

FASTING

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Bracketed comments following some scriptures assist the reader in understanding the intended meaning of these verses

We acknowledge the additional works of the various Scholars and Bible Commentaries used in conjunction with the College material. This is not to say that we agree with all their theology, but we certainly value their contribution to the Body of Christ.

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FASTING

Fasting is an often misunderstood and neglected subject within the Christian community. While many religious cultures use fasting as part of their ritual, for the Christian, fasting is primarily a tool which can be used to aid us in our Christian walk. It is not to become a ritual. In this study we will look into the principles of fasting from a practical viewpoint, the benefits of fasting, both spiritual and physical, and the proper usage of this practice within the framework of the Christian faith-walk.

Let us be clear from the beginning that fasting in itself will not give us victory over sin and the powers of darkness. It is, however, a scriptural directive, and if done correctly will bless the Believer. Fasting, as directed by the Holy Spirit, can help Christians become more sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. This is the absolute foundation of the practice of fasting, as, of course, Christians have a proper focus and pray accordingly. Indeed many "spiritualists" fast so as to become more sensitive to evil spirits. So the principle works across the spirit realm for good and for evil.

Furthermore, let us state that nowhere in the New Testament did Jesus institute any kind of fast. In other words, fasting was not established as a command or ordinance, unlike tithing, communion and water baptism. The Apostle Paul fasted, but never told the Church specifically to fast.

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So what is the moral of the story? It is this: in all things, including fasting, we are to be led by the Spirit. At the very least we are to ask God before we fast if it is right for us to do so. This will prevent the Christian using fasting as a means of trying to gain

favour with God or trying to “manipulate” Him into acting on their behalf. If employed for these purposes, fasting becomes a religious work which counts for nothing.

Also, it is not fasting that gives us faith. Rather faith comes as the digested Word of God, with the help of God’s grace, is assimilated into our very being. Therefore “*faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God*” (Romans 10:17). This is a “*hearing*” that extends and goes beyond the mind. In fact it is a hearing that not only takes what is heard down to the heart of man, but actually makes a home in man’s heart for that which has been heard. Only by God’s amazing grace can this take place - as man seeks God’s Word and will for his life, then, with the help of the Holy Spirit, finds and embraces not only God’s Word but His will for his life as well.

Once again, let us state that the primary benefit of fasting, provided we are properly focused concerning spiritual things and are directed by the Holy Spirit, is that it can make us more sensitive to the Lord and His voice.

FASTING IN SCRIPTURE

Background Reading: 2 Chronicles 20:1-19

We find the practice of fasting to be quite common throughout the scriptures. Notice from 2 Chronicles 20:1-3 that one of Jehoshaphat’s first actions when confronted with a life and death crisis was to seek the Lord and proclaim a fast throughout the land of Judah. He and the people of Israel responded to the threat of foreign invasion in this manner. Fasting was one tool which the people employed to humble themselves before the Lord and seek His face in a time of national emergency. This was their response - they fasted and came together in unity to seek the Lord, Jehoshaphat confessing their total dependence on Him. Victory was gained in the midst of impending disaster when the Lord gave them direction (2 Chronicles 20:14-17) and they acted upon it in faith (2 Chronicles 20:18-30). Their willingness to fast functioned as part of the process by which the defeat of their enemies was secured.

“ . . . The primary benefit of fasting, provided we are properly focused concerning spiritual things and are directed by the Holy Spirit, is that it can make us more sensitive to the Lord and His voice. . . ”

Moses on Mt. Sinai fasted forty days and nights, obviously under the Lord’s direction, receiving from the Lord the ten commandments chiselled on two stone tablets (Exodus 34:28).

Daniel fasted and prayed (Daniel 9:2-3), humbling himself before the Lord after discovering in the Book of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:10) that the Jewish exile in Babylon was to last seventy years - and this time was almost up. He sought the Lord earnestly, confessing the sins of the nation of Israel, and calling upon the Lord, in His mercy, to forgive the people and restore them to their homeland. Once again, fasting served as a tool by which Daniel could bring his heartfelt prayers before the Lord, and see his prayers answered.

