

FASTING

By Keith Malcomson

Definition: Very simply, fasting is the practice of a true Christian abstaining or coming aside from food for a set purpose and a set period of time in order to pray as an act of faith unto their Heavenly Father.

Who said we should fast? First of all we need to remember that it was the Holy Spirit who wrote the Bible through chosen men. This truth of fasting is clearly written and taught throughout the Bible. The Holy Spirit has not changed. Through the mouth of the Old Testament Prophets the Father called His people Israel to fast frequently. In the New Testament Jesus took it for granted that His disciples would fast. He said, “*when ye fast*”, not *if* you fast but *when* you fast. And again He said, “*But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.*” We are still in “*those days.*” (Mt.6:16; Mk.2:19-20).

When should we fast? There are 4 specific times which I believe will bring a Christian into a time of fasting.

1. *Spirit-led Fasting*: We need to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit drawing us into a time of fasting for a specific issue. It was the Holy Spirit who led Christ into the wilderness to fast.
2. *A Lifestyle of Fasting*: This is the regular discipline of fasting. A set day each week or at least at some point during each month should be set aside for such. This is done with a desire to follow after God and not a response to a special feeling or need. It is an act of discipline.
3. *An Emergency*: We may receive news of an accident, illness or difficulty in a loved one’s life. This is not pre-planned but the emergency drives us to fast and pray for this sudden need.

4. *A Godly Church Leader Calls a Fast*: There are times when we fast alone and privately but there are also times to join together with other believers in fasting. It was normal in the Old Testament that God would use a godly man or woman to call His people to fast. The church at Antioch under the leadership of Barnabas, Paul and others united together in prayer and fasting.

How do we fast? The normal practice of fasting would involve abstaining from food, for example for a full day. This would start first thing in the morning through to the following morning when you would eat again and break the fast. Of course you might just miss one meal or two meals in a day in order to pray and fast. Others may fast for 3 days or a week. A normal fast will be abstinence from food but not water. It is important to drink water during a fast. Also it is important to have time aside to be alone with God in prayer. There is no point in choosing a day that is busy or full of distractions or when a lot of people are around you. Choose a day when you can be quiet and alone with God. Another aspect is to read the Bible *“Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them. And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed and worshipped the LORD their God.”* (Neh.9:1-3)

What Happens When We Fast? We are causing the natural body with its natural human desires to be submitted to the spiritual man within us – the new creation. Fasting puts down the old nature, prayer lifts up the new. It is an act of self discipline; self control or temperance is a fruit of the Holy Spirit; it is a sign that He dwells within you. It is just one small way of keeping the body under and bringing it into subjection. It involves a humbling of the soul, self-denial - a denial of self by taking up the Cross to follow Christ. It is an act of true discipleship and is always God-ward never man-ward. It is just a token of and fruit of salvation. It shows that the grace of

God is working in the heart (Mt.16:24, Rom.6:6-13, I Cor.9:27, I Pet.2:11, Gal.5:22-24).

Prayer and Fasting *“And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer, and supplications, with fasting...”* (Dan.9:3). Fasting by itself is of no spiritual benefit. We should add fasting to prayer. It compliments prayer. The time we would have spent eating we now give to prayer. If we do not pray during the time of fasting then it becomes an empty ritual. Prayer is the very life breath of a Christian. Christ said *“men ought always to pray and not faint.”* (Lk.18:1). Prayer is one of the greatest privileges, tasks, ministries and blessings available to redeemed saints. To this task of prayer is added fasting. Christ said, *“this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting”*. He taught His disciples that some things would just not be accomplished by prayer alone but must be joined with fasting (Mt.17:21, Mk.9:29, I Cor.7:5). Every time we mention fasting in this leaflet it is always in the context of praying.

WHAT TYPES OF FASTING ARE THERE?

Partial Fast: Daniel and his 3 young friends ate only vegetables and drank water for 10 days. This was a partial fast not a total fast. Some years later we are told that Daniel went on another partial fast. *“In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.”* (Dan.1:12, 10:2-3). We know that John the Baptist only ate locusts and wild honey. Christ said of him, *“For John came neither eating nor drinking.”* Locusts were the food of the common people, a poor man’s food. It would seem that John lived a life of partial fasting. All his days he never partook of the fruit of the vine in any form. (Mt.11:18-19; Mk.1:6) We are warned however in the Bible that if teachers come *“commanding”* us to *“abstain from meats”* we are to reject them and it as a doctrine of devils (I Tim.4:1-6).

