



Fasting

In the Bible, God's people fasted at least once a year. It was something that was established on a regular basis.

Frequently, in the Old Testament, fasting involved the people humbling themselves before God in order to get an answer to their prayers.

***Ezra 8: 21** There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.*

Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find people fasting in order to praise God or worship him better.

David said in ***Psalms 35: 13*** *Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.*

Reading this verse could give you the impression that fasting is a way of cajoling God into giving us what we want or making Him feel pity for us, so that, seeing us depriving ourselves of food, He'll think : "Well, now he has suffered enough, I've seen his motivation, I'll answer his prayer".

If you think like that, so it's a mistake and you need to gain a deeper understanding of your Father. Be certain that no one will ever cause God to feel pity for him or her. The relationship God wishes to establish with us is based on the fact that He has given us everything He possessed long before we even met Him.

And this being so, it is no good begging, going without food in the hope of getting something from Him. He has already given us everything.

Then why fast?

Is it still necessary today?

Well, we can see that even in the Old Testament God Himself asked his people to fast.

Joel 2: 12 "Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."

Once again, we see fasting associated with man humbling himself before God to be restored. We get the impression that fasting is going to allay God's anger towards his people.

Let me tell you that it is a misconception of fasting.

Then why, you may ask, when I read a verse about fasting, is it so often linked to repentance, returning to God, crying, mourning, supplication? And it is here that Christians often misunderstand.

Fasting is not linked in any way to humiliation or repentance. Nevertheless, it is an important element in turning back to God, quite simply because it draws us closer to our Father and Saviour, but for no other reason.

Fasting in itself is powerless. It is not a magic formula which, because I stop eating and drinking for a while, ensures special favors from God, which I could not have otherwise.

I like it when we can discover the true nature of God in the Old Testament. He already gives us an idea of what fasting means for Him. For God, fasting is more an attitude, a state of mind than just temporarily going without food. People are often mistaken when they read certain passages in the Bible and focus exclusively on the aspect of temporary abstinence.

Isaiah 58: 5 *“Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?”*

God is speaking through his prophet Isaiah. We realize that the people of Israel are more focused on skipping meals than progressing in their walk with God.

All had to do with appearances, putting on humble and unhappy looks, but all these attitudes were self-centered. Their pseudo humility had become pride.

And God was not content with that. Through Isaiah, again he gives precise details about how to fast.

Isaiah 58:6-7 *Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

The full sense of the word appears in that verse. Yes, fasting means going without food, but it is more than that. Depriving oneself of food is only one effect of fasting. I must be clearly conscious that fasting is first and foremost a way of helping me grow in God, my Father.

If you look more closely at **Isaiah 58:6**, you might get the impression that God talks about others, that he asks us, when we fast, to go and loose the chains, untie the cords, and set our brother free.

Not at all.

God does not talk about others in verse 6, He talks about him who fasts for himself. Fasting, among other things, is going to allow me to loose the chains in my life, which hold me back and keep me from entering God's plan for me. Let us not forget that Isaiah speaks on behalf of God. God speaks about His people, and he says :

(Translation NASB) Is this not the fast which I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?

God speaks about the effects of fasting on his people. He does not say: “Go and set your brothers free from their chains, or else set the oppressed free”. No, God speaks to us in a personal way. He tells us : “My Child, this is the kind of fasting I have chosen, fasting that is going to set you free, deliver you, and loose the chains the devil has been allowed to put on you.”

Then in verse 7, he goes on to show us how fasting must have repercussions on “our neighbor’s life”.

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked, to clothe him and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Fasting is first taking action in my own life and then action in the life of my brother.

By now, you must be thinking “This is all very well, but practically, how does it work? How can fasting help me change?”

In order to understand what is going to happen when I fast, I must realize that ever since I was born again, I have been composed of three parts: my spirit, my soul and my body. (I suggest you read my study about “Spirit, Soul and Body”).

Depriving oneself of food will enable the soul to overcome the body. It is no longer the body which indicates the laws, but the soul, which is itself influenced by my spirit, which is regenerated in Jesus Christ.

For a while, I’m going to cut my body off from its vital nourishment, and I am going to put it aside for a time.

All this is in order to maintain it in perfect union with my soul and my spirit. And so, it is no longer my soul drawn either to the desires of my body, or to the desires of my spirit, but the three are in agreement.

There are then no more obstacles to my transformation. Now, I understand clearly that fasting is above all else, a desire to grow.

