

# What The Bible Teaches

on

# **PRAYER** and **FASTING**

Emmanuel Oladipo



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# WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ON ...

## Introduction to the series

The Word of God is not always easy and straight forward. Even St Peter tells us that some of the writings of St Paul were hard to understand! (2 Peter 3:15-18). Working with its human writers, the Holy Spirit is the Author of the Bible, (2 Peter 1:21). We depend on Him to explain it to us. Even then, however, our human capacity is too limited to grasp fully all that He seeks to teach. This is why we must always be ready, particularly those of us who are leaders, to admit that we do not know it all. There is always room to learn from another child of God who helps to throw fresh light on Scripture, and this includes those passages with which we are very familiar.

This is true not only for us as individuals. It is also true for Churches and denominations. Just as no one person has a full understanding of everything in the word of God, there is no one Church or denomination which knows it all! Each one emphasises one aspect or other of Bible truth, unaware of any blind spots we may have. As the proverb puts it, "We see the back of other peoples' heads. Others see ours." That is why we have to learn from one another if we are to achieve a balanced understanding of God's word.

This is only one of a series of studies on different topical subjects. The idea is to take a careful look at all the main Bible passages which deal with each particular theme, thus getting us closer to God's full revelation on the subject. There is a brief comment on each passage, to bring out its clear and obvious meaning. Conscious of the diversity of understanding within the Church, the author gratefully acknowledges the Christian leaders and teachers from different backgrounds who kindly went through the manuscripts and gave him the benefit of their wisdom.

St Paul lays on us the charge to handle the word of God correctly, (2 Timothy 2:15). We trust that all readers will find that the approach here lives up to their

highest expectations of due care and integrity.

These studies are offered to God's people in a spirit of humility. One drawback of a publication such as this is that it is one directional! It need not be so. Does a reader feel that a significant passage on any topic has been omitted? Or that a text is wrongly applied? Or that the comment offered is unjust? Please feel free to write back through the Publishers. All such comments will be carefully examined. If they are found to be valid, a revision will be made in subsequent editions.

We embark on these studies with the confidence that we are doing it in partnership with all Bible-believing Churches. Different Church leaders could have very good reasons for setting up policies that may be different from the conclusions at the end of our study. We have no doubt that they will be prepared to explain in full to any of their members who care to ask.

It is an exciting adventure to explore God's word in the power of His Holy Spirit. Thank you for joining on such a highly privileged journey!

Emmanuel Oladipo

January 2018

# WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ON PRAYER AND FASTING

## Introduction

“Prayer moves the hands of the One who moves the universe!” We cannot understand the reason why the God of heaven and earth has placed such a powerful tool in our hands. Every indication in the Bible leads us to believe that when prayer is combined with fasting, it results in even more spiritual authority.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Enemy, Satan, does everything in his power to pervert this special gift of God’s grace. He seeks to mislead God’s people into different bye-ways instead of following the guidelines and examples that have been laid down for us in Scripture,

He persuades some people never to fast. They are so much in love with food that they almost believe they would be giving the coffin maker a contract if they were to miss a couple of meals!

To others he tells a different lie. He does not stop them from fasting. He pushes them to the other extreme. Long and frequent fasting, he tells them, is the sure and certain key to spiritual power. I once had a Secretary who fasted so constantly she could never get her work done in the office!

Some people make a business of it, setting up prayer houses where people go to consult them; and invariably, fasting is what they prescribe as the cure for all problems. A woman suffers repeated miscarriages and seeks their help. She is prescribed forty days of fasting on the “prayer mountain.” After getting away with embezzlement for many years, a highly placed officer is being investigated at the office. The answer: prayer and fasting.

For others, unfortunately, the problem is sheer ignorance. These could be true children of God genuinely seeking Him with all their hearts. They in-

clude some of our dearly beloved brothers who have died as a result of long fasts with the purest of motives, because they simply did not know about the medical implications of their actions.