Complete Fast: This fast is an abstaining from all food but a continuing to drink water. This is considered a normal or typical fast whether it lasts one day, one week or one month. Throughout the Bible this is what is meant when the word fasting is used. The most

frequent length is either a day or an unspecified length of time. In other words, they fasted until they received an answer. Christ fasted 40 days from food in the wilderness which is the longest we read of (Mt.4:1-2; Lk.4:1-2). During a fast from food, the water is said to purify the whole physical system of the body in a period of three days. Just as the Word of God which is typified as water purifies us spiritually so the natural water purifies our physical bodies during such a fast.

Water Fast: There are a few times in the Bible where a food and water fast was carried out. Esther and Mordecai called the people to a fast in which they were to abstain from food and water for 3 days. When Ezra was grieved over the people he drew aside to mourn, pray and fast without food or water. The king of Nineveh called for this kind of fast when the city was under threat of judgement. After Paul was converted on the road to Damascus he was lead to a home and spent the first 3 days of his new life in abstaining from food and water. (Est.4:16; Ezra 10:6; Jn.3:7-10; Acts 9:9). I would not suggest such a fast for more than a day without a clear leading from the Lord.

Supernatural Fast: we are told of Moses: *“And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water.”* He conducted such a fast twice over. This is impossible to do naturally – it was supernatural. Moses was one of only two people who experienced such a fast. The other was Elijah. Not even Christ performed such a fast. This is not something to be sought or attempted; it was a sovereign act of God (Ex.34:28; Deut 9:18; I Kings19:8).

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OR REASON FOR FASTING?

1. In Repentance for Mercy: When the wicked king Ahab heard that God was about to judge him for his sin, he earnestly sought God in prayer and fasting and God heard him. Many other times when the people of Israel sinned against God they turned to him in prayer, fasting and mourning and God heard them and restored them. Even the wicked city Nineveh was preserved when they

sought God in prayer and fasting. (I Sam.7:6; I Kings 21:27-29; Jer.36:6-9; Jn.3:5-10).

2. For Victory Against the Enemy: Again many times when Israel was under attack by the enemy or about to attack the enemy they sought God in prayer and fasting and went out to win great victories. When the disciples could not cast the demon out of the lunatic boy, Christ told them that it was because they did not add fasting to their praying which was an act of unbelief. Christ said, “...*this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.*” It is very worthy of note that the word “*fasting*” has been removed from most new versions of the New Testament. This ought to concern us! (Jdg.20:25-26, 41-44; II Chr.20:3-13; Est.3:13, 4:16, 7:10, 9:1-2; Mt.17:21; Mk9:29).

3. In Ministry unto the Lord: We are told that Anna “...*departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.*” At the Church in Antioch we are told the believers were gathered together in a service with one goal, that of ministering unto the Lord. “*As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted...*” (Lk.2:37; Acts 13:2). There should be a season when we come aside to seek God in fasting not in order to get but as a service and ministry unto Him.

4. Personal Needs: Daniel prayed and fasted for understanding, Hannah for a child, Ezra for guidance and Paul fasted often for every type of situation (Dan.10:1,12; I Sam.1:6-8; Ezra.8:21; II Cor.11:27-28). Every important decision of life like a job, a spouse, a move, ministry or any other major decision ought to cause us to take time aside to pray and fast.

5. In Separating Leaders, Elders and Missionaries Unto Their Task: Directly after the Father separated Christ to His public ministry He was led of the Holy Spirit into a 40 day fast and then was tempted of the Devil. Afterwards he returned in the “*power of the Spirit*” to commence his ministry of preaching repentance and healing, saving and delivering. When the call of God came to the Church at Antioch to separate Barnabas and Saul to the ministry, they did so with prayer and fasting laying hands upon them. Again

after these two apostles had planted a number of churches they returned to each of them and amidst prayer and fasting they chose and set apart certain men in each assembly as elders (Mt.3:16, 4v2; Lk.4:13-14; Acts 13:2-3, 14:23).

