



THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

WEEK 3
06.18.17

FOCUS VERSE

Acts 13:3

And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

LESSON TEXT

Isaiah 58:3–7

3 Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.

4 Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

5 Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?

6 Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

7 Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

Acts 13:1–3

1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

3 And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.



FOCUS THOUGHT

The discipline of fasting has the potential to help deepen and strengthen a believer's walk with God.



CULTURE CONNECTION

A Call to Fast

In 2016 the United States was once again embroiled in the quadrennial winnowing process better known as a presidential campaign. Before the race between the two dominant parties began in earnest, each party struggled through a long primary season. The Republican primary process was especially difficult. During the heat of the primary season, nationally syndicated conservative talk-show host Glenn Beck took an unusual step for contemporary politics. He called for his audience to fast for America. He called for a national repentance and for his listeners to vote for Senator Ted Cruz to be the Republican nominee. (By the time you prepare for this lesson, of course, you will know whether Senator Cruz was successful in his quest for the nomination.)

Beck's call for a fast was quickly met with ridicule by the mainstream media outlets. Rather

than recanting, Beck doubled down. "I own my comments and actions and encourage others to do the same," Beck said. "Prayer, fasting and asking for a humbling of ourselves and nation. I pray and fast not for Ted Cruz to win, but for His will to be done and that our will and wants will align with His. Join me tomorrow" (<http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2016/02/21/glenn-beck-doubles-down-after-breitbart-article-mocks-his-call-to-fast-for-cruz-country-i-am-not-running-from-this>, accessed April 15, 2016).

While Beck's invocation to fast may have been unusual for politics, fasting was fairly common in biblical times. One can find examples of fasting in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. And one can also find encouragement for contemporary believers to fast.

OUTLINE

I. THE GOODNESS OF FOOD

- A. Blessing of the Lord
- B. Feast Days as Worship

II. REASONS FOR FASTING

- A. Urgency in Prayer
- B. Mourning
- C. Worship
- D. Spiritual Direction

III. INAPPROPRIATE FASTING

- A. Participating in Empty Rituals
- B. Fasting for Human Approval

IV. THE MECHANICS OF FASTING

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In February 1906, William Seymour arrived in Los Angeles to pastor a Holiness mission located on the corner of Ninth and Santa Fe. One of its members, Neely Terry, had met Seymour in Houston, and she was instrumental in his coming to Los Angeles. After a

few services, the leadership of the mission removed Seymour because he was preaching that speaking in tongues would accompany the baptism of the Holy Ghost. When Seymour arrived in Los Angeles, he was a member of Charles Parham's Apostolic Faith movement. This movement longed to restore the church to its Book of Acts roots. The Edward Lee family, who had been members of the Santa Fe Mission, invited Seymour to stay with them until he figured out his next move.

At this time, despite his preaching, Seymour had not himself received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. He was hungry for the experience. So too were the Lee family and another family from the Santa Fe mission, the Richard Asberry family. To this end, Seymour and these families met frequently at the Asberry home on Bonnie Brae Street. They prayed and fasted to prepare their hearts for the Spirit.

On April 9, 1906, Edward Lee received the Spirit. Then a growing number of people experienced the baptism of the Spirit. The group

outgrew the Asberry home and relocated to a former AME church on Azusa Street. From there the famous Azusa Street revival touched the world.

Pioneer Pentecostals made fasting part of their spiritual disciplines. It remains important today. Many churches start each quarter of the year with a period of prayer and fasting. Today we will look at whys and hows of fasting.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE GOODNESS OF FOOD

The first chapter of Genesis develops a poetic cadence. “God said . . . and it was so. . . and God saw that it was good.” God created the world, and He does all things well. It follows then that creation is good because it bears the imprint of the Creator. Into this good creation, God placed mankind. God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed into him and Adam became a living soul. Humans then are material (body) and immaterial (soul). Nothing in the Genesis account suggests that our bodies are inferior to our souls. Both bear His imprint. Both the body and the soul need nourishment to be sustained. God’s visit in the cool of the day sustained Adam’s and Eve’s souls. The Garden of Eden provided the food to sustain their bodies. Eating is necessary and because God is good, it is often pleasurable. It certainly is not inherently unspiritual.

A. Blessing of the Lord

We are, in fact, to give thanks to God for our food. In response to His disciples’ request that Jesus teach them to pray, we have today a model prayer we know as the Lord’s Prayer. Included in this prayer is a request for daily bread. This request acknowledges that food is a blessing from God. Nothing in this prayer suggests that food is a necessary evil. It does, however, remind us that God is not only the giver of life but also the sustainer of life. And even our everyday nourishment ultimately comes from Him and should be received as a blessing from God.

