

## **What is Spirit-led Fasting?**

Fasting as a spiritual discipline has been practiced by the people of God in the Old Testament, New Testament, in the early Church and throughout church history. The ultimate example of the importance of fasting is our Lord Jesus Christ who fasted on many occasions. Fasting is nearly always linked to a time of seeking God in prayer.

The humility expressed through fasting saturates and energizes our petitions with a special and unusual intensity. The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:16-18 in the Sermon on the Mount places it as a spiritual discipline along with financial stewardship and prayer.

The central principle of biblical fasting is the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function of eating food and drinking fluids for the purpose of intense spiritual activity. The biblical record of fasting reads like a "Who's Who" of Scripture. Some examples of fasting in the Scriptures includes:

- Abraham's servant when he was seeking a bride for Isaac.
- Moses on Mount Sinai.
- Hannah when she prayed for a child.
- David on several occasions.
- Elijah after his victory over Jezebel.
- Ezra when he was mourning Israel's faithlessness to God.
- Nehemiah when he was preparing his return trip to Israel from the Babylonian captivity.
- Esther when God's people were threatened with extermination.
- Daniel on several occasions.
- The people of Nineveh (and their animals!) when confronted with God's coming judgment.
- Jesus when He began His public ministry.
- Paul at the point of his conversion.
- The Christians at Antioch when they sent Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey.
- Paul and others when they appointed elders and pastors in the various churches they planted.

## ***Three Types of Fasting***

There are three types of fasting illustrated in biblical examples. The first type is the "Normal Fast." The Normal Fast is defined as going without food but drinking fluids, such as water, various juices, etc. This type of fast could last for up to forty days.

The second kind of fast is the "Complete Fast," during which no food nor fluids are ingested. Obviously, this fast should last no more than a few days. Examples of this type of fast in the Scriptures can be found in Acts 9:9, Ezra 10:6 and Esther 4:16.

The third type of fast is the "Partial Fast," which is a Normal Fast that is on occasion interrupted because of health restrictions or social obligations. A biblical example of this type of fast can be found in Daniel's life in Daniel 10:3. Though less demanding than a Normal Fast, the Partial Fast is a legitimate form of fasting and is to be respected, as illustrated by Daniel's action that resulted in great victory over the powers of Satan.

There are many different types of fasting. Some examples are:

- A complete fast for short periods
- Water-only fasts
- Juice fasts
- Fasting from certain types of food
- Fasting from certain activities or recreation. (Some of the most powerful fasting can be giving up favorite activities to spend intense time alone with God.)

*Spirit-led fasting is one of the most neglected spiritual disciplines of our day.*

It should be no surprise that spirit-led fasting is one of the most neglected spiritual disciplines of the church today. Who among us looks forward to not eating? Who among us gets excited about going for days without tantalizing our olfactory sensors with the aroma of those tasty morsels which please our palates?

What makes fasting more difficult is that the human body naturally craves for the food that it needs to exist. The sensation of hunger typically begins after a couple of hours without eating and is generally considered by many as quite uncomfortable. After 12 to 24 hours without eating the muscles in our stomachs begin to contract and spasm—we call these contractions, *hunger pangs*.

Some of us who are addicted to caffeine experience headaches. Others feel weak, sleepy and irritable when they haven't eaten.

But our bodies also enjoy eating. Eating is more than a physiological function the body undergoes; it is an experience! Our bodies are so attuned to eating that I could begin to name some food dishes and some in our audience would begin to salivate—get that man a bib! Some of us eat to live while others among us live to eat!

- But we are encouraged in Scripture to humble ourselves through fasting that our requests to God might be energized with an unusual intensity.
- We are encouraged to turn down our plates in order that we might draw near to God.
- We are exhorted to voluntarily deny ourselves of the normal function of eating certain foods and drinking certain fluids for the purpose of intense spiritual activity.

There is a lot of lukewarmness in the church. In Revelation chapter three Jesus said that He wished that the church in the last days was either hot or cold. But they are lukewarm and it sickens Him so that He will spit the lukewarm church out of His mouth. (vs 15).

Paul gives us a description of the lukewarm church that will exist in the last days:

*2 Tim 3:1 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come:*

*2 Tim 3:2 For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,*

*2 Tim 3:3 unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good,*

*2 Tim 3:4 traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,*

*2 Tim 3:5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!*

It is my belief and the conviction of others that we are now living in the days that Paul was writing about.

The group he was referring to isn't the multitude of people who have rejected the Savior because they refuse to worship and serve the risen Jesus. The group Paul described were those who professed to be "Christian"—Christ-followers.