This is no longer a desire to please God more by self-inflicted suffering. God loves me, no matter what I say or do. His love for me does not depend on my actions. (For more details about the love of God, see my study about new birth).

Fasting is the result of a strong desire to get rid of my chains, the cords which have been holding me back for too long. It is also the result of a desire to love my neighbor in a balanced, godly way.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees were experts at fasting in the flesh. The benefits they derived from it were quite the opposite of what God wants for us. When they fasted, they did it so the others might see them and think: "how spiritual can these people get!" What came out of it was not humility but pride and vanity. That was the only result they got.

Let us look at this example of the Pharisees arguing with Jesus and trying to prove their pseudo-spirituality because they fasted more than anyone else.

Mark 2: 18 *Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"*

Jesus' answer illustrates perfectly the fact that fasting is only an opportunity for self-improvement according to God's will for us. If fasting was only a way of pleasing God by self-imposed deprivation of food in order to get a favour from God, Jesus would have said that his disciples too had to fast.

This is not what happened. Let us see the end of the verse with Jesus' answer.

Mark 2: 19 *Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while He is with them? They cannot, so long as they have Him with them.*

At that time, the apostles were with Jesus every day. They enjoyed His presence, His teaching, His influence. The apostles were in a training period. They did not need to fast to get better because the Master was with them. If they had a question, they simply asked Jesus and He answered them.

Jesus, the Word, was with them, day after day. They learnt from Him, rejoiced with Him. They were the guests of the Bridegroom.

Today Jesus has gone back to the Father, seated at His right hand side. And so, now that Jesus is no longer on the earth, fasting becomes useful again, because we need that connection with Him, our spirit, soul and body entirely consecrated to Him, in order to draw the strength to improve according to His will.

The passage of the Pharisee who fasted twice a week shows that his fasting was to no avail because he had not been justified.

Luke 18 :12-14 'I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Another passage, which can be misleading, is the one where Jesus refers to a kind of demon that only comes out through prayer and fasting. This leads some people to think that fasting releases an increase in power which will elevate prayer to a higher level where it is more likely to be heard by God.

Matthew 17: 21. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.

Often we are mistaken, because we overlook what happened before. Let us go back to the beginning.

A man has a son who is possessed by demons. These demons drive him into the water or into the fire, it is clear that they want the boy's death. It is a sad life for the father who is constantly on the watch. Several times he must have narrowly saved his son's life as he was drowning or burning in flames. This man comes to see Jesus' apostles to ask them to pray for his son. But the apostles' prayers were inefficient. The father goes to Jesus to ask Him to set his son free.

What is Jesus' reaction?

What does he say?

Matthew 17: 20 So Jesus said to them, *“Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.*

It is obvious that the apostles did not have enough faith to drive the demons out of the boy. This incident taught them that they still had much to learn and receive. But that would come later for them, after Jesus’ crucifixion and glorification. This is why he said to them in **Mark 2: 20** *But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.*

This is why, when Jesus said that :”that kind of demons can only be cast out through praying and fasting”, He meant that they needed their whole being, spirit, soul and body, to be united, so their faith might be effective to cast the demons out. Sometimes a few version of the bible add in their translations “Of demons”, but this term is not part of the original text of the Bible. The term “this demon” has been added by translators. Even if we can take to account that it is important to fast to activate our faith in order to cast out a demon, Jesus was not talking about demon here. He was talking about unbelief.

Fasting increases the activation of our faith.

Nowadays, we have every reason to fast and pray. Every one of us needs to go further. From time to time, we reach a point where we feel we are not progressing anymore, or at least, not as quickly as before.

Fasting will increase faith as in **Matthew 17: 20 and 21**, but we must be quite clear that fasting will also sanctify us and make us more like Jesus. And because of this, our prayers will be answered, and because of this, our lives will be filled with joy in Jesus Christ. It is this that must be our primary motivation.

And then, the effects of fasting will be manifested as God said in **Isaiah 58: 8**. *Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; Thy righteousness shall go before thee, And the glory of the Lord go with you.*

Fasting is a way of life, just like being a Christian. It is not just a set of rites to observe without understanding their meaning, things to do repeatedly without living them, meals to skip without realizing that the body is submitted to the

soul and the spirit so that for a time it cannot hold one back from moving on with God. We want to take advantage of these periods when our bodies are in utter submission, to go forward and progress. These moments are meant to set us free from our chains and change specific things in our lives.

When our whole being - spirit, soul and body - is drawing near to Jesus, then we shall see our prayers answered.

This study has been offer to you by "***The Real Good News***" Ministry.

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