While the Bible does not give detailed directives on each and every specific situation we face today, the principles that should guide us are clearly laid down in the word of God. It is not enough, however, to look at a few verses here and there, even if we take care to read them in their contexts. What we are seeking to do here is to develop an understanding that is full and balanced, based on all the main passages on prayer and fasting in the entire Bible.

The format is a set of Questions and Answers. My prayer is that every reader would have their questions answered sufficiently to set them free to live a life of purposeful prayer and fasting in a way that glorifies the Lord and brings great blessings on His people.

Emmanuel Oladipo

January 2018

# Prayer and Fasting

## 1. What is fasting?

To fast is not to eat by choice for a certain period of time. It may be for all food or for some types of food, and it may be for health or for religious reasons.

## 2. What examples of fasting do we have in the Old Testament?

The Old Testament abounds with examples of fasting, both by individuals and by communities, normally for good reasons but sometimes for very bad reasons! Here are a few of them:

### (a) By Individuals

#### (1) Exodus 34:27-28

Moses spent forty days and forty nights on the mountain with God the first time the Law was given (Exodus 24:18). When he came down to find Israel in flagrant celebration of idolatry, he dashed to pieces the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. God then invited him to the mountain a second time. This time Moses saw the need to plead with Him in a special way on behalf of the people. He spent forty days and forty nights without food or water.

#### (2) 2 Samuel 12:15-23

King David committed adultery with Bathsheba the wife of Uriah and had him murdered in battle. She had a son for him, and God sent the Prophet Nathan with the judgement that the child would die. David spent time fasting and praying that the child's life would be spared.

#### (3) 1 Kings 19:8

Elijah had a glorious victory over the false prophets of Baal on Mount

Carmel. Then he received news that Queen Jezebel was going to kill him as he had killed them. He ran in panic into the desert. There, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and fed him in a special way. He went in the strength of that meal for forty days and forty nights.

**(4) Psalm 69:10-12; 109:22-25**

The Psalmist describes his experiences of fasting and the negative reactions of those around him.

**(5) Daniel 9:1-3**

Daniel had been searching the Scriptures. He discovered that Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel's exile would last for 70 years. Then he looked at the calendar and calculated that the time was ripe for this prophecy to be fulfilled. He therefore turned to the Lord with prayer and fasting on behalf of his people so that they would be restored to the land which the Lord had given their forefathers.

**(b) By communities**

**(1) 1 Samuel 14:24-30**

It was in the middle of a military campaign and King Saul was in a temper. Rather unwisely and by an oath, he compelled his soldiers to fast until as he had killed them. He ran in panic into the desert. There, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and fed him in a special way. He went in the strength of that meal for forty days and forty nights.

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to be fulfilled. He therefore turned to the Lord with prayer and fasting on behalf of his people so that they would be restored to the land which the Lord had given their forefathers.

## **(b) By communities**

### **(1) 1 Samuel 14:24-30**

It was in the middle of a military campaign and King Saul was in a temper. Rather unwisely and by an oath, he compelled his soldiers to fast until the evening, by which time he expected to have his revenge on his Amalekite enemies. His son Jonathan was not there at the time and nearly lost his life as a result!

### **(2) 1 Kings 21:8-14**

The wicked King Ahab coveted the vineyard of Naboth, but this upright man refused to sell his family heritage. Queen Jezebel, who was even more wicked than her husband, ordered the people in Naboth's city to proclaim a communal fast and use it as an occasion to accuse Naboth falsely.

### **(3) Joel 2:12-17**

God sent an army of locusts to invade Israel because of their sins. As He did not want their complete destruction, He sent a message to His people that they should return to Him with fasting and weeping and mourning. The prophet Joel then encouraged them that the whole community should be involved, including children and even babies nursing at their mothers' breasts!

### **(4) Jonah 3:3-10**

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, went to proclaim God's message to Nineveh: God was going to destroy the great city unless the people repented. The King of Nineveh proclaimed a fast, turning to the Lord together with all his people.