Only one miracle account, the feeding of the five thousand, is mentioned in all four Gospels. While this account is principally about the miracle power of Jesus, it is possible to

extract some insight into the subject of God and food. In this account Jesus had attempted to withdraw Himself from the crowds to rest. The crowds, however, had followed Him into the wilderness. Instead of resting, Jesus spent the afternoon teaching those assembled. As the day grew to a close, He recognized that the crowd was hungry. Although He had been spiritually nourishing them all afternoon, He understood that in addition to their spiritual hunger they were physically hungry. He did not rebuke them for their physical hunger. He did not call on them to fast. Instead He miraculously multiplied five loaves and two fish until the entire crowd had eaten their fill. He did not say He needed to perform this miracle because the people were so unspiritual they could not go without a meal. They were hungry and He fed them. He did, however, bless, or give thanks for, the food.

B. Feast Days as Worship

In biblical times, food often played a role in worship. While this lesson is about fasting, it is important to understand that God also instituted celebrations that had eating as a central function of worship. When it comes to food, fasting is not the only response that leads to deeper spiritual life. In the Old Testament, feasts were important spiritual events in the life of Israel. These high and holy days were times of celebration, remembrance, and eating.

During the Passion Week, Jesus took time to eat with His disciples. In what we know as the Last Supper, Jesus broke bread with those closest to Him. Although He knew that the time for His crucifixion was near, instead of calling His disciples to fast, He invited them to participate in the celebration of the Passover. During this feast celebrating Israel’s deliverance from the death angel and her subsequent deliverance from Egypt’s bondage, He instituted a new celebration that included eating: communion. In addition to being a meal that looks forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, communion celebrates community.

Eating together, especially in Bible times, implies a sharing of life. Since food sustains life, the act of sharing food lends itself to the building of deeper community. In the summary verses at the end of Acts 2, among the activities mentioned is home fellowship that

included eating together. (See Acts 2:44–46.) It should then go without saying that the consumption of food is not inherently carnal. Food can, and often does, help build authentic Christian community.

II. REASONS FOR FASTING

The Bible does talk about abstaining from food for a period of time, or fasting. In fact, fasting or going without food is mentioned more than eighty times in the Bible. Although most of the references to fasting are in the Old Testament, it is mentioned twenty times in the New Testament. There does not appear to be only one primary reason why biblical characters fasted. Sometimes they fasted, or at least did not eat, because they were overcome with grief or awe and they lost their appetite for food. More often it grew out of humility and the pursuit of God. While it is not possible to find that one reason for fasting, a number of broad themes emerge out of the Scripture. We will examine four of them.

A. Urgency in Prayer

Perhaps the most frequent reason biblical people fasted was to demonstrate the urgency of their prayers. Prayer begins in the mind and the heart of a person. But at some point a person gives voice to prayer. Sometimes the mind and the mouth seem inadequate to express the deep passion of prayer. It is not unusual to see people cry when they pray. Fasting is another way to involve the whole person in prayer; in other words, it is a means to ratchet up the intensity of prayer.

People in the Bible were urgent about their prayers for a number of reasons. One recurring reason for urgency was to repent of sin. For example, the children of Israel were instructed to fast on the annual Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies to offer the blood of a sacrificial lamb to God as a token of their repentance. All of Israel was to fast both food and water to demonstrate their repentance and to plead for forgiveness.

In I Samuel 7, King Saul called Israel to Mizpeh for a time of corporate repentance for their idol worship. “And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD. And they gathered together to

Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the LORD. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh” (I Samuel 7:5–7).

After Jonah’s scathing call for judgment on their city, the people of Nineveh repented of their sin and pled for mercy. All inhabitants of the city, even the domestic beasts, were robed in sackcloth, and together they fasted in an attempt to demonstrate the depth of their repentance. (See Jonah 3:4–9.)

Physical healing was another reason biblical characters were urgent in prayer, and sometimes when praying for healing they also fasted. In Psalm 35:13–14 David prayed and fasted for the healing of his enemies. He also prayed and fasted for the healing of his infant son. In this instance the son was not healed, and as a result of his sickness he died. (See II Samuel 12:15–18.) This account should help us understand that prayer and fasting do not force God to do our bidding.