In 1 Timothy 4:1-2 Paul writes, *"Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron..."*

Many today who consider themselves Christians—many today who are church attenders—are in bondage to the flesh and are heavily influenced by fleshly appetites and desires, so to many, the idea of going without meals in order to pray and seek God, seems very strange.

It's just like with our prayer life, the thing we need to do the most, we do the least. When it comes to prayer and fasting, the devil in partnership with our flesh, fight "tooth and nail" to keep us from achieving spiritual victory in our lives and the lives of those we love and are concerned for.

If you read your Bible you will discover that those who accomplished great things for the Lord practiced Spirit-led fasting.

#### *Fasting for a Mate*

I have already mentioned that Abraham's servant was probably fasting as he was seeking a bride for Isaac. In Genesis chapter 24 we find Abraham's servant praying for God to lead him. When he comes across the young woman that he believes is an answer to his prayer he meets with her family and they serve him food. Listen to how he responds. He says, *"I will not eat until I have told my business."*

We have a lot of single men and women who desire God's choice for a wife or husband. Rather than going to eHarmony.com or Match.com or worse still, the bar and the club, you ought to fast.

#### *Fasting for a Family*

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel chapter one tells us that Hannah fasted when she prayed for a child. Her womb was closed and she desperately wanted a child so she prayed, and with her prayers she fasted.

I've heard of people who have tried everything in order to have a child. They've changed their diet—there is nothing wrong with that. They've calculated their ovulation and fertility period down to the microsecond. They've plotted the phases of the moon to pinpoint accuracy. They've done everything the doctor and the specialist has told them to do but what they haven't done is what Hannah did—she fasted.

If you read through 1 Samuel, you will find that the Lord had closed the womb. You see, the Lord opens and closes the womb-- Psalm 127:3 says, *"Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, The fruit of the womb is a reward."*

But fasting for your child doesn't stop when he or she is born—it should continue throughout their lives.

Many parents are wrestling with troubled children—even rebellious children. The other day we had prayer on my job for a coworker who was having difficulty with a child and was missing precious time on the job.

By the way, I came across a wonderful resource for parents who need to know how to pray for their child(ren.) It is found at <http://www.prayerclosetministries.org/PraParentPGs.html>.

### *Fasting for your Church*

In the book of Nehemiah, we find Nehemiah fasting and praying as a result of hearing about the plight of Jews who survived the captivity and the devastating condition of the city of Jerusalem and its walls.

Many of us remember that it wasn't too long ago that our church was going through some difficult times. God led us to cry out to Him with fasting and prayers and He heard our prayers and rescued our church and to this day, He is answering those petitions prayed between January 2 to 22, 2008.

In the New Testament we find that the Christians at Antioch fasted when they sent Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey. They knew that Paul and Barnabas would encounter opposition not only from those that wanted to smother the Gospel but would take their very lives of the missionaries if they had to.

The church today faces the same opposition. The church was warned in Acts chapter 20:29-30 that *"savage wolves will come in among us, not sparing the flock."* We were also warned that from among ourselves, *"men would rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."*

It was the devil that was behind the Judaizers that Paul and the other apostles encountered (Acts 15) and it is the devil who is still behind the false teaching and other deceptions that threaten the church of our time.

We need to fast and pray for our own spiritual victories.

We need to fast and pray for the deliverance of our family members and friends.

We need to fast and pray for our church—our mission to reach the lost—our obedience to equip the found.

In the New Testament we learn that Paul and others fasted when they appointed elders and pastors in the various churches they planted.

I expect that we will be appointing some leaders over the next couple of years—maybe even over the next several months. It is my prayer that when that time comes, we will be seeking the Lord for *His* approval with prayer and fasting.

If you want to achieve great things for God, you need to fast.

Fasting is demonstrating to God that we are really serious about what we are asking Him for.

When you read that Bible you will find that the Bible just assumes that God's people will fast in their devotion to the Lord. The Scriptures leave little doubt that God expects Spirit-led fasting to be a definite part of our relationship with Him.

One example of this is found in the Old Testament book of Joel.

Joel 2:12-13 – *"Now, therefore says the Lord, 'Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, and weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm.'"*

In the Old Testament, when something calamitous or distressing took place in a person's life, they would tear their clothes. Not only would they tear their clothes, they would put on sackcloth and throw ashes upon themselves.

But here in this passage in Joel, God says, "...*rend your heart and **not** your garments. Turn to the Lord with all your heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning.*" God wanted His people to examine themselves to see if they had committed sins. They were to look to Him in repentance and mourn over their sins and *fast*.

As they fasted, they would ask God to show them their sins, to reveal to them their iniquity. In sorrow, they would cry out to the Lord, asking Him to lead them down the correct path.

But fasting wasn't limited to Old Testament times. Fasting occurred during the time of Christ's earthly ministry as well. In fact, oftentimes people fasted with the wrong motives so Jesus had to deal with it.