### **3. What did the Law teach about fasting?**

#### **(a) The Day of Atonement**

##### **(1) Leviticus 16: 29-34; 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7-8**

The one and only fast prescribed in the Law of Moses was the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. It was a national holiday, during which “you must deny yourselves” which is understood to mean fasting as some translation footnotes explain. (This is what the nation of Israel was celebrating when their enemies launched a surprise attack on 6 October, 1973. It was the beginning of what was later known as the Yom Kippur War).

Sin separates people from God, and there is nothing that man can do to bridge the divide. God initiated this ritual to be observed each year on a day of national repentance from sin, consisting of a burnt offering by which an animal would be killed and consumed by fire. The blood of the animal was a symbol of the blood of His Son which was going to be shed for mankind.

## **4. What was the practice of the Children of Israel?**

Israel as a nation observed various fasts at different times and for different purposes as the following examples indicate:

### **(a) In repentance**

#### **(1) 1 Samuel 7:5-6**

When the Philistines killed King Saul in battle and captured the Ark, it did not take them long to realise that it was the totem of a God much more powerful than they had imagined. They returned it to Bethshemesh in the land of Israel and there, seventy men were struck down for an all-too-human curiosity which made them look to see what was in it. Taking care of the Ark was not likely to have been anybody's particular ambition after that! Abinadab, however, was given the unenviable job in Kiriath-jearim, and his son Eleazar was consecrated as its custodian.

It was twenty years later, under the leadership of Samuel, before anyone gave much thought to the Ark again. Israel then mourned and sought after the Lord with prayer and fasting.

#### **(2) Nehemiah 9:1-3**

The people of Israel were slaves in Babylon, exiled from the Promised Land because of their sins. Under Nehemiah they returned to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Then they read from the Law and understood their need to repent of the many sins of the nation. This they did with fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting ashes on their heads as traditional signs of repentance.

### **(b) In Mourning**

#### **(1) 1 Samuel 31:11-13; [1 Chronicles 10:11-12]**

The men of Jabesh Gilead honoured King Saul and his son Jonathan who had fallen in battle. The victorious Philistine enemies exposed their bodies to ridicule but these valiant men went and retrieved them for cre-

mation and a decent burial, following which they mourned their deaths with seven days of fasting.

### **(2) 2 Samuel 1:11-12**

This too was in mourning for King Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the soldiers of Israel who had fallen in battle along with them. This time it was proclaimed by his faithful friend David for the troops under his command.

### **(3) Esther 4:1-3**

It was at the time when the Jews were in exile, under the rule of the Persians. Out of hatred for one Jewish man called Mordecai, a high government official, Haman, planned to destroy not only him but all his people in addition. The entire Jewish nation was therefore in danger of extermination in a flagrant attempt at genocide. This was the reason for their mourning and fasting in all the provinces of the Persian Empire.

## **(c) Seeking God's Favour**

### **(1) Judges 20:24-28**

Israel as a nation had decided to punish the tribe of Benjamin for standing by one of their men who had committed a serious wrong against the law of God and man. After enquiring of the Lord, they went into action against Benjamin but were soundly defeated! This is what sent them fasting as they cried to God for help.

### **(2) 2 Chronicles 20: 2-4**

Jehoshaphat was one of the Kings of Judah who loved the Lord. He turned his people away from worshipping idols and appointed just judges, Levites and priests to assist him in administering the land according to the Law of God.

Then he heard that a vast army of invaders was on its way to destroy his country. This was why he proclaimed a fast for all Judah to seek God's favour in a time of grave national peril.

### **(3) Ezra 8:21-23**

When Nehemiah was appointed Governor and sent by the Persian Emperor to go and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem he gladly went with a detachment of military officers and horsemen (Nehemiah 2:9). Some time before this, however, Ezra the priest had been sent to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple and offer sacrifices to God. Having assured the pagan king that the God of Israel was able to protect the party on their dangerous three-month journey to Jerusalem, he was too ashamed to turn back to him and ask for an escort of soldiers. He proclaimed a fast among his fellow travellers instead, to seek God's protection on the way.