Ezra sought the Lord in prayer and fasting for a safe journey for the returning exiles - who carried priceless Temple offerings through hundreds of miles of harsh country infested with savage tribes and robbers (Ezra 8:21-23). What a journey! Through fasting and prayer, they gained victory in the spiritual realm and saw it manifested in the physical.

Nehemiah also fasted and prayed so that God would grant him favour in his desire to see the restoration of God’s people to their homeland - in prosperity, not affliction and poverty (Nehemiah 1:1-10). He would undertake this work personally, and complete it under dangerous and treacherous conditions (Nehemiah 2:17-18; Nehemiah 6:15-16). He too was sincere in his desire to serve God, and fasted accordingly.

Instances of fasting can be seen where people needed direction (Judges 20:26-27), when they desired to express repentance (1 Samuel 7:6; Leviticus 23:27; Jonah 3:5-10), in times of intercession (2 Samuel 12:16; Esther 4:16) and also national disaster (1 Samuel 31:13). We can see by these examples that fasting is portrayed

throughout the Word as a sacrificial form of prayer warfare - which helps bring results that may be available in no other way.

We see warnings in the Old Testament in regard to fasting with a wrong attitude (Zechariah 7:5-7), and while involved in sin (Isaiah 58:1-7). Such fasting is useless, for unless accompanied by righteous living and a right attitude, all the fasting in the world will accomplish nothing.

In the New Testament we see Jesus speaking to His Disciples about fasting (Matthew 6:16). His Words, “*Moreover when you fast . . .*,” indicate that even though He was not setting a law in place (e.g. no set time, no “when” to fast, etc.), He regarded fasting, as led by the Holy Spirit, as a normal aspect of the disciplined life, not an activity of fanatics. Nevertheless, it was an activity to be undertaken with a right attitude, whether done corporately or individually. It was not to be a religious exercise or an attention-seeking manoeuvre (Matthew 6:16-18).

Furthermore, we also find the early Church fasting in order to gain direction (Acts 13:2). Once they had heard the voice of the Spirit in regard to Paul and Barnabus, they again fasted and prayed before laying hands on them to release them into ministry (Acts 13:3).

Obviously fasting is still part of the Christian walk today, and is linked with prayer for the purpose of seeking direction, gaining spiritual awareness, and narrowing one’s focus. Of course all of this will only be achieved with the help of God’s grace at work in us. Nevertheless, these are some of the benefits which can be gained from employing the tool of fasting in combination with prayer and meditation on the Word of God.

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SPIRITUAL BENEFITS OF FASTING

Before beginning this section, it is important to recognize the fact that proper fasting (which is Holy Spirit approved or directed) changes not God but man - for the Lord is unchanging, the same yesterday, today and forevermore (Hebrews 13:8). Thus we fast to effect change in ourselves, be it in terms of increasing spiritual awareness, or being helped to focus properly concerning spiritual matters. Again God will not be changed through our fasting, but we can possibly better position ourselves in regard to clearer spiritual focus and hence more effective prayer.

One of the purposes of fasting is to deny the body its sustenance so that the voice of our spirit (which has been fed on God's Word) can override the voice of our flesh, including our logical thinking. Fasting can help in the stirring up of our faith in response to God's direction on certain matters so that we can respond to this direction. If our spirit has been fed on the Word of God and is empowered by the Divine Nature, it can rule our life instead of the flesh's dictates which range from the emotional to the intellectual. Thus sometimes fasting can help bring us to a position where we are better able to hear the voice of truth via the Holy Spirit, and this can benefit us immensely.

Fasting can function as a means by which the voice of our physical flesh is denied expression, which can then help in obtaining a better spiritual focus based on what we have fed ourselves on, i.e. God's Word.

