

Foundations Lesson #16B

Fasting, Part 1

The spiritual discipline of fasting has been instituted by God so that we, his followers, might draw near to him in a more concentrated, focused fashion, and so that we might add urgency to requests we bring before the Lord. Both Old and New Testaments contain stories of men and women who fasted, and who were greatly blessed by God for having done so.

So what does it mean to fast? It means eating nothing and drinking nothing except water. Fasting is, of course, a sacrifice, but it's a sacrifice that God honors when we do it with the right attitude. The first time you enter into the discipline of fasting, you might encounter some well-meaning soul who would warn you of the dangers of starving yourself. The truth is, there's a huge difference between fasting and starving. When people claim to be starving, they usually mean that their belly has gone a few hours without being pampered. When the human body goes without food, it first draws its nourishment from wastes and toxins in the body, which results in a marvelous cleansing. Once they've been exhausted, the body gets its sustenance from the fat that it's stored up. Only when there's no more fat to draw from does the body start consuming healthy tissue in order to sustain itself. This is the point at which starvation begins to take place. Usually, that point isn't reached until about 4 to 6 weeks have passed without eating food. Some medical doctors have even prescribed, under careful medical supervision, long fasts for their patients for the health benefits alone, with no thought of any possible spiritual advantage.

Part of the benefit of fasting is derived from our learning to say “**no**” to our appetites. Scripture gives us many examples of people who missed out on God's plan because of their desire for food. Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for some bread and some lentil stew. The Israelites who escaped the slavery of Egypt, grumbled and complained because they craved the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic they formerly ate when they were still living in the land of bondage. Eli was rebuked by the LORD for honoring his sons more than God by their fattening themselves on the choice parts of every offering made by the people of Israel. Even the very first sin to plague the human race was committed in part because the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was “good for food.”

Please hear me. The body is supposed to be our servant, not our master. When you and I take control of our physical appetite, we develop strength we can also use in controlling our emotions and our other cravings as well.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus instructed his hearers, saying, “when you give to the needy” and “when you pray” and “when you fast.” It's very important for us to consider that he did **not** say “if you give to the needy,” “if you pray,” or “if you fast.” Each of these three disciplines has been designed by the Lord to be an integral and important part of the life of a follower of Jesus Christ. He never suggested that any of them were optional. I've never met anyone in the church who argued that giving to the needy and praying were no longer required by God, yet the sad truth is that many Christians live their lives as though fasting were some ancient ritual that no longer deserves our consideration. We need to be clear that Jesus said, to **all** those listening, “**when** you fast,” not “if.”

There's another Scripture that tells us fasting is for today. I'm reading from Matthew's gospel chapter 9, beginning in verse 14. It says,

Mt. 9:14-15 Then John's disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

When the bridegroom, Jesus Christ, was taken from the earth by his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, then, according to Jesus, it would be time for his followers to fast. We are in that season now. Eventually, he'll return in blazing fire with his powerful angels. Until then,

fasting is to be a part of the lives of his devoted followers.

Scripture doesn't give us a clear mandate as to how often we should fast. John Wesley wouldn't ordain anyone into the ministry unless they fasted at least one day a week from when they got up in the morning through to the evening meal. We know the Pharisees fasted two days per week, and Jesus never admonished them for doing so. He rebuked them for making a show of their fasting, but not for how often they did it. These serve as examples of what some people have done in their effort to be faithful in living out the discipline of fasting. I encourage every believer to seek specific guidance and direction from the LORD regarding how often **he** would have them fast. God knows what's best for each one of his children.

If any one of us fasts less than what God has purposed for us, we're just pampering the flesh and declaring by our actions that God isn't worthy of any meaningful sacrifice on our part. If we fast more than what God has intended, we'll likely fall into pride over what **we** have done. Both of those pitfalls need to be avoided. We should also be careful not to judge ourselves based on how much other believers are fasting. God is not a one-size-fits-all God. Everything he does is custom made.