### **(4) Esther 4:15-17**

Queen Esther had not declared officially that she was Jewish and that she was therefore one of those targeted for extermination. At the instance of her uncle, Mordecai, she was going to plead their cause before the king. Taking her life in her hand as she went to seek royal audience, she requested Mordecai and all other Jews in the palace to fast and pray for her.

## **(d) On behalf of others**

### **(1) Ezra 10:1-6**

Following his safe arrival in Jerusalem along with his party, Ezra offered sacrifices of praise to the Lord. He was shocked to discover that the people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, were disregarding the Law of God. He had a time of prayer and confession together with the leaders but subsequently went into a room in private to fast and to pray on behalf of the people.

### **(2) Psalm 35:11-14**

In a manner that is most usual in the Old Testament, the Psalmist not only prays but fasts on behalf of his enemies.

## **(e) For National Remembrance**

### **(1) Esther 9:30-32**

After the great deliverance of the Jews from the wicked design of Haman, Queen Esther decreed that the fast of Purim be observed as a national event by future generations.

### **(2) Zechariah 8:18-19**

By the time the nations of Israel and Judah went into exile, the Jews had settled on four periods of fasting through the year, in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months. Scholars of the Talmud, (the Book of Jewish Law and Commentaries), explain that, except for the fast of the seventh month which was instituted as part of the Law, they all mark disasters in Jewish history.

## 5. How was fasting practiced?

There was not only one way of fasting in the Old Testament. There were variations on how long it lasted and on what they abstained from eating and drinking.

### (a) Duration

#### (1) Judges 20:26; 2 Sam 1:12

When the children of Israel fasted during their conflict with the tribe of Benjamin, and also when David and his men fasted in mourning for King Saul and Jonathan, it was “until evening.” This would indicate that they abstained from breakfast and lunch and broke their fast with supper.

#### (2) Nehemiah 1:4

In his own case, the period of fasting for Nehemiah was “for some days.”

#### (3) Esther 4:15-16

The Queen’s request was that the Jews should eat and drink nothing for three days and three nights as they prayed on her behalf.

#### (4) Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8;

Moses and Elijah were the two people who fasted for forty days and forty nights in the Old Testament. This means that it was not a period of forty consecutive single day fasts which were broken every evening and restarted the following morning. It was one fast which lasted for the whole period of forty days and nights.

It is worth noting that there is something out of the ordinary involved. Specifically in the case of Moses it was mentioned that he abstained from more than food: he did not drink any water either. Without a miracle from God, a normal, healthy human being can survive for forty days without food but not without water.

## **(b) Abstinence**

### **(1) Ezra 10:6**

For a fast of a short duration, what Ezra did was typical. He ate no food and drank no water.

### **(2) Daniel 10:1-3**

Daniel's three weeks fast was different. He abstained only from some specific delicacies: he ate no choice food and no meat, he drank no wine, and he did not anoint himself with his accustomed lotions and perfumes!



## **6. What differences resulted from fasting in the OT?**

Sometimes the Lord exceeded all expectations in the positive way He responded to the requests of those who approached Him with prayer and fasting in the Old Testament. On occasion, however, nothing happened as a result of their self-denial. At other times, the result was the exact opposite of what they were asking!

### **(a) Positive difference**

#### **(1) 2 Chronicles 20:1-23**

God's response to the cry of King Jehoshaphat with national prayer and fasting was one of the most remarkable victories in military history. It was the singing of the Choir which won the battle even before the soldiers had a chance to use their weapons!

#### **(2) Jonah 3:3-10**

Nineveh was a chief city of the enemy nation of Assyria, and Jonah would have been only too happy for it to be destroyed. To the annoyance of the prophet, God heard the prayers of the repentant King and his people. The destruction Jonah predicted, expected and even desired did not happen because the Lord looked down in mercy when the city cried to Him in true repentance with prayer and fasting.