6. Approving Yourself as a Minister of God: Paul says, “*But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God...*” This means to commend, exhibit or show yourself forth as a true God-called minister. How this is done is by the following: in patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, *in fastings* etc. Paul mentions many other things, but please note that he said that one of the ways that he shows that he is a true minister is by fasting. He later says “*in fastings often*” (II Cor.6:4-10; 11:27). Fasting plays an important part in the life of anyone who is a leader. They must set an example to all they are leading.

PROBLEMS AND FAQ's

How do I come off a fast? Take the same amount of time to come off that you have been on the fast. If you had a 3 day fast, take 3 days to gently come back to normal eating. A big meal after fasting can damage your stomach. Soup and fruit juice is a good way to come off a fast.

What if I am Sick or have a Chronic condition? Any individual who suffers a condition such as diabetes or who is on medication, should not consider fasting without consulting a doctor. These folk should not feel guilty. There are still ways to fast without endangering your health though. You could consider a partial fast of abstaining from certain foods or drinks. Another area of caution is nursing mothers. They need to consider their babe but again here are ways for them to fast without being foolish. I certainly believe that God is a healer but that does not mean casting aside wisdom while still sick or weak.

What if I am working? The same applies as above. A partial fast may be the answer to this. It is the heart and desire that is important and that God sees. A friend of mine whose work required heavy

physical labour, went on an extended fast of just bananas and water. He was able to maintain energy for work but also to pray and fast in a sacrificial manner.

Was Fasting not just for the Old Testament times? It is hard to believe any true Christian who reads their Bible could believe such a lie. But it is becoming popular in these days to say such. I cannot give a strong enough “NO” to this question. In the New Testament we have Anna, John the Baptist, Jesus and others fasting. Then after Christ’s death, burial and resurrection we see Paul and the many new Gentile Churches fasting. It is normal New Testament practice.

Is Fasting Legalism? It is so often said today that it is legalistic to call Christians to a fast or to expect them to fast. I have heard so many people, even mature Christians, say that we must be very careful of not becoming legalistic or religious in this act of fasting. Sadly, I have heard very few eagerly encourage young believers to fast. It is not healthy for a young believer to hear many negative warnings about fasting without being taught the many Scriptural encouragements to fast. Jesus did warn against a wrong type of fasting, but he never warned of any dangers with true Biblical fasting. No true Christian with a genuine desire to fast needs to worry that they are being legalistic.

Dangers surrounding fasting: First, the Pharisees of Jesus’ day were often proud of their fasting ritual. They boasted to the people that they fasted twice a week. Pride is dangerous and will carry no spiritual reward or benefit. Jesus also warned of hypocrisy; meaning to put on an outward act for people. In Jesus’ day the religious would make themselves look sad and put on an act for people to see. Jesus condemned this. Instead he told those who were fasting to wash their faces and smile. Another danger is ritualism, this is when we do it as a religious practice but without our heart fully engaged in it. One last danger is fanaticism or extremism. This would be the practice of damaging your body in the process of unwise fasting. Fasting was made for the benefit of man, not man for fasting. (Mt.6:16-18; Lk.18:11-14; Isa.58:3-9; Zech.7:5-14; I Cor3:16-17; 6:19-20).

CHURCH HISTORY

As we read the history of the Church it is hard to find men greatly used of God who did not give themselves to “*prayer and fasting.*” Savonarola of Florence, Matthew Henry, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Howell Harris, David Brainerd, Charles Finney, C.H. Spurgeon, Andrew Murray, Rees Howells, William Seymour, Smith Wigglesworth, B.H. Clendennen and many others bear witness to this. As we follow such lives we find great advances of the kingdom of God, revivals, miracles and powerful preaching. These men would all pinpoint specific times of prayer and fasting when God met with them. The history of great revivals can never be separated from prayer and fasting.

A great revival began in America through Jonathan Edwards preaching his sermon ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.’ What most do not know is that he had preached this sermon a number of times before without much result. What made the difference? This time his preaching was preceded by 3 days of prayer and fasting during which he barely slept – then revival came. Before the power of God fell at Azusa Street, the small band of believers united in 10 days of prayer and fasting. William Seymour who led that 3 year revival which spread across the world spent weeks at a time in fasting in prayer. This was normal practice for him. What other great revivals will yet come to our lives, families, churches and nations as we prevail with God in prayer and fasting?