When looking for guidance and direction in their lives, people often fasted and prayed. For example, Ezra called for a corporate fast for the five thousand Israelites who were returning with him to Judea after years of Babylonian exile. Fasting demonstrated the earnestness of their prayers. They were embarking on a long-dreamed-of journey, and they desperately desired God’s direction. In the New Testament era, the leaders of the church at Antioch prayed and fasted to help them prepare to send Barnabas and Saul on a Gentile mission. “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2–3). Fasting and prayer helped make them able to discern God’s direction.

Obviously a crisis in life brought urgency into the life of a biblical character, as it does to us today. The story of Esther illustrates this well. Haman had skillfully maneuvered King Ahasuerus into declaring an open season on the Jews who were in Persian captivity. Mordecai urged Esther, the young Jewish girl whom the king had chosen to replace Vashti as queen, to approach Ahasuerus to intercede

on behalf of the Jewish people. Given the customs of Persia, Esther knew that approaching the king uninvited was not without significant risk. She asked the Jews to fast and pray for three days to seek God's favor in her quest. They responded by donning sackcloth and ashes and they prayed and fasted.

Esther was successful in her intercession before Ahasuerus. The Jews were spared, and ironically the evil Haman was hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai. To this day devout Jews celebrate this event known as Purim. They fast the day before Purim to prepare themselves for the memorial celebration.

"The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year; and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed" (Esther 9:27–28).

B. Mourning

Sometimes it is easier to prove a rule by its exceptions. Earlier in this lesson we referenced David's fasting for the healing of his son he had fathered with Bathsheba. Not only did the depth of David's despair prior to his child's death trouble his servants, but they were also troubled by his lack of fasting after his son's death. (See II Samuel 12:18–23.) One can ascertain then, that for Jews, fasting was usually a part of the mourning process.

When the men of Jabesh-gilead brought home the bodies of King Saul and his sons after they had been killed in battle, the men buried the bodies and then fasted for seven days as a way to mourn the loss of their king. (See I Chronicles 10:12.) When news of the death of Saul and Jonathan reached David, he and all the men that were with him mourned and fasted. (See II Samuel 1:1–12.) Sometimes—and it appears to be the case in this instance—fasting in the Bible was from loss of appetite because of acute grief.

C. Worship

The first mention of fasting—in this case going without food or drink for forty days and forty nights—is found in Exodus 34. This chapter recounts the second trip Moses made to the top of Mount Sinai. His encounter there on the mountain with the glory of God left him without appetite. Evidently the presence of the Lord supernaturally sustained him because humans cannot live without water for that length of time. Elijah had a similar encounter with the glory of God that left him bereft of appetite. He too went forty days and forty nights without food or drink (I Kings 19:7–8).

In the New Testament, Acts 13 records that the prophets and teachers of Antioch "ministered to the Lord, and fasted" (Acts 13:2). Other versions substitute the word *worshiped* or *worshipping* for the word *ministered*. It was during this time of worshiping and fasting that the Holy Ghost spoke to them about separating Barnabas and Saul for the Gentile mission. From this account it is possible to conclude that fasting is not always done in response to events or circumstances. It can and should be part of the worship life of a believer. In the Acts 13 account, it is instructive in that they apparently prayed and fasted again before they commissioned Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:3).

D. Spiritual Direction

As Saul of Tarsus (later called Paul) was on his way to Damascus to persecute the church, he encountered the resurrected Christ, which changed his world. While that encounter opened his spiritual eyes, it blinded his physical eyes. His traveling companions helped him to arrive in Damascus, and for three days he neither ate nor drank. God sent Ananias to Saul to finish his conversion. Ananias prayed and Saul's sight returned; then Ananias baptized Saul. Fasting helped prepare Saul to receive Ananias's message.

Just as the prophets and teachers had fasted and prayed before they appointed Barnabas and Saul to the Gentile mission, Paul and Barnabas "prayed with fasting" before they in turn ordained elders for the Asia Minor churches (Acts 14:23). Fasting along with prayer should remove the politics from the choosing of leaders. Fasting, done

properly, produces a healthy dependency on the Lord. It demonstrates that church leaders recognize they are to work in harmony and under the direction of God.

III. INAPPROPRIATE FASTING

In addition to showing us the proper way to fast, the Bible reveals how the practice of fasting can be used inappropriately. Certain attitudes and action make fasting unacceptable to God.

A. Participating in Empty Rituals

Rituals are not, in and of themselves, bad. In fact they have the capacity to add depth and structure to a person's spiritual life. Think of the value of a regular time of prayer and weekly church attendance. But rituals always run the risk of becoming empty—or just becoming an end unto themselves. They can become untethered from the truth that gives them their meaning. Think of how often Jesus challenged the Pharisees because they had disengaged a ritual from the truth behind the ritual. Because of this tendency, the Bible frequently reminds readers to be careful with them. Fasting is one such ritual that can lose its efficacy if it becomes unmoored.