We also see from the Scripture that the discipline of fasting can be undertaken individually, or publicly, or in a group. The first example of an individual fasting comes from the life of Moses.

Ex. 32:28 Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant – the Ten Commandments.

All authors I've ever read maintain that this fast was miraculously sustained by the LORD. The longest fast without taking water should be three days, unless God performs a miracle. David also fasted. Second Samuel 12, starting in verse 16, says,

2Sa. 12:16-17 David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.

verses 21-23 His servants asked him, "Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!"

He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

In the New Testament, Anna gives us a powerful example of an individual who fasted.

Lk. 2:36-37 There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.

Most fasts are individual, but Scripture also records several public fasts. Many years ago there was a man in our church who maintained that all fasting should be a private matter between the believer and God. So when the pastor called a church fast, this man voiced opposition. I believe this brother's objections came because he had studied Matthew 6, where Jesus taught regarding fasting that our Father, who sees what is done **in secret**, will reward us. The difficulty could have been avoided if the brother had studied **everything** the Scripture has to say about fasting. Let me give you some examples of public fasts in the Bible.

Jer. 36:9 In the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, a time of fasting before the LORD was proclaimed for all the people in Jerusalem and those who had come from the towns of Judah.

2Chr. 20:3 Alarmed, [King] Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.

Jol. 1:14 Declare a holy fast;
call a sacred assembly.
Summon the elders
and all who live in the land
to the house of the LORD your God,
and cry out to the LORD.

Jol. 2:15 Blow the trumpet in Zion,
declare a holy fast,
call a sacred assembly.

So fasting can be individual or public, but we also see in Scripture that a group of people can decide to cry out to God with fasting.

Ezr. 8:21-23 There, by the Ahava Canal, I [Ezra] proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

Est. 4:15-17 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

Before going on to the next section, I wanted to mention some ways in which the word "fast" is used today. The most common use of the word "fast" has to do with eating no food and drinking only water, which some people call a **normal** fast. An example of this from the Scripture comes from the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mt. 4:1-2 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

Verse 2 does not say that Jesus was thirsty, but only hungry, indicating that he most likely had been drinking water the whole time he was fasting. I find it very significant that Jesus' 40-day fast took place just after his baptism but before his public ministry. Since Jesus is our example, it could be that God would want some of his servants to fast before launching out into new areas of ministry. I also find it significant that Luke's gospel records that Jesus entered this 40-day fast "full of the Holy Spirit," yet he left it "in the power of the Spirit." Many have testified that they've operated in more of the power of the Holy Spirit after going on an extended fast.

Another way that Christians use the word "fast" is to mean eating nothing and drinking nothing. Some people call this an **absolute** fast. Again, the medical profession would tell us that this should be restricted to a maximum of three days. Esther, her maids, and others fasted this way, as we saw earlier. Additionally,

Dt. 9:18

[Moses addressing the Israelites] Then once again I fell prostrate before the LORD for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the LORD's sight and so provoking him to anger.

Ac. 9:8-9

Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

The last way in which people use the word “fasting” today is as a synonym for “abstaining.” I've heard people say that they were fasting from watching TV for a week, or going on a “juice fast,” or a “Daniel fast.” I acknowledge that any form of abstaining that would draw us closer to God has value to it. I've personally been called to eat nothing and drink only water or juice for some extended periods of time, and I found great benefit in doing so. On the other hand, when we adopt this definition of the word “fasting,” we have to realize that we're using the word differently than God uses it in the Bible. As I've already mentioned, Scripture uses the word “fasting” to mean no food and no drink except water. In the **Additional Resources** section of this web page, you'll find a document giving many of the Biblical examples of abstinence. I've made that available for anyone who'd like to study that topic further.

