

## A Time to Fast

The subject of fasting is somewhat of a novelty in our circles. It is not often discussed over the pulpit or in Bible studies. Although the Bible is full of positive examples of fasting, quite a bit of our direct teaching on fasting focuses on how not to fast. Some might get the impression that fasting was an Old Testament commandment of the law that no longer applies under grace. Others might think that fasting should be spiritualized to mean abstaining from sinful or luxurious things in our life. In general, the concept of fasting is not compatible with the western, self-indulgent, undisciplined life style and therefore, is not a popular topic.

When Jesus was asked why his disciples did not fast, he answered, “*Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast*”. (Mark 9:15) We see from his response that fasting has to do with a longing for Christ’s presence. While Christ was present with them, there was no need, but when Christ would be taken away from them, it would be appropriate and expected that they would fast and long to be with him again. This correlates well with Anna the widow who served in the temple with fasting and prayer while she looked for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Indeed fasting has that mournful aspect, which says we are not entirely satisfied with the present and long for something more than our creature comforts.

This tension between being satisfied with our creature comforts and desiring God’s presence and direction is a theme throughout scripture. This principle is summarized in Galatians 5:17, “*For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other.*” We see it borne out the 40 years the children of Israel spent as a nation in the wilderness. During these years, they experienced hunger. God later explained to them why He allowed them to hunger.

*And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments or no. **And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.** (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)*

We can see how hunger was used to humble people. When we have not eaten for some time, we become physically weak. Thus, we are confronted with our dependence on food for strength and life. God uses this physical reality to point out a spiritual reality, our absolute need of His guidance and presence for spiritual strength and life. This process of fasting has the ability to ‘prove us, to know what is in our hearts, whether we will keep his commandments or not’. It is in fasting that we declare that our ultimate dependence is on God and not in our own strength.

When Jesus went out into the wilderness for 40 days, he was able to overcome the wilderness tests, which so many of the Israelites failed. It is interesting to note that all of his responses to Satan’s temptations were quoted from the book of Deuteronomy wherein God speaks to the Israelites about their time of testing in the wilderness. When Satan tempts Jesus to meet his own

needs by turning stones into bread, Jesus quotes the Deuteronomy 8 passage saying that “*man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*”. (Matthew 4:4). Imagine if Satan was able to convince Jesus to be self-sufficient and to use His power for His own satisfaction rather than stay committed to God’s timing and plan though it involve pain. What precedent would this have set for the calling upon ten legions of angels when our salvation was at stake? Jesus triumphed over Satan by desiring God’s pleasure and purpose more than his own comfort and happiness. What a perfect example He is for us!

Unfortunately, the Israelites did not remember their lessons from the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 32, the Lord foretold that when they came into the Promised Land and experienced prosperity and self-sufficiency, they would forget God and rebel. In the New Testament, the Laodicean church also failed to overcome this same temptation. They were a prosperous church who saw themselves as rich and having need of nothing. They did not realize their spiritual nakedness and blindness due to their being lukewarm. What a sobering lesson for us in these prosperous times! Perhaps we need to return to the wilderness to learn some lesson in finding our sufficiency in Him alone.

It has been the experience of many that when they bring their appetite for food under subjection, it is far easier to bring the rest of their appetites under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It has also been commonly observed that by practicing self-control over pleasures that are legitimate, we become more adept at resisting the illegitimate pleasures.

Clearly, our yearning for God, for His presence to be felt, for His will to be done, and a humble recognition of our total dependence on Him, should be our motivation to fast. Both the Lord Jesus and the prophet Isaiah had very harsh things to say to those whose motivation was to appear holy and righteous in the eyes of people. For this reason, Jesus discouraged making a public display of fasting. (Matthew 6) The prophet declared that fasting should be accompanied by a sense of compassion and involvement in meeting the needs of others. (Isaiah 58) As we hunger, we should naturally have more compassion on others who hunger. We dare not be selfish and focused on our own pleasure because this completely contradicts the spirit and principle of fasting. “*That he who loveth God love his brother also.*” (1 John 4:21)

Just as there is a sense of oneness when we share the Lord’s Supper, so there is a deepened sense of fellowship as we fast and pray together as a community of committed brethren. There is plenty of Biblical precedence for this. We should not think of this as a contradiction to Jesus’ instructions in Matt 6, just as corporate prayer is not a contradiction to Jesus’ exhortation to pray in our closets. It is a supplement to it. Scripture tells us if two shall agree, the Lord is paying special attention (Matt 18:20), so we should agree together to pray and fast for those things that concern us all.

Some might think that in our day and age there are no pressing needs that would merit this, but the church’s need for guidance, direction, and empowerment is, if anything, far greater than in previous generations. Our need for communion with God and the desperate spiritual plight of our friends (not to mention a lost world), are reasons great enough to merit wrestling with God in the manner of Jacob. If our Lord and Master, who was divine, found it necessary to fast in order

to maintain His communion with God, can we say that we are so spiritual that we do not need this degree of fervour in our prayer life?

When the Scripture speaks of fasting it is nearly always in the context of prayer and seeking God. By turning from the spiritually dulling effects of food and distraction of a hurried life, we express to God that our appetite for Him, His will, and His empowerment is more important to us than even our daily food. The Lord gave us a promise that a certain level of spiritual power is only available to those who seek Him with such earnestness. We read in Matthew 17:21, *“Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”* Fasting is not magic, as all power comes from God, but as we learn to empty ourselves and rely on Him, more of His power will flow through us. Perhaps, just perhaps, this is the missing ingredient in today’s age of material abundance and spiritual emptiness.