### **(b) No difference**

#### **(1) 2 Samuel 12:13-23**

For seven days, King David prayed and fasted and afflicted himself when his son was ill and after the Prophet Nathan said that he would die. It did not make the slightest difference: the child died.

#### **(2) Isaiah 58:1-12**

The people of God fasted and prayed, but the Lord took absolutely no notice! The reason was that while they fasted they continued in their sins. They were exploiting the weak and vulnerable in society, forgetting

that God helps those who cannot help themselves and fights on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves.

### **(3) Jeremiah 36:9-26**

By common consent, the people of Jerusalem and those who came in from all over the country recognized the dismal state of the nation and proclaimed a fast, setting time aside to seek the Lord. The Prophet Jeremiah used the opportunity to announce God's word to them through his Secretary, Baruch, so that they would turn from their sins and avert impending national destruction. His word had a great effect among the people, and the leaders went to report to the king. King Jehoiakim, unfortunately, was not the type of ruler to lead the nation back to God in revival. Sentence by sentence he literally committed the word from the Lord to the flames. Not surprisingly, all the fasting was to no purpose!

### **(c) Negative effect**

#### **(1) Zechariah 7:4-14**

God's censure of Israel's spiritual degeneration went a stage further in the prophecy of Zechariah. Not only did He fail to answer their prayers, but He allowed the enemies to enslave them. The reason was clear: their fasting had the same selfish motivation as their feasting; and they did not care for the poor. That was why God scattered them among the nations in spite of all their fasting and praying.

## 7. What does the New Testament teach about Fasting?

### (a) The Teaching of Jesus

#### (1) **Matthew 6: 16-18**

As part of the famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ makes it clear that he expects fasting of His followers by saying, “When you fast ...” and not, “If you fast ...” He then cautions against fasting for the public to see and applaud, explaining that it is a private affair between the person fasting and God.

#### (2) **Matthew 9:14-15; [Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35]**

The disciples of the Pharisees and also of John the Baptist fasted but Jesus Christ did not make His own disciples to observe the fast. When challenged to explain the reason, He said that the time for them to fast would be when He was no longer with them in the flesh.

#### (3) **Matthew 17:14-21; [Mark 9:17-29]**

When Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, He found a man who had brought his demon-possessed son to the disciples while He was away, but they could not cast out the demons. This happened after they had been given the power to do so when they were sent out two by two. They asked Jesus Christ the reason for their failure. His answer was that to cast out this type of demon required prayer and fasting. (Note that Matthew 17:21, and also “and fasting” in Mark 9:29, are recorded as footnotes in some versions of the Bible).

## **(b) The Teaching of the Disciples**

There is no direct teaching on fasting recorded for us by any of the disciples. There are areas of Paul's teaching on other matters, however, which are sufficiently close to this subject to be worthy of reference.

### **(1) Romans 14:5-9**

The teaching here is about what food to eat or not to eat. St Paul lays down the principle that each Believer is a free agent before God, because each one of us is fully and directly accountable to Him. Therefore we should be careful not to judge one another on the basis of what we eat and drink or what we abstain from eating or drinking. This is a principle we can safely apply to the question of fasting: when we fast or how we fast, or whether we fast or not, is between each Christian and God.

### **(2) 1 Corinthians 7:4-5**

This is part of St Paul's teaching on family life. He cautions married couples not to deny each other the sexual pleasure which God wants them to enjoy to the full in marriage. By common agreement, however, they could choose to abstain for some time in order to devote themselves to prayer. (Some, but not all, Bible translations say "fasting and prayer.") Such sexual abstinence by itself even without refraining from eating is a form of fasting when we remember the experience of Daniel who denied himself certain pleasures for three weeks.

## **8. What examples of fasting do we have in the New Testament?**

We have numerous examples of fasting in the New Testament, including the Pharisees, Anna, Jesus Christ Himself, and His disciples.

### **(a) The Pharisees**

#### **(1) Mark 2:18-20**

Perhaps this was on one of the Jewish fast days when all religious people would normally fast, which could be the reason why both the Pharisees and John the Baptist were united in getting their disciples involved. Whatever it was, Jesus did not require His own disciples to join in.