Going on to Roman Numeral number two, I'd like to look at some of the purposes of fasting. In this section, I hope to answer the question, “Why should I fast?” Most usually, fasting is connected to prayer. When these two activities are combined, the blessing of God seems to be much stronger than usual. Combining prayer with fasting is almost like combining nitro and glycerin – the result can be most powerful. One author has said this:

QUOTE

If prayer is the capsule containing our gifts and requests to God, then fasting is the booster rocket that lifts our prayers beyond the boundaries of earth and into the heavenlies. Fasting provides the “oomph” of the Spirit needed to catapult us beyond the gravity of the flesh and into the very purposes of God!

The first and foremost purpose of fasting is simply to draw near to God. Fasting should be viewed as a precious opportunity to draw closer to the Lord.

Ac. 13:1-3

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

I find it significant that these five church leaders apparently weren't asking the Lord for anything specific. They were worshiping the Lord and fasting, probably out of a hunger to know God better, to be more conformed to his likeness, to be more intimate with him. Everything in the Kingdom of God is a matter of relationship. Everything. The first and most important relationship we have is with God himself. So if doing away with food for a season of time has a way of yielding a closer relationship with **The Almighty**, that's more than worth it if you ask me!

I know someone who many years ago fasted for 21 days on just water, and his entire purpose was simply to draw closer to God – he had no other reason for the fast. After he was done, a friend of his chided him that he didn't have to “prove” anything to God, and that God loved him just the way he was. Some people simply don't understand a hunger for intimacy with One who is so wise, so lovely, so gracious, so tender, so compassionate, so merciful, and so wonderful that the finest human artwork is as rubbish in comparison. One man once told us that fasting is not so much that we get to have more power with God, but that he has a way of taking the wax out of our ears, the scales off our eyes, and the callouses off our hearts. When that happens, we'll be closer to God as a result!

Probably one of the main reasons believers fast is to petition God in a more urgent, earnest manner. Scripture gives several examples of this.

Jnh. 3:5-9 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

2Chr. 20:2-4 Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar" (that is, En Gedi). Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.

Jol. 2:12-17 "Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing – grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

In each of the three Scripture passages we've just read, a great catastrophe was about to take place, and special urgency in crying out to God was very appropriate. Each time, God miraculously responded to prayer and fasting, and certain disaster was avoided.

Fasting is also one way in which we can humble ourselves before the Lord.

Is. 58:3a 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

Is 58:5a Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself?

Ps. 35:13 Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.

As mentioned earlier, fasting also has a way of training us to be more disciplined. I believe this is more important than what most believers realize. The apostle Paul talks about our need to make sure that our body is in subjection to us. In I Corinthians 9:27, he writes,

1Co. 9:27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Could it be that some believers would find the strength to overcome their smoking habit if they

started fasting one day a week? Could it be that others would be able to control their anger or stop viewing pornography if they adopted the regular exercise of drawing near to God with fasting? That's worth considering.

There are other purposes for fasting that the Bible speaks of. I've mentioned them on the outline and given references that you can look up at your convenience.

Foundations Lesson #16B

Fasting, Part 2

Going on to Roman Numeral number three on our outline, I'd like to examine the results of fasting that the Scripture tells us about. For starters, God has clearly told us that fasting with godly motives will be rewarded.

Mt. 6:17-18 [Jesus speaking] But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.

Even though the details of the reward are not described, Jesus wanted us to know that God rewards those who fast.

The most prominent result of fasting in the Scripture would have to be the miraculous deliverances God engineered. We've already read how Jehoshaphat called a national fast. The results were more than amazing. God gave what might be considered to be the strangest battle strategy in all of history – the musicians were stationed at the head of the army to praise the Lord. As they did so, the three enemy forces turned on each other, so that not one of them was left alive. There was so much plunder that it took **three days** to collect it all. Then in the book of Esther, the nation of Israel was delivered from near extinction after people fasted and sought God. The book of Jonah records how Jonah prophesied against the city of Nineveh that in 40 days the city would be destroyed. In response, the Ninevites declared a fast and sought God. The result? Jonah 3:10 says,

Jnh. 3:10 When God saw what they [the Ninevites] did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

As inspiring as testimonies of God's miraculous intervention are, there are other results of fasting which may not be as dramatic, but they're very important to the plan and purposes of God. In Daniel chapter 9, we read that Daniel turned to the Lord in prayer and petition, with fasting. What happened? The angel Gabriel visited him and imparted insight and understanding to him. Similarly, when some church leaders were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke, saying, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." That launched the first of four missionary journeys for Saul, who became the apostle Paul, causing an enormous spread of the gospel through much of the known world. We read of another result of fasting in Acts 14:23, which says,

Ac. 14:23 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.

