

Prayer and Fasting

Isaiah 58:1-14

I. Background on Fasting

Fasting is a biblical act of worship. It is a voluntary abstaining from physical nourishment for spiritual purposes. It is a longstanding practice in Christianity, and clearly people fasted for church revival and personal needs well before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Los Angeles. One writer described as such: "Fasting is basically a quest for spiritual mastery over the sensory appetites, an elevation of thoughts to God and his will. It is a normal inclination of those who are eager to express love for God and manifest dependence on him."

A. Old Testament

1. In the strictest sense it meant going without both food and drink for a designated period of time, as mentioned by Esther to Mordecai: Esther 4:16 (NASB) 16 "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish."
2. It often involved the entire congregation of Israel as well as individuals. Fasting on the Day of Atonement was spoken of as a time for afflicting oneself (Lev 23:26-27 (NIV) 26 The Lord said to Moses, 27 "The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the Lord by fire. Lev. 16:29, 31; 23:27-32; Neh 9:1). This indicates the earliest reason for fasting: the denial of self so that one might be more sensitive to things of the spirit.
3. Fasting was done annually. Zechariah 8:19 mentions four annual fasts that were observed in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months of the Jewish year. Esther 9:31 refers to the origin of still another annual fast, known as Purim, which commemorated the Jews' survival in Persia. Fasting is a typical form of worship and honor to God.
4. Fasting was done in response to a special need or present calamity. Judges 20:26; Joel 1:14). These occasions emphasize the spiritual impulse to humble oneself in times of personal distress.
5. Fasting is often mentioned in connection with repentance, both personal and national. 1 Sam. 7:6; Deut. 9:3-4; 1 Kings 21:27; Neh 9:1-2.

6. Fasting for divine guidance was also prevalent in the Old Testament. Deut. 9:9; Exodus 8:21-23; 2 Sam. 12:16-23; 2 Chron. 20:3-4). **Dan 9:2-3 (NIV)** 2 In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. 3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

B. New Testament

1. “In the New Testament fasting is more sharply focused than in the OT. While fasting in the OT was only occasionally personal and specific, in the NT it is almost altogether so. The Pharisees, who regarded fasting as one of the three most important works of righteousness, were said to have had a set schedule of fasting (**Luke 18:11-12 (NASB)** 11 The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.')
2. Jesus set the proper motivation and tone for fasting in **Matt 6:16-18 (NIV)** 16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
3. Jesus went on an extended 40 day fast in the wilderness in Matt 4:1-4. This was a time of testing and preparation before launching his ministry.
4. Jesus emphasized the personal nature of fasting on an occasion when John's disciples inquired as why the disciples did not fast. Matt (9:14). This reveals that formal fasting was not the main emphasis but that urgent spiritual need would later bring it about
5. The church in Antioch fasted before the selection of Barnabas and Paul to go out as missionaries (**Acts 13:2-3 (NIV)** 2 While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.)
6. Paul and Barnabas then “appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord” **Acts 14:23 (NIV)** 23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and

fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

II. **Biblical Application.** What does God want us to do?

- A. Fasting and prayer is so thoroughly scriptural that sincere Christians cannot neglect it. The example of the Lord and the early church are clear. Jesus words were “when you fast...” denoting that it would be typical for us to fast.
- B. Fasting and prayer is linked with self-control (temperance) which is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). Just as self control is an essential part of the spiritual life, gluttony is a hindrance to it. The Bible states that our body is “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19) and it must bring honor to God. Fasting rather than gluttony encourages the spiritual nature of the human temple.
- C. “Fasting and prayer positions you for Spiritual Break through. It is contrary to natural reasoning to deplete oneself of physical energy at a time when it is needed most. But the diminished bodily strength is replaced by a spiritual energy necessary for spiritual needs. **Luke 4:14 (NIV)** 14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.
- D. The joining of prayer with fasting is integral. 2 Sam. 12:16; Acts 13:3; 14:23; 1 Cor. 7:5 Acts 13, "...And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. "
- E. Practically:
 - 1. Pray about how the Lord would have you to fast.
 - 2. Allow the Lord to challenge/stretch you.
 - 3. When fasting all food be sure to drink plenty of water
 - 4. If you are working and need to eat then do so without condemnation.
 - 5. If you have a physical disability that requires that you eat, consult your doctor. Fast something else.
 - 6. If you mess up do not get condemned or legalistic. Go back on it if need be.
 - 7. It's not about you it's about Jesus.