSELVES** - Dt. 8:2-3 cf. vv. 11-14 – In the time of Joel, drastic situations called for drastic action. [It was] “*a call to personal repentance that comes from the heart. The heart was considered to include the intellect as well as the emotions...[It was] a call to national repentance in a solemn assembly from which no one, not even babies or newlyweds, would be exempt* (see Deut. 24:5).” (Ryrie, KJV, re: Joel 2:12-17, p. 1309)
- c. **TO BE HEARD ON HIGH** - Ezra 8:23 cf. Isa. 58:4, 9. Note that fasting is not some sort of “*hunger strike*” or protest, to force God's hand or treat him as if we were a terrorist threatening Him! *Fasting with such motives will always fail* (see Isa. 58 above). We fast because this is warfare and we are battling with powerful spiritual enemy forces (cf. 2 Cor. 10:3-5)!
- d. **TO AVOID GOD'S JUDGMENT** - Joel 2:12-14; Jonah 3:5, 10 (Nineveh). Again, we should be reminded that **fasting is not an unconditional guarantee that God won't judge a sinful nation or people** (cf. II Sam. 12:16, 22—David's child who died, in spite of his fasting), but it can sometimes make the difference.
- e. **TO “FREE THE CAPTIVES”** - Isa. 58:6.
Illustration: Missionaries in Togo, W. Africa who fasted and prayed for rain when a powerful village sorcerer claimed that there would be no rain until the village people stopped following Christ. The rain came less than a day later!

Illustration: John Kumbia [pastor Mike's friend in Papua New Guinea] fearlessly sitting down (against the pleas of all his relatives) with an uncle who as the village sorcerer was greatly feared, upon John's return to his village for a visit. How? John knew that “*Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world*” (I John 4:4)!
- f. **TO GAIN INSIGHT AND WISDOM** - Isa. 58:10-11 & Dan. 9:2, 3, 21, 22; 10:3ff
- g. **TO KEEP OUR BODY UNDER CONTROL** - Ps. 106:15 cf. Ex. 16:3 & Num. 11:4-5. The people of Israel cried out for their physical wants, and God gave them those desires... **BUT it severely hurt them, spiritually.** cf. Dt. 32:15-16; I Cor. 6:12; 9:27; 2 Pet. 2:19; etc. Pastors & others in ministry should be particularly careful to guard themselves & not become dominated by food. To do so, is a bad testimony before others and limits the credibility & impact of our preaching & teaching in regard to having self-control in other areas.

PHYSICAL DANGERS OF FASTING

Physically speaking, fasting is normally very good for your body. It gives your digestive system a rest and your mind will be more alert and active than usual. However, if you are older, underweight, or have physical problems such as diabetes, etc., you should **DEFINITELY** check with your doctor **before** attempting to go without food.

SPIRITUAL DANGERS OF FASTING

- **SPIRITUAL PRIDE**. Fasting, like prayer, Bible study, or any other spiritual discipline, can become a source of pride and even boasting (e.g. Luke 18:11-12). The Pharisees & scribes were full of such pride. And we believers today are sometimes filled with it as well! "*The Pharisees fasted twice a week—conspicuous piety... The required public fasts were only three in number: The Day of Atonement; the day before Purim; and the ninth of Ab, commemorating the fall of Jerusalem.*" (Ryrie, KJV, note on Matt. 9:14, p. 1431). **Make sure you are fasting in the right way, for the right reasons.**
- **WRONG MOTIVES & THINKING**. In Joel the prophet reminds God's people that "*Even if Israel repented, she could not assume (as we often do) that God would automatically send a blessing.*" (Ryrie, KJV, p. 1309)
- **UNBIBLICAL VIEWS REGARDING THE PHYSICAL BODY**.
 - i. *We must beware of beginning to regard the body as vile or evil.* The Gnostics held such an erroneous viewpoint. They taught that the spirit of man was good, but his body was evil. That is **NOT** a biblical viewpoint.
 - ii. *Beware of carrying fasting to extremes in the areas of asceticism and separation from the world* cf. monks and others in church history. They began to regard contact with the world itself as evil, going to ridiculous extremes such as sleeping on wooden beds, sitting on flagpoles, dwelling in caves, etc., in order to punish their bodies and win favor with God. This view is wrong & totally unbiblical!

GENERAL INFO REGARDING VERY LONG FASTS AND THE HUMAN BODY

I doubt that anyone will try to undertake fasts of 2-4 weeks, however, if you ever do decide to undertake such a fast, **DEFINITELY OBTAIN A DOCTOR'S PERMISSION FIRST!** Even though you probably will never try to fast longer than a week, you might be interested in what experts say that such a person experiences physically.

- **FIRST PHASE** (The first 2-4 days). You will crave food ("*I'm hungry!*")
- **SECOND PHASE** (Days 5-7). You may feel weak and faint.
- **THIRD PHASE** (From the first week onward). You will experience growing strength. Note: Anyone planning to fast more than a couple of days, should refrain from heavy physical labor!
- **FOURTH PHASE** (Becoming hungry again). This usually occurs around 30-40 days after the start of a long term fast (cf. **Mt. 4:2**).

At that time **YOU DEFINITELY MUST START EATING**, since that second time of hungering is a sign that the body is now feeding on itself! You may recall regarding Jesus time of temptation in wilderness in Matthew 4, that the Bible says, "...*after forty days, He hungered.*" It was at that time that Jesus knew He needed to resume eating, and not coincidentally, it was at precisely that time that Satan came and tempted Jesus to make bread out of stones.

BREAKING A FAST

If you fast for more than a day or two, it's important to end the fast properly. Do **NOT** end a multi-day fast by going out and ordering a big, heavy meal to celebrate! That is almost guaranteed to make you sick! It is far better to break a fast of 3-7 days by eating raw fruits, vegetables, toast, soup, and other "lighter" foods. Within a day or two you should be able to eat most anything you had eaten before. But it is best to ease back into solid foods, especially greasy ones.

WHAT FASTING CAN'T MAKE UP FOR:

- **WILLFUL, DELIBERATE DISOBEDIENCE!**

On the positive side: e.g. An unwillingness to witness of Christ to others; failing to discipline yourself to read your Bible & pray daily; an unwillingness to get involved to any real extent in the activities of the local body of Christ; skipping church on Sunday in order to attend family gatherings, watch/play sports, go to birthday parties, etc.

On the negative side: e.g. An unwillingness to stop gossiping & talking about others behind their back i.e. being "two-faced," criticizing individuals to others then smiling at them and pretending to be their friend when you meet them; An unwillingness to try to break free of sins & habits that you know are wrong & hinder your testimony before both the saved & unsaved; etc.

- **A HEART THAT IS LUKEWARM FOR GOD! – Rev. 2:7 (esp. v. 4)**

- **AN APATHY FOR GOD'S KINGDOM, GOD'S WORK & GOD'S PEOPLE! – 1 Cor. 12:12-21 esp. v. 21**