

Guidelines for Fasting and Prayer

The Purpose of Fasting

Why fast? The Scriptures clearly reveal the purpose of fasting through several examples in the life of the nation Israel and in the life of Jesus and the early church. In a survey of the Scriptures there are at least three summary reasons given for fasting.

1) One is A Humble Admission of Need. The need may be forgiveness of sin, comfort over some grief or sorrow, concern over the situation of an individual, a city, or a nation, or the need for guidance and direction from the Lord. For example, when Nehemiah heard about the condition of Jerusalem he immediately began to mourn and seek the Lord in fasting and prayer (Nehemiah 1:4-11). He readily admitted the need of the people of God. In Daniel 9:3 Daniel writes "I gave my attention to the Lord God..." Literally the verse says "I set my face..." It is a picture of focused concentration on the Lord ready to admit the needs of the moment. (For other examples see I Samuel 7:6; 31:13; I Kings 21:27-29; Nehemiah 9:1; Esther 4:1-3; Isaiah 58:5-6; Psalms 35:13; 69:10; 109:24.)

2) A Humble Request for Help. This is closely linked to the first reason. Before we will ask for help we have to admit we have a need—a need we know we cannot meet. God alone can give the needed help. This can include seeking the Lord's guidance for a decision (Judges 20:26), for healing (2 Samuel 12:16-23), or for safety and protection (Ezra 8:21-23). Esther 4:16 records Esther's plea for the people to "fast for me" for three days concerning the deliverance of the Jewish people. In Jonah 3:3-10 the entire city of Ninevah entered into a fast to repent of their wickedness and seek deliverance from certain judgment. An example of a plea for national deliverance is found in 2 Chronicles 20:3-4. Other examples of asking for a need are found in Daniel 9:3; Isaiah 58:7-12; and Jeremiah 36:1-9.

In the New Testament we find examples of those who sought the Lord with a whole heart at a time of great need or as an expression of humble dependence on the Lord to guide or provide in some way. In Matthew 4:2 Jesus revealed His dependence on His Father during the wilderness temptations. The 40 days of prayer and fasting were a time of intense focus on the Father and submission to all of His will and His Word. When Jesus taught on fasting He clearly showed that it was a matter of a heart to heart focus on the Father, a submission to His will, and trusting in His supply for the need (Matthew 6:16-18).

In Luke 2:37 Anna's life of "fastings and prayers" reveals a lifetime of focused service and dependence on the Lord. In Acts 13:1-3 and 14:23, we see clear evidence of a step by step dependence on the Lord in the early church. Whether determining the Lord's will in the direction of ministry or in appointing the right leadership, they sought the Lord wholeheartedly in prayer and fasting.

3) A Haughty Attempt to Get One's Own Way. Isaiah 58:1-4 is one of the clearest rebukes to a proud heart full of selfish motives. That kind of fasting was of no benefit. In

Zechariah 7:5 we find a people who have performed a regular fast but for selfish reasons and with no sensitivity to the Lord and His ways (see 7:1-12). In Luke 18:12 a ritualistic Pharisee found no response from God. God was not impressed with his self-righteous fasting.

God looks at the heart not the outer man. He is concerned that we are walking humbly before Him with a desire only to do His will. He delights in us seeking Him with a whole heart and sometimes a whole heart means a time of fasting. That brings us to The Practice of Fasting. How do we go about a time of prayer and fasting? What are the procedures?

The Practice of Fasting

There are several kinds of "fasts" that we can practice. Many times the intensity of the need will determine this. Let's answer some basic questions about the practice of fasting.

What kind of fast?

1) a limited fast--A person limits their diet for a time as a part of seeking to do the will of God. This is found in Daniel 1:8-13 where Daniel and his three friends asked for a limited diet in order to follow God's Law and God's will.

2) a standard fast--A person eats no food but does drink liquids. This is the most common fast in the Scriptures.

3) an absolute fast--A person does not eat or drink for a period of time. Esther called for a three-day fast of this kind (4:1-17)(A person normally cannot go without liquids for more than 3 days. Moses experienced two supernatural fasts of 40 days each in which he neither ate nor drank anything in the presence of the Lord on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:1-2, 27-28; Deuteronomy 9:9-29; 10:1-5, Note verses 9:9 and 9:18)).

Who should fast? A fast can be by one person--a personal fast. It can be a partner fast in which two or more enter in. This would be true of a husband and wife, a small group such as a class or leadership team (Acts 13:1-3), or a congregation coming together in a heart to heart seeking of the Lord (Ezra 8:21-23). There are also community fasts (city, tribe, or nation) in which all are called to fast as in Jonah 3 or 2 Chronicles 20:3.

When should a person or group fast? The Scriptures command one regular fast for those in the Old Covenant. In Leviticus 16:29-31 the nation of Israel is told to humble their souls (implying fasting) on the Day of Atonement. There are no regular fast days commanded in the New Testament. Any regular fast day found there is the product of man-made regulations and is usually marked by a generous helping of man-centered pride (Luke 18:12; Colossians 2:16-23). All other fasts are occasional fasts according to the need of the moment.

The final question in regard to fasting is "How is a fast to be done?"

First of all, the heart attitude and motive must be right. Fasting is directed to the Lord not to people (Matthew 6:16-18).

Secondly, let the Lord lead you as to the timing and length of a fast. Remember, it is the heart attitude. We can't go on a "holy hunger strike" and expect the Lord to "give in" to our desires.

Thirdly, there are some Practical Guidelines:

- Keep your focus on the Lord trusting Him in the situation and need (Hebrews 11:6).
- Stay in an attitude of prayer throughout the day. Set aside segments of time for specific prayer. Pray often.
- Read Scripture much during your time of prayer and fasting. Praying is as much listening as talking. Record any insights you gain. You may want to write down some of your specific requests in a Journal or notebook.
- Concerning meals missed, skipping one, two or three consecutive meals is a normal fast. Some may chose one, two or three days. Others may fast several days. Drink plenty of juices and/or water as you fast. [For those who go on an extended fast, it would be helpful to read one of the books that gives information and guidelines on an extended fast.]
- For those on medication or who have been ill, be cautious and get an OK from your doctor.
- Some are not able to fast because of a physical condition. They must have regular meals. The Lord may lead you to "fast" from certain foods, etc. Remember, the important thing is the heart attitude not the calorie count. Sometimes there may be a little dizziness, headache or nausea from not eating. Don't be alarmed. Remember to drink extra liquids.
- At the end of your fast it is helpful to eat fruit or soup, etc. Don't eat a big meal. Your eyes may be bigger than your stomach so watch out for gluttony (The fruit of the Spirit is self-control--Galatians 5:22-23).

When all is said and done may we have the testimony of Daniel, "So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting..." (Daniel 9:3)

Rick Shepherd

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