During fasting we exercise our wills against the demands of the (physical) flesh and this can help strengthen our wills, just as exercising our bodies with weights can strengthen our bodies. Just as muscles do not grow or maintain their strength unless they have something to resist, it can be the same with people's wills. These need to be strengthened so that they can be exercised in regard to positive goals. With a stronger will one can seek God more earnestly and not allow distractions to sidetrack or hinder one from doing so. Thus fasting can be a useful tool in helping strengthen our wills, provided it is done within the guidelines of wisdom. However fasting only strengthens our wills to say "Yes" to God - it does not give us power to carry out what we will to do. Our will is the trigger

as we yield to the Holy Spirit. The power to do God's will only comes through the energies and graces of the Divine Nature.

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Our fleshly desires nearly always oppose the desires of our regenerated spirit, and so will oppose the direction given in the Word of God. Our fleshly desires usually revolve around self-rule - what we want, what we feel like doing, what will please us and benefit us, or so we think!

GALATIANS 5:17 For the flesh (its desires) lusts (lust) against the Spirit (His desires, His will), and the Spirit (and the regenerated spirit) against the flesh: and these are contrary (opposing) the one to the other: so that you cannot do the things that you would (in your own strength - only by the Holy Spirit can the flesh be subdued.)

Through denying the body the pleasure of the food it desires, it is somehow possible, when we properly focus ourselves, mentally and spiritually, to be better able to “tune in” to what the Spirit is saying to us. We are possibly then also better able to stir up the faith within our hearts to use in accordance with the direction the Spirit gives.

As Christians, we need to retrain ourselves so that we do not respond to the desires of the flesh (mind). This is why we need to renew our minds continually with the Word of God. Through this, by God's grace, our old ways of thinking can be replaced with God's way of thinking - for the Lord says in scripture that His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways.

ISAIAH 55:8 “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” says the Lord.

ISAIAH 55:9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Fasting is one tool which, when prompted by the Holy Spirit, can help discipline us, without the distraction of the dictates of the physical flesh and its desire for food, to become less self-conscious and more God-conscious. By not listening to or obeying the body’s emotional pleas for food, we deny these particular physical cravings and can then discipline ourselves to concentrate on what God’s Spirit desires. Even though it is not essential, nevertheless fasting is one thing which can help train us in this area, so that our mind is then better able to focus on relevant spiritual issues.

Of course, this will be in direct proportion to the amount of digested Word of God in our hearts. Only if we have been fed on the spiritual diet of God’s Word can we begin to have our senses exercised to discern between good direction from God and evil direction from the enemy or even the flesh (mind) of man (Hebrews 5:14).

Nevertheless, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (James 5:16). And if it takes fasting for that person to receive direction from God concerning how to pray, so that their faith can be stirred up and properly applied, then so be it.

“. . . fasting only strengthens our wills to say “Yes” to God - it does not give us power to carry out what we will to do . . . The power to do God’s will only comes through the energies and graces of the Divine Nature. . .”

Jesus alluded to the power of prayer when combined with fasting when this particular instance of deliverance took place:

MARK 9:25 *When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, “You dumb and deaf spirit, I charge you, come out of him, and enter no more into him.”*

MARK 9:28 *And when He was come into the house, His Disciples asked Him privately, “Why could not we cast him (the demon) out?”*

MARK 9:29 *And He said unto them, “This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.”*

Thus He told the Disciples that the particular kind of demon could not be released by them but through “*prayer and fasting.*” Yes, Jesus at this point had not been glorified and had not yet sent the Comforter to empower Believers with the Divine Nature or the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). Nevertheless, for Jesus to mention fasting and prayer together, fasting must be of assistance in helping us to focus properly in relation to faith and the wisdom of God so that God’s power may be released concerning some areas of deliverance. Again, let us remember in all things to be led by the Spirit or at least to get His approval. With this approach, we will keep religious and fleshy works at bay.

Fasting can help us to ignore the flesh’s (physical) dictates and any other relevant distractions. Then in prayer, with proper focus, and perhaps after being led to study certain truths, the Believer may come to the Lord less distracted and therefore better able to hear or discern the voice of God for direction etc. At this time the Believer’s worship may also deepen in intensity. All this becomes a possibility as Believers fast and focus with proper spiritual intent.