One of the most extended discussions of fasting in Scripture is found in Isaiah 58. Before we look at Isaiah 58, it is helpful to remember that at times Isaiah is one of the more difficult books to follow. The prophet frequently—and often in rapid succession—changes speakers. In one verse it may be God speaking, in the next the prophet, and in the next the rebellious people. If a reader does not pay careful attention to these switches, that individual can miss the meaning of the text. Sometimes the more complex language of the King James Version further complicates this problem. In chapter 58 God took His people to task for their double-mindedness. While they appeared eager to please Him, they did not keep His commandments. God used their practice of fasting to illustrate His point.

“‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each

other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high” (Isaiah 58:3–4, NIV). God went on to ask, “Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?” (verse 5, NIV). The implied answer is a resounding no!

Rather a fast in this case must be accompanied by looking out for the unfortunate and strangers. It must be accompanied with care for the needy and hungry. Fasting is invalidated when those who are fasting continue to oppress the poor and outcasts. Truly effective fasts help believers align their hearts with God's heart, and He has a special place in His heart for those who are poor. This is the fast He has chosen. Don't just not eat; act justly!

“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 them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I” (Isaiah 58:6–9, NIV).

B. Fasting for Human Approval

As referenced above, Jesus was often at odds with the Pharisees. One way these religious leaders offended Jesus was that they wanted everyone to know about their devotion. It was almost as if their primary reward for religious devotion was the admiration of other people. In response to their clamoring for public approval, Jesus insisted that their devotion should be developed in private. “Moreover when ye fast, 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. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:16–18).

IV. THE MECHANICS OF FASTING

The Bible records a number of kinds of fasts. The most radical fast is a total fast. In this type of fast an observant neither eats nor drinks. The Israelites participated in a total fast on the Day of Atonement. Both Moses and Elijah did not eat or drink for forty days. As previously mentioned, God must have supernaturally sustained them because the human body cannot naturally live without water for this period of time. Christians should be careful when participating in a total fast. A good rule of thumb would be not to go more than one day on a total fast.

A more normal fast would be to go without food for an extended period of time. Most biblical fasts were of this kind. Jesus went without food for forty days just before He launched His public ministry. Sometimes this fast would be practiced from morning to evening. (See Judges 20:26 for an example.)

There were occasions where biblical characters abstained from certain foods for a given period, especially from those that were especially enjoyable. The best-known and currently most popular example is Daniel’s fast. Although Daniel did participate in a normal fast (Daniel 9:3), on at least one other occasion he intentionally went without certain foods (Daniel 10:3). The Bible does not call this a fast, but recently it has become known as the Daniel fast. It is probably better described as abstinence rather than a fast.

As indicated in the previously mentioned exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees,

fasts can and sometimes should be individual affairs. Like private prayers, they enhance the devotional life of a believer. Fasts can also be corporate. All of Israel fasted on the Day of Atonement. The church leaders at Antioch fasted together before they commissioned Barnabas and Saul. Churches often call church-wide fasts as a time of spiritual focus and often to develop spiritual unity.

More often than not, fasting is accompanied by prayer. Or to put it in proper perspective, prayer is accompanied by fasting. Missing meals without a time of spiritual reflection and focus may just make a person hungry and sometimes a little irritable. Proper fasting takes focus. It is intentional and not mechanical. God does not feel sorry for us when we become hungry while fasting and as a result of His pity give us what we want. Fasting demonstrates our need of God. Done with the right attitude, it demonstrates our humility and often heightens our hunger for more of God in our lives.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

It is a given that fasting is a significant spiritual discipline. And while it is significant, we should not think it earns us credits in some banking system in Heaven. Perhaps a parallel can be seen between fasting and giving. A believer is often blessed when he or she gives. But we cannot give to be blessed. If the reason we give is to gain a blessing, then we are not giving; we are investing. Fasting is about humility and dependence. In the Bible, fasting was often a sign of brokenness. Strength may come from humility but we cannot be humble to gain strength.

We who do not fast should consider it. When done with the proper attitude, it may enhance our spiritual lives.

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the idea of the goodness of God’s creation.
- Recount times when you were blessed by table fellowship.
- Discuss how fasting can lead to pride rather than humility.
- Challenge yourself and your class to participate in a fast, perhaps a corporate fast for your Sunday school class.