#### **(2) Luke 18:9-14**

A Pharisee and a tax collector went to the temple to pray. Comparing his own godly lifestyle with the sinful tax collector, the Pharisee describes how he fasted twice every week. This was a demonstration of his religious zeal which was way above normal requirement, but it did him no good!

### **(b) Anna the Prophetess**

#### **(1) Luke 2:36-37**

Anna was a godly old lady who worshipped the Lord night and day. Her whole life revolved around fasting and prayers.

### **(c) Jesus Christ**

#### **(1) Matthew 4:1-2; [Luke 4:1-2]**

Like Moses and Elijah, Jesus Christ also fasted for forty days. This was right at the beginning of His public ministry. It is interesting that it says that He ate nothing and was hungry at the end, but we are not told whether

He drank no water and was thirsty. We have to be careful not to affirm anything from the silence of Scripture. If He did not drink all that time, however, then there must have been a special miracle to keep Him alive in the heat of the desert.

## **(2) John 4: 31-34**

Jesus and His disciples were passing through a Samaritan village when they left Him by a well, tired in the midday sun. The disciples went into town to buy food while He had a life-changing conversation with a sinful woman. On their return they urged Him to eat but He would not. He told them of another type of food that nourished Him even when He went without physical food.

## **(d) The Apostles**

### **(1) Acts of Apostles 13:1-3**

The Church at Antioch had many gifted leaders. With a united purpose, they fasted and prayed together as they sought the Lord's direction. This was the context in which God revealed His will to them. He called out Barnabas and Paul for their first Missionary Journey. The Church then did some more fasting and praying before sending them out.

### **(2) Acts of Apostles 14:21-23**

Out on the Mission field, Paul and Barnabas planted Churches and appointed Elders over them. In their turn, they did for the new leaders what the sending Church had done for them as Missionaries: they committed them to the Lord with prayer and fasting.

### **(3) 2 Corinthians 6:3-10; 11:21-29**

St Paul describes his hardships, and in both instances he includes going without food. It is reasonable to assume that some of it must have been by choice as he spent time in fasting and praying. On the other hand, some of his fasting was no doubt involuntary, either because no food was available in his particular circumstances at the time or perhaps be-

cause those who held him captive deprived him of food. We also know that he and his fellow voyagers did not eat for a long period of about fourteen days when they were caught in a storm on their way to Rome in Acts 27:21-36.

## **9. Summary**

Fasting and prayers have always been an important part of religious worship.

### **(a) In the Old Testament**

#### **(1) The Practice**

Fasting was practiced by individuals and by entire communities in the Old Testament. It always involved abstaining from food for a short period of time, usually until the evening or for a few days, although Moses and Elijah went for a much longer period of forty days. Water too was sometimes mentioned. For Daniel, fasting consisted of not eating special food or using ointments.

#### **(2) The Purpose**

The purpose of fasting was normally to seek God's face, but sometimes it was to express emotions of anger or sorrow. It was only on the Day of Atonement that fasting was prescribed in the Law, but other days of national fasting were later added.

#### **(3) The Results**

God normally answered the requests made with prayer and fasting, but there were occasions when He did not. These were when the hearts of the people were not right with Him, especially as a result of their failure to look after the poor and needy.

In the case of King David, even when he repented of his sins, fasting did not prevent God's judgement from being carried out with the death of his son who was born as a result of adultery and murder.

## **(b) In the New Testament**

### **(1) The Teaching**

Jesus Christ taught that fasting should not be for show but directed solely to God. Although He did not make His disciples fast when He was present with them in the flesh, He said that they were to fast later on. He also indicated that prayer with fasting had greater authority in dealing with some spiritual issues.

St Paul conceded that the sexual abstinence of married couples was a valid part of their spiritual discipline. He also taught that what we eat or do not eat is a matter only between us and God.

### **(2) The Practice**

There are many instances of fasting in the New Testament. The Pharisees fasted regularly, and in one of the parables of Jesus, one of them boasted that he fasted twice a week.