Apparently, the selection of properly qualified leaders in the churches and the commissioning of those leaders to do their job in the grace of God was so crucial to the proper function of the church

that it was only natural for prayer, with fasting, to accompany a matter of such importance. I wonder how many problems in the church today would be avoided if we were more diligent to pray and fast over the selection and commissioning of church leaders.

Turning to page two on our outline, Roman Numeral number four deals with some pitfalls that need to be avoided when fasting. It shouldn't surprise us that Scripture has to address this subject. With a practice that's designed to be as powerful as fasting is, it's no wonder that obstacles need to be overcome. Jesus pointed out that our motives in fasting must be pleasing to God. He said,

Mt. 6:16-18 [Jesus speaking] "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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.

Because God sees everything, no special behavior is required to get his attention. Since true fasting is to be done unto the Lord, not men, our outward appearance is not to be any different on a day of fasting than on a day of normal eating.

The prophet Zechariah had to address the issue of fasting for the sake of ritual. He writes,

Zch. 7:3-6 by asking the priests of the house of the LORD Almighty and the prophets, "Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?" Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me: "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?"

Apparently, the people of Zechariah's day were going through the motions of religious obligation, but in their observances, they failed to have a heart for the LORD.

Isaiah also had to confront the people of his day who were fasting, but doing so in place of obeying God in other areas of their lives. I'm reading from Isaiah 58, starting in verse 3,

Is. 58:3-9a

'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.
Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

"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 him,
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.

As Isaiah points out in these verses, we can't expect to use fasting as a band-aid to cover up disobedience to God in other areas of our lives.

Another pitfall to be avoided on our list comes from the New Testament. In Luke 18, Jesus tells us the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. He says,

Lk. 18:11-12 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

It's all too easy for us to congratulate ourselves after successfully completing a fast, but this is a huge mistake. We have to train our minds and hearts to believe what's written in Luke 17:10, where Jesus said,

Lk. 17:10 So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Finally, care should be exercised in breaking a fast; the longer the fast has been, the more self-control is needed. When we fast, our intestines are in a state of deep rest or sleep. They have to be woken up gradually and gently. Eating small quantities of food, well-chewed, with plenty of water is a good idea. Also, starting with raw fruits and vegetables and then eventually graduating to breads, then dairy products and last of all meats is also beneficial.

Before ending this lesson, I'd like to read a poem from Arthur Wallis' excellent book, God's Chosen Fast. The poem was written by the author and it reads,

POEM

On Sinai's mount, with radiant face,
To intercede for heaven's grace
Upon a stubborn wayward race,
He fasted.

Once lifted from the miry clay,
When opposition came his way,
This soldier-king would often pray
With fasting

A seer, possessed of vision keen,
Who told the troubled king his dream,
Had light on God's prophetic scheme
Through fasting.

The prophetess in temple court
Beheld the Babe the two had brought;
For Him she long had prayed and sought,
 With fasting.

He came to break the yoke of sin,
But ere His mission could begin
He met the foe and conquered him
 While fasting.

“Set these apart,” the Spirit bade.
A spring, that soon vast rivers made,
Broke ope by men who as they prayed
 Were fasting.

“So shall they fast when I am gone;”
Was this no word to act upon?
Ask countless saints who fought and won
 With fasting.

When we shall stand on that great day
And give account, what shall we say,
If He should ask us, “Did you pray –
 With fasting?”

Amen. God bless you all.