In the world we are taught to judge all things by our senses and our emotions. However our senses and emotions can often be misleading and guide us along wrong pathways. For this reason, we should always seek to be led by the Word of God (Proverbs 3:5-6). Where more specific direction is required, fasting may, at times, help bring us into a position where we are able to discern the voice of the Lord more clearly. As a result, we can become more spiritually

aware of situations which exist both around us and apart from us. Such heightened spiritual perception is one of the possible fruits of fasting, but this will only become apparent if our hearts are focused on God, His Word and the finished work of the Cross. Holy Spirit led fasting can help deepen our focus when it is combined with meditation on God's Word.

Immediately after His baptism by John, Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, where He spent forty days fasting (Luke 4:1-2). This was not to increase the severity of the testing Jesus endured, but rather to assist Him in dealing with it. The lengthy fast would have helped Him gain increased (or heightened) spiritual awareness of what was confronting Him, helping Him as He denied His carnal distractions (physical cravings for food) so that He was better able to strengthen His own will and also discern the wiles of the enemy. Remember that the temptations were real - otherwise the test would not have been genuine! When by His will Jesus said "Yes" to the Spirit and therefore "No" to the devil, the Divine Nature within then gave Him a holy desire and a power to do that which He willed to do, i.e. to reject the tempter's urgings.

“. . .Such heightened spiritual perception is one of the possible fruits of fasting, but this will only become apparent if our hearts are focused on God, His Word and the finished work of the Cross. . .”

As we have said, when we fast properly, it can help us cut out distractions and enable us to better focus on the Lord and His will in our lives. Therefore fasting, if needed, can be a useful tool to help us tune our spiritual ears more closely to the exact frequency of God's Spirit. As we purpose to, we can will not to listen to our emotions and flesh (mind). As a result, our channel can become less cluttered, giving us, potentially, a better chance to hear the voice of the Lord and to understand God's will for our lives. We can then rely on the Divine Nature within us to give us the desire and power to do God's will (All of this can happen, of course, when we combine fasting

with proper meditation on God's Word. Fasting without a proper focus will be of no use).

Again this is not a result of the operation of willpower. Man's will is merely the trigger that sets in motion a chain of events that can be negative or positive. However the power of the Holy Spirit will not work on our behalf unless we are pointed in the right direction, that being the way of truth.

If led by the Holy Spirit to fast, in order to hear the voice of the Lord and understand His will for our lives, we need to place ourselves in the best possible position by:

1. Fasting willingly, not grudgingly.
2. Repenting if we have sinned.
3. Being humble.
4. Believing for the Lord to help give us clarity of focus as we meditate on His Word.

Also note that generally, what we are able to receive directly from the Spirit will be in direct proportion to our knowledge of God's Word (the amount of His Word we have digested) and our Christian maturity.

“. . .Fasting, if needed, can be a useful tool to help us tune our spiritual ears more closely to the exact frequency of God's Spirit. . .”

Many people have the view that fasting can give us faith, but this is not so - for we know that hearing and studying God's Word are the only ways to gain knowledge, and therefore faith.

ROMANS 10:17 So then faith comes by hearing (the message of God), and hearing by (the preaching and sharing of) the Word of God.

However, fasting can sometimes help us activate or stir up the dormant faith we already have in our hearts through helping us clear our cluttered minds. Dormant or stored faith can be released as we fast and focus properly.

Also if you are struggling to gain victory in an area of your life after having done all the obvious things, then perhaps fasting could help.

Remember, the aim of fasting is not to change God but to help bring us to a position where we can:

1. Become more open to God's leading.
2. Exercise the faith which has already been deposited in our hearts.
3. Experience a weakening of the operation of the physical flesh in our lives.
4. Be helped to gain spiritual awareness or perception, even gaining, or experiencing, greater intimacy with God.

