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prayer & fasting

Why Focus on Fasting and Prayer?

Isaiah 58:6: (NASB) *Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?*

There are some things from the days of the earliest Christian church that we read about, find inspiration in but rarely take the time to do ourselves. Fasting and praying are a particular example - these combined activities are sprinkled throughout the Old and New Testaments, yet they receive very little attention from us now. What is there about these activities that provoked such spirituality in so many of our spiritual heroes? Why fast? Why pray? Why combine them?

From where does fasting come?

(Source: www.howtofast.net) **The Origins of Fasting as a Sacred Tradition:** Every major religion has encouraged or required its followers to practice a form of fasting. Fasting, though, existed before these institutions and has older roots. Dietary restrictions, typically in the form of a taboo, were and are common among primitive peoples. Examples of not eating certain vegetables, the meat of certain animals, or refraining from eating specific foods during certain days of the year can all be found in primitive societies. Some of these taboos were for health reasons - avoiding harmful or seasonally-tainted foodstuffs, for example, but there are also many examples that are firmly rooted in fasting rather than safety. Ancient fasting practices were generally motivated by two, often intertwined, reasons: special spiritual rites and purification.

Was fasting a part of the Jewish heritage?

Leviticus 16:29-31

(Source: Biblical commentary by Matthew Poole) Ye shall afflict your souls, i.e. yourselves, as the word soul is frequently used, both your bodies by abstinence from food and other delights, and your minds by anguish and grief for former sins, which though bitter, yet is voluntarily in all true penitents, who are therefore here said not to be afflicted, but to afflict themselves, or to be active in the work.

The concept of *afflict your souls* is the act of fasting. You withhold from your body and mind food and other delights. It is a day of penitence and focus by taking distractions out of your life to focus just on God. This was for the Day of Atonement, a central part of Israel's focus.

Examples of different types of fasting in the Old Testament: **Esther 4:15-17:** The purpose of this group fast was to focus on God's mercy.

Daniel 10:2-3: This was a different kind of fast for one individual of a very plain diet that was experience-driven.

Deuteronomy 16:3: Here is another partial fast of bland food. This was driven by the Law.

So, is the fasting to get God's attention or is it to get our attention focused on getting God's attention?

What is the purpose of fasting?

(Source: www.allaboutfasting.com)

Fasting will:

- Rest the digestive system
- Allow for cleansing and detoxification of the body
- Create a break in eating patterns while shining a spotlight on them
- Promote greater mental clarity
- Cleanse and heal "stuck" emotional patterns
- Lead to a feeling of physical lightness, increasing energy level
- Promote an inner stillness, enhancing spiritual connection

Seeking mental clarity and a reaching out to one in distress: **Daniel 6:16-22:**



A pagan king who is seeking deliverance for another - what does he do? ¹⁸Then the king went off to his palace and spent the night fasting, and no entertainment was brought before him; and his sleep fled from him. The king was trying to focus himself on the dilemma with Daniel and denied himself his normal activities. He had been tricked into sentencing Daniel to death and hoped Daniel's God would deliver him, but he had no surety of that. **At light's earliest moments, faith and hope will now be tested:** ¹⁹Then the king arose at dawn, at the break of day, and went in haste to the lions' den. ²⁰When he had come near the den to Daniel, he cried out with a troubled voice. The king spoke and said to Daniel, Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you constantly serve, been able to deliver you from the lions? ²¹Then Daniel spoke to the king, O king, live forever! ²²My God sent His angel and shut the lion's mouths and they have not harmed me, inasmuch as I was found innocent before Him; and also toward you, O king, I have committed no crime. The King was overjoyed at the deliverance of Daniel.

Let's look at an example after Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, and the people of Israel realized just how far away from God they had fallen. **Fasting as a tool to focus on sin and forgiveness:** [Nehemiah 9:1-3](#)

 **God, I need you, Charles Stanley, Fasting and Praying**

- *So the question is, how does fasting help? Well, one of the most important things it does is this: it increases our sense of humility and dependence upon the Lord. When you begin to pray and cry out to God, you set aside everything else for fasting, God begins to work in your heart in a deeper, more intimate way than ever before because of what you've done - you've humbled yourself before Him and said, "God, I need you." That's what Nehemiah was saying, that's what Daniel was saying, that's what the early church was saying.*

God already knows we need Him, but the point is we need to know we need Him. That is what fasting and prayer can do.

Fasting as a humble seeking of confirmation of spiritual decisions: [Acts 14:19-23](#): Paul and Barnabas placed leadership in each of these small churches that were growing. To confirm that spiritual decision, there was prayer and fasting. This helps us see some of the value from a Christian standpoint. They wanted God's approval and focused on the importance of that approval.

What happens when fasting goes wrong?

The prophet is here told to plainly expose the sins of Israel: [Isaiah 58:1-4](#): God is saying His people are confused - they are "seeking" God in a manner prescribed by Him, yet...³*Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice? In other words, we did what you wanted us to do, so what is the problem? Where is our blessing? They outwardly did the right things. So, God through Isaiah explains: Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers. ⁴Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist... God's answer: Your fasting is not truly costing or humbling you! Their minds were not in the right place.*

[Isaiah 58:4-7](#): In other words, you do the fast, you offer the prayers but not to truly bring yourselves before God - you do these things to fulfill a *requirement* without living these things to transform your souls! It is only going through the motions. It is like going to church on Sunday but without actually transforming your life.

Here lies the true value in a "fast and pray" exercise: ⁶*Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?* Fasting should produce something deep within you, like compassion.

Jesus reminