

Fasting: A Way to Seek God's Attention

I. Introduction

Fasting is a misunderstood concept. Webster's Dictionary defines a fast as abstaining from all or certain foods, as in observing a holy day. In the Old Testament, it was known as "afflicting one's soul."

Is 58:3 Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?

People abstained from eating food for certain reasons. The purpose of this study is to examine the Biblical reasons for fasting, study various examples from the Bible, and explore the discipline of fasting today.

II. Reasons for Fasting in the Old Testament

A. National Crisis

1. Jehoshaphat fasted before the battle

2 Chron 20:1, 3, 12, 14-17, 21-24 It came to pass after this also, that the children of Moab, and the children of Ammon, and with them other beside the Ammonites, came against Jehoshaphat to battle...**3**And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah...**12**[Jehoshaphat prayed] O our God, wilt thou not judge them? For we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee....

14Then upon Jahaziel...a Levite of the sons of Asaph, came the Spirit of the Lord in the midst of the congregation; **15**And he said,...Thus saith the Lord unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's **16**Tomorrow go ye down against them: behold, they come up by the cliff of Ziz; and ye shall find them at the end of the brook, before the wilderness of Jeruel. **17**Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against hem: for the Lord will be with you.

21And when he had consulted with the people, he appointed singers unto the Lord, and that should praise the beauty of holiness as they went out before the army, and to say, Praise the Lord; for his mercy endureth for ever. **22**And when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments against the children of Ammon, Moab, and mount Seir, which were come against Judah; and they were smitten [defeated]. **23**For the children of Ammon and Moab stood up against the inhabitants of mount Seir,

utterly to slay and destroy them: and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, every one helped to destroy another. **24**And when Judah came toward the watch tower in the wilderness, they looked unto the multitude, and , behold, they were dead bodies fallen to the earth, and none escaped.

It began with the people of God's fast and prayer. Then came God's prophecy and instruction, which was followed by praise and obedience. Finally, there was God's miraculous deliverance and peace.

2. Esther fasted to save the Jews

Esth 4:16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

Esther was able to go to the King/husband about the plot to kill her people the Jews. Their enemies did not slaughter them, and that great intervention from God is celebrated annually as the Feast of Purim.

B. Distressing Times

1. King David lamented over Abner's murder

2 Sam 3:35 And when all the people came to cause David to eat meat while it was yet day, David sware, saying, So do God to me, and more also, if I taste bread, or aught else, till the sun be down.

By his fasting, the people knew that David had nothing to do with the murder.

2. King David fasted for his son

2 Sam 12:9, 13-16 **9**Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? Thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife [Bath-sheba] to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon...**13**And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. **14**Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die. **15**And Nathan departed unto his house. And the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. **16**David therefore besought [pleaded] God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.

By Jewish law, both David and Bathsheba deserved to die for their sin of adultery and murder. However, the Lord visited the punishment of death on the infant. Therefore, David's fast unto the Lord for his child was of no avail.

C. God's Protection

I King 21:27-29 And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly [went about mourning]. **28**And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, **29**Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.

Even wicked King Ahab received the attention of God when he fasted!

D. Obtaining Wisdom

Dan 10:2-3 In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks. **3**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.

The outcome of this fast introduced the seventy weeks of Daniel in which the time frame for the coming of the Messiah was announced, the things the Messiah would do was given, and the covenant with the people of God would be confirmed.

III. Reasons for Fasting in the New Testament

A. Power to Overcome Temptation

Mt 4:1-11 Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the of the devil. **2**And when **he had fasted forty days and forty nights**, he was afterward an hungered. **3**And when the tempter came to him, he said, if thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. **4**But he answered and said, *It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceededth out of the mouth of God.* **5**Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple. **6**And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, **He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.** **7**Jesus said unto him, It is written again, **Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.** **8**Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and showeth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; **9**And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. **10**Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, **Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God,**

and him only shall thou serve. 11Then the devil leaveth, him, and behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

When Jesus was hungry, Satan tempted Him with the lust of the flesh. When Satan showed Him the glory of the kingdoms of the world, he tempted Jesus with the lust of the eyes. When Satan told Jesus “if thou be the Son of God cast thyself down”, he tempted Him with the pride of life. Jesus overcame Satan with “it is written”.

B. Faith to Overcome the Enemy

Mt 17:15-21 Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatic [epileptic], and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water. 16And I brought him to thy disciples and they could not cure him. 17Then Jesus answered and said, O **faithless** and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer [bear with] you? Bring him hither to me. 18And Jesus rebuked the devil [demon]; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour. 19then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, **Why could not we cast him out?** 20And Jesus said unto them, **Because of your unbelief:** for verily I say unto you, **If ye have faith** as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and **nothing shall be impossible unto you.** 21**Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.**

Jesus’ disciples could not cast the lunatic [epileptic] spirit out of the child because of their lack of faith. Jesus said it would only come out by fasting and prayer. Fasting is a key to building faith to do the miracles of God.