Fasting according to God's Word, and when prompted by the Holy Spirit, is one of the disciplines of the Christian life. By denying self in the physical, we can be strengthened through clarity of mind and then be in a better position to say "Yes" (the trigger) to the will of God. The only way to properly fast according to the Word of God is to go through the Cross, focusing on the finished work of Christ - us in Him in His death and Resurrection - then progress on to the promises of His Word that rely on Christ's finished work. By denying self (our flesh) in the power of God, self (our spirit man) can be strengthened so as to be able to flow in the will of God. We will then be in a better position to help others, for it is only from a position of spiritual strength that we will be able to do so.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR FASTING

Background Reading: Matthew 6:16-18

Here are some guidelines which one should consider in order to receive the full benefits fasting provides.

1. Enter into Holy Spirit approved fasting with purpose, willingness and faith in the things which you have been taught.

2. By faith determine your reasons for fasting and list them on paper (these should not be only for temporal gain, but should be for soul enrichment through relationship and revealed truth etc.).

3. During fasting, give as much time as possible to Bible reading, study and prayer - in short, meditation on the Word. Fasting should always be accompanied by prayer, for it should always be undertaken as an activity which is based on relationship - us in Christ and we in Him, flowing with Him in the energies of the Divine Nature. Otherwise fasting becomes a religious work, of no spiritual or eternal value.

4. During fasting, find a place where you can speak out positive scriptures and praise God aloud for what He has done and is about to do. This will help begin the process whereby we focus properly.

5. Repent of any sin for:

PSALM 66:18 If I regard iniquity (sin) in my heart, the Lord will not hear me

6. Do not wait for an emergency to compel you to fast. Rather, be open to the leading of the Spirit in regard to fasting. This can help bring you into a position where you can face an emergency or test in the power of the Spirit. Remember Jesus fasted then was tested.

7. Fasting initially may cause some unpleasant physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, dizziness, physical discomfort, etc. Do not let these symptoms deter you for they will disappear once your body is cleansed of its toxins.

8. During fasting, it is wise to abstain from strong stimulants such as tea and coffee (herbal teas are, however, quite satisfactory). Water is a good substitute as it is an efficient cleansing agent which rids the body of toxins.

Note: If you are used to drinking a minimum of 4 to 5 cups of tea or coffee a day, you will need to prepare your body for fasting by gradually diminishing this amount. Otherwise to suddenly abstain from these stimulants will normally cause withdrawal symptoms such as headaches.

9. If you are on medication or at this point suffer from some form of sickness, it would be wise to obtain medical advice before entering into any fast that extends beyond two or three meals. Some in this category may fast by not eating certain foods but still eating other foods required by their medical condition. In all these areas use commonsense, see your doctor and tailor the fast to fit your situation.

10. If you are fasting for the first time, begin by going without one or two meals. Then graduate to fasting for longer periods such as a day or two.

11. Guard against constipation by having meals, before and after fasting, which contain fresh fruit or fruit juices, dried figs, prunes, apricots, oatmeal, bran, etc.

12. Break your fast of 2 or more days gradually. Begin with meals that are light and easy to digest, for your stomach will shrink with any fast over two days. The longer you have fasted, the more care you will need to take in breaking your fast.

13. Do not turn fasting into a regimented religious act, but again, let the Spirit lead you in regard to when to fast and how long to fast. Fasting, done according to the will of God, then becomes a work of righteousness, not a work of the flesh. We should take care to fast in union with the Holy Spirit, not apart from Him.

14. Fasting can also be a tool which can help us get to know God in a more personal and intimate way.

Especially during the first twenty-four hours, out of habit you will feel like eating, for hunger is partly a matter of habit. So at the beginning of a fast, you will most likely experience hunger at your normal meal times - but this sensation will usually pass. Sometimes

you can fool the stomach by drinking a glass of water instead of eating.

Remember: When entering into a fast in relation to spiritual matters, prepare yourself by purposing the period you want to fast and the reasons for doing so. Do not fast aimlessly, or you will not gain any real spiritual benefit.

*“. . .Fasting, done according to the will
of God, then becomes a work of
righteousness, not a work of the
flesh. . .”*

PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF FASTING

1. Controlled fasting will help the body purge itself of toxic substances. Fasting can cleanse the system if your intake consists of water only.