Anna the Prophetess devoted her life to fasting and prayers in the temple. Like Moses and Elijah, Jesus Christ himself fasted for forty days. The disciples sought God's face in fasting and praying and did so when commending their leaders for special ministry.



## 10. Conclusion

With regard to fasting and praying, both the teaching and the practice of Old Testament believers are confirmed in the New. We can rightly conclude that God desires this discipline of us as individuals and as Christian communities.

### (a) Reasons for fasting

In 1 Corinthians 8:8, we are told that, by itself, food does not bring us nearer to God: “we are no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do.” Therefore the actual purpose which fasting serves as an aid to prayer remains a mystery, but clearly, God wants His people to seek His face with fasting and prayers. Perhaps part of the benefit is that the resultant hunger is a constant reminder of our need, and it helps us to keep turning our mind to the purpose of the fast.

Bible examples of what could drive us to prayer with fasting today include the following:

#### **(1) Exodus 34:28**

When we are confronted with an exceptionally serious problem and we want to devote ourselves to seeking God’s face.

#### **(2) 2 Chronicles 20: 2-4**

National leaders in modern history have followed the example of Jehoshaphat, and they have not been disappointed. George Washington provides an example, before the Battle of Brooklyn Heights in the American War of Independence in 1776. Also, in the Second World War, when the British Expeditionary Force was stranded in Dunkirk, Empire Day was declared a day of national prayer and fasting which was led by King George and his godly Queen on 24 May, 1940.

#### **(3) Ezra 8:21; Matthew 4:2**

At the beginning of an important or a dangerous enterprise, we have this

good example of committing matters to the Lord with prayer and fasting.

#### **(4) Psalm 69:7-12**

When interceding for those who do not care for God, even if they treat us shamefully. For example, Christians facing persecution from Muslims or other militant opponents of the Good News of Jesus Christ may choose to fast and pray for them.

#### **(5) Daniel 9:1-3**

A study of God's word could highlight a situation which calls us to set time aside to seek God in a special way on behalf of ourselves or our people.

#### **(6) Acts of Apostles 13:1-3; 14:21-23**

When we appoint or dedicate new leaders, or when we are sending out new missionaries, we usually hold a feast. The example of the Apostles was to dedicate them to the Lord and His service with prayer and fasting.

### **(b) Right attitudes and motives.**

Fasting is not necessarily a spiritual exercise. In certain circumstances it may amount to no more than a hunger strike! We must bear in mind that this study is not just about fasting alone but prayer and fasting. Even when we discount the evil extreme of Jezebel and the people of Naboth, there are still pitfalls we should be careful to avoid.

#### **(1) Isaiah 58:2-8**

The children of Israel prayed and fasted all right. In addition, we are told that they also humbled themselves. Still, God was not impressed.

The reason is because they decided to mind their own business! They were fighting for their rights. They did not concern themselves with the plight of the oppressed, the homeless and the hungry people among them.

#### **(2) Luke 4: 3-12; 18:10-14**

When he came to tempt Jesus Christ during his forty day fast in the desert, the devil tried everything to make Him concentrate on Himself. First, he tried to make Him turn a stone to bread to feed Himself. Then he offered Him authority over the kingdoms of the world. Lastly, he tried to make Him seek His own glory with a miracle. In each case, Jesus turned back to God. Man should not live by bread alone, He explained, but by God's word. It is only God that is to be worshiped. And finally, He told Satan about not putting the Lord to the test.

While the tax collector saw himself as a poor sinner before the Lord, the text says that the Pharisee prayed about himself (or in the footnote, "to himself.")

These two stories show us that it is only when our prayer and fasting is about God and not about us that it becomes a meaningful spiritual discipline. Much fasting does not prove how spiritual we are!

### **(c) How to fast**

There is no one set pattern which is laid down for us as the right way to fast. We can choose from the different models we find in the Bible, but we should be careful not to add to the Bible; and we should also use the wisdom given to us by God.