C. Perseverance during Troubling Times

Lk 5:33-35 And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? 34And he said unto them, Can ye make the children [friends] of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? 35but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.

Jesus said that while He [bridegroom] is with them, His disciples would not fast. However, when He would be taken away [crucified], then they would fast. Trouble, affliction, and persecution would be causes for them to fast.

D. Direction from God

1. Selection of missionaries and missions

Acts 13:2-4 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. **4**So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus.

After fasting and prayer, the Lord gave direction that He wanted Barnabas and Saul (Paul) to do the first mission He had for them. The church laid hands on them and “sent them out” to Cyprus, Pisidia, and back to Antioch.

2. Appointing of elders for churches

Acts 14:21-23, 26-27 And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, **22**Confirming [strengthening] the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. **23**And **when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting**, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed...**26**And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. **27**And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed [reported] all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.

Paul and company completed the mission that they were sent on, and returned to Antioch to report that during the mission God had done miraculous signs and opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

IV. Contrast of Attitudes when Fasting

1. Bad attitude unacceptable to God

Is 58:1-12 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. **2**Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. **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 [exploit] all your labors [laborers]. **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?

God rebukes them because on the day of their fast they:

- a) find pleasure or do what you want to do*
- b) exploit your workers*
- c) engage in strife, debate [quarrel], and strike with a wicked fist*
- d) do not eat, bows his head and puts on sackcloth and ashes to make a show of piety*

2. Good Attitude Acceptable to God

Is 58:6-7 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?

God approves those who fast appropriately:

- a) loose bands of wickedness*
- b) undo heavy burdens*
- c) let the oppressed go free*
- d) break every yoke*
- e) share food with the hungry*
- f) give shelter to the homeless*
- g) give clothing to those that need it*
- h) don't hide from your relatives*

3. Benefits of an Acceptable Fast

Is 58:8-12 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy rearward [rearguard]. **9**Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting [pointing] forth of the finger, and speaking vanity [wickedness]; **10**And if thou draw out [extend] thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity [darkness], and thy darkness [gloom] be as the noonday: **11**And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought [dry places], and make fat [strengthen] thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. **12**And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundation of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths [streets] to dwell in.

God blesses those who practice the Acceptable Fast:

- a) your light shall break forth**
- b) your health will spring forth speedily**
- c) your righteousness shall go before thee [good reputation]**

- d) the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard
- e) you will call and the Lord will answer
- f) when you cry the Lord will be there for you
- g) depression will go away
- h) the Lord will guide you continually
- g) the Lord will satisfy your soul in drought [dry places]
- h) the Lord will strengthen your bones
- i) you will be like a watered garden and a spring of water that doesn't fail
- j) your descendents will rebuild the wasted places
- k) your descendents will raise up the foundation
- l) you will be called the repairer of the breach, restorer of paths

V. Discipline of Fasting and Praying

Jesus gave some instructions about the correct attitude of fasting and praying.

1. Charitable Deeds

Mt 6:1, 4 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven....4That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

2. Prayer

Mt 6:5-8 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. **6**But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet [inner room], and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. **7**But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. **8**Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

3. Fasting

Mt 6:16-18 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. **17**But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; **18**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.

VI. Conclusion: Why Fast?

There are a variety of reasons to pray to God. People pray for their country during a national crisis. Others pray for help with financial, marital, career, family, and personal problems. Still others pray for help with sickness, to overcome death, for protection, and other issues. The Bible and life are full of examples in which people seek guidance and assistance from the Lord when making important decisions.

There is a positive way to get the Lord's attention, and that is to fast and pray. Abstaining from food without prayer has been considered nothing more than a Christian diet. Fasting is foregoing food in order to pray and spend time alone with the Lord.

There is a correct attitude to adopt when fasting and praying. The Lord pays attention to those who humble themselves, remember the poor, feed the hungry, help the needy, shelter the homeless, and help ease others' burdens.

The Lord warned against making a show to impress other men; vain, repetitious words; and being insincere. If that is the motivation, then there would be no reward from God. However, if someone fasted before the Lord in an acceptable manner, blessings would abound. God promised that your health will spring forth speedily; the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard; when you called the Lord would answer; when you cried the Lord would be there for you; depression would go away, the Lord would guide you continually; the Lord would satisfy your soul in drought, and the Lord would strengthen your bones, among other things.

If you are sick, tired, alone, burdened, or whatever the case may be, humble yourself before the Lord in fasting and prayer, and allow Him to lift you up and be your ever present help in time of need.