2. Some people who are accustomed to fasting regularly report that after they have fasted, their energy level is far greater. Some also sleep better and wake up refreshed rather than feeling tired at the beginning of the day.

3. Also with fasting, some people feel calmer and less anxious concerning life's pressures. Some have reported that fasting for 3 to 5 days can lead to increased energy and calmness, and greater attention to the work at hand. As a result, such people are able to manage stress in a much more positive way.

4. Some people feel better within themselves because they lose weight (excess weight) and have a new sense of mastery and self-confidence.

5. When many Believers fast, clarity of the mind can come about at a natural level. This can help Believers become alert at a spiritual level also, as they focus properly in relation to the need.

On a physical level, in order to gain the full benefits of fasting, one should also have a well balanced diet and an exercise program. As with any diet or regular exercise, however, commonsense must also prevail when one is fasting. Therefore, it is up to each person to decide in their own mind on a course of positive action and to adhere consistently to it.

SOME WARNINGS CONCERNING FASTING

1. Do not let fasting become a ritual for then the spiritual purpose of the fast will be lost.

2. Always remember that God does not give us merit points for fasting. Neither does fasting develop faith. Fasting is merely an instrument which we can use to help us gain a heightened alertness at a natural level, and so be better able to take advantage of prayer, study etc.

3. Be honest in your fast, otherwise, a fast is a farce. You can try to fool yourself but you cannot fool God.

4. Fasting is not for those who are sick or weakened through illness. People with medical conditions should seek their doctor's advice before fasting.

5. Do not boast about your fasting. Do not speak about your fasting so as to attract the attention and even the praises of men. Rather, try to fast privately - let it be between you and God (unless a corporate fast has been proclaimed). Jesus Himself gave us these instructions:

***MATTHEW 6:16** Moreover when you fast (no set time), be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward (so much in the religious realm falls into this category; it is done for "show" whether it be fasting or giving, etc.; the Lord will never reward such). (E.S.B.)*

MATTHEW 6:17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face (the “anointing” and the “washing” were actually symbols of joy; this was the opposite of the sad countenance : E.S.B.);

MATTHEW 6:18 That you appear not unto men to fast (you will not be making a show for others to see), but unto your Father Who is in secret (only He will know); and your Father, Who sees in secret, shall reward (bless) you openly.

6. Research has shown that after fasting, the body’s metabolism can drop to as much as 22% below the normal rate. So be careful of your food intake after a fast in order to avoid gaining weight.

Fasting will not change God’s righteous standards or give us extra favour with God. In other words, if you have not repented of sin, even though you may fast for forty days, your fasting in itself can never secure God’s forgiveness. Only Calvary’s Blood and repentance will bring about forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

Second Samuel Ch.12 speaks of David committing adultery, and from this action, a child was born. God said that part of the judgement issued in relation to this sin was that the child would die. Even though David fasted seven days, the child still died.

If a thing is wrong, all the fasting in the world will not make it right or be of any value. We see this clearly in Isaiah 58:3-10 where God’s people were fasting but receiving no benefit from it at all because of their sin. The Pharisees were similarly guilty of fasting as a religious exercise while their hearts were far from God. So fasting, as we have said, can only be effective as an accompaniment to righteous living - it cannot be of any value if practised in the absence of faith and love.

“. . .Fasting will not change God’s righteous standards or give us extra favour with God. . .”

Forty days of fasting will not replace the study you should have done, the truth you should then have embraced or the prayers you should have prayed. Fasting in itself will not replace the need for us to daily take up our cross, and focus on the message of Calvary. Fasting in itself will not give us power. Only believing and trusting in the finished work of the Cross, and then yielding to the Holy Spirit, will provide us with an inroad to heaven whereby our prayers can be heard and answered, as we believe and trust in God's grace.

Therefore when we fast, let it be with a right attitude - one of seeking God with a humble heart. As we have said, let us also fast in fellowship and communion with the Holy Spirit, conducting our fast in conjunction with Him, not apart from Him. Otherwise we will be engaging in a religious exercise, and not enjoying intimacy in our relationship with our Heavenly Father.

May you have the victory in Christ. Amen!

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