In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus says, "...*when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.*"

When you fast, you are saying "*Lord, I am more hungry for you than I am for food.*"

Fasting communicates that we are hungering and thirsting for God to work on our behalf.

Fasting also reveals where are priorities are when it comes to doing the will of God. In other words, do you really want to see people saved from sin and delivered from satanic possession or oppression? Do you really want to see people healed and rise up from their sick bed?

If you understand that we are in a spiritual battle, you will also understand why Paul refers to the Word of God as the "Sword of the Spirit." You will also know why he includes *prayer* as a necessary part of the Christian's spiritual armor.

You see, sometimes we have to "strive...in prayer" as Paul mentions in Romans 15. The word *strive* comes from the Greek word from which we get our English word, *agony (agwnizomai)*.

It means "to contend for a prize," to "struggle" as one would in order to prepare to compete in an Olympic contest. We are to strive in some of our prayers and one major way to do this is with the fast.

Please let me try to illustrate this. Perhaps some among us have had to pray this kind of prayer because they have known someone close to them who has been told by the doctor that they are very sick.

If you were praying for God's healing for this loved one...

- You wouldn't just "mention" their name in a prayer. "*God bless Aunt Mildred.*"
- You wouldn't just give your prayer request as an "unspoken."
- You wouldn't just utter a "*God bless momma...*" or "*God bless my daughter.*"
- You wouldn't chance the leaving of a request with a person who didn't pray.
- You wouldn't give this kind of prayer request to one you knew was living in sin.

- I bet that some of us who never made it to a LIFE Group in the past would “sho-nuf” attend a LIFE Group now—just so you could get the group to prayer for the one you love.

When you really need something from God bad enough, you will fast. For most of us, our thoughts will be so consumed with that need that we will not have an appetite for food.

More often than not, this was how fasting was observed in the Bible.

In the Bible we find God’s people involved in a fast during times of distress.

- For example, the Jews fasted on the Day of Atonement because they were showing distress over their sin.
- When Israel went to war, oftentimes they fasted. In Judges 20:26, Israel fasted at Bethel in the war against Benjamin.
- Fasting occurred when someone was gravely sick. In 2 Samuel 12:16, David fasted for the life of his son conceived in his sin with Bathsheba.
- Fasting was connected with sorrow over sin. In Nehemiah chapter 8, Ezra the priest reads the people the law. When they heard the Word of God they fasted as they repented of their sins.
- Fasting occurred in times of danger. In II Chronicles 20:3, Jehoshaphat fasted when he was threatened by Edom.
- Lastly, fasting occurred during the times that God revealed His Word. In Daniel 9 and Exodus 34 we find Daniel and Moses fasting both before and after receiving God’s revelation.

It is interesting that in the New Testament we cannot find an explicit command to fast.

There is the assumption in New Testament Scripture that there will be times in our lives where we are in great distress and great anxiety and great spiritual crisis and it is in these times that we would set aside food to concentrate on the things of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

There are habits and addictions and all kinds of debilitating vices that a person will not be released from except my prayer coupled with fasting. The reasoning for this statement is that many of these addictions—drugs, alcohol and sexual deviations are the result of demon oppression.

*Mark 9:14 And when He came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them.*

*Mark 9:15 Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him.*

*Mark 9:16 And He asked the scribes, "What are you discussing with them?"*

*Mark 9:17 Then one of the crowd answered and said, "Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit.*

*Mark 9:18 "And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not."*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.biblebb.com/files/macqa/1301-C-8.htm>

*Mark 9:19 He answered him and said, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me."*

*Mark 9:20 Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth.*

*Mark 9:21 So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood.*

*Mark 9:22 "And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."*

*Mark 9:23 Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes."*

*Mark 9:24 Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"*

*Mark 9:25 When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!"*

*Mark 9:26 Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, "He is dead."*

*Mark 9:27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.*

*Mark 9:28 And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"*

*Mark 9:29 So He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting."*

It is my hope and prayer that we will not wait until there is a church-wide fast in order to fast. It is my prayer that we our hearts will be burdened over the sin in our land and the sin in the church so that we would just fast.

It is my hope and prayer that one day our hearts would ache for the loved one who is lost and on his or her way to an eternal hell and we would just fast.

It is my hope and prayer that our spirits would long for the Lord to speak to us—that our hearts would desire the Word of God more than our natural food and we would just fast.

It is also the cry of my heart that one day we all would have an unquenchable longing to see God's Word proceed from this place and be persuaded that it will not happen unless we just fast.

There is nothing wrong with the pastors calling a church-wide fast but Lord give us a church where each and every member would be sensitive to the calling of the Holy Spirit to a Spirit-led fast.