#### **(1) Judges 20:26; Nehemiah 1:4; Daniel 9:1-3**

Fasting can be for one day or a few days or longer. It may mean total abstention from all food or only from certain types of food and other necessities or delicacies. How long the fast lasts, and whatever other details a person decides to observe during the time of fasting is a free choice before the Lord. Anyone who prescribes a certain number of days for fasting and praying in order to solve one particular problem is going beyond what we find in the word of God.

#### **(2) Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Matthew 4:2**

Inspired by the fast of Jesus Christ in the desert, some churches have a

tradition of encouraging their people to fast during the forty days before Easter, in the season of Lent. The way it is observed varies widely; and some take it a lot more seriously than others.

Independently, some individuals feel called to dedicate a long fast to God. Sometimes they may decide on a long series of consecutive one-day fasts lasting for several weeks or perhaps for as many as forty days. Some follow the example of Moses, Elijah and Jesus Christ by fasting without break, day and night for several weeks, or perhaps for forty days and forty nights. In either case they need to be very careful not to cause serious damage to their health. They could even put themselves at the risk of death, which we have seen happen to some of our brothers.

For long consecutive daily fasting, it is not a healthy habit to transfer normal meal times from daylight hours to the hours of darkness and then eat just as much if not more! This does not mean that it is a sin: to have light meal in the evening (literally, "break-fast"), followed by a heavy meal later in the night (= lunch?), and another one just before day break (= dinner?). Who are we to judge its spiritual impact? All we can say is that it does not make for a healthy pattern of life while it lasts!

Anyone who wants to have a long period of unbroken fast, day and night, should take certain strict precautions.

- There should be a clear objective as a focus for the whole exercise; otherwise it could be a worthless ego trip.
- They must be in sound health before they begin. Even then it is advisable to do it under medical supervision.
- They are usually recommended to take a prescribed quantity of warm water at regular intervals. After the first few days they will cease to be hungry (!) Unless they drink, however, they could die of thirst, as the average human being cannot survive without water for more than about five days under normal circumstances.

- There has to be a very gradual re-entry to normal food at the end of the fast. People have been known to survive forty days of fasting and be killed by their first meal at the end!

### **(d) God's Will is supreme**

When Jesus prayed He made it clear it was the Father's will He wanted to see accomplished. This goal should be at the centre of all our fasting and praying. God's hand cannot be forced.

#### **(1) 2 Samuel 12:13-23**

David sinned by taking Uriah's wife and arranging for the husband to be murdered in battle. The woman had a child for him before the prophet Nathan confronted him with the judgement of God. Among other things, God said that the child he had as a result of betrayal and murder was going to die. This was His judgement on David's sin. King David fasted and prayed for seven days and seven nights. In spite of this, God maintained the judgement, and the child died.

It is a lesson for all of us. Nothing we do can force God's hand. No amount of fasting and praying and punishing ourselves can compel Him to do what He has decided not to do or to undo what He has decided to do. However, King David had the right approach in the manner he appealed to the mercy of God:

"While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The Lord may have mercy on me and let the child live.'" (v.22)

#### **(2) 2 Kings 20:1-6**

Sin hides God's face from us, but once we repent of sin, there is no other barrier to His mercy which requires us to fast and pray in order to overcome. The experience of King Hezekiah is a good example, when God pronounced judgement on him that he was going to die. He wept bitterly and pleaded with God, but he did not need to fast before God added fifteen years to his life. We should not look on fasting as "works" by which

we can gain His favour (see Titus 3:5). That was King David's mistake, and we should learn from it.

Our God is merciful. Indeed, mercy is an intrinsic part of His nature. It is not anything we do which can "release" His mercy, just as we do not need to do anything special to "release" His love.

**(3) Matthew 17:21; John 14:12-14**

Jesus promises us that if we ask anything in His name He will do it for us. Evidently, making such prayers with fasting is especially pleasing to Him.

**(4) Matthew 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.'"

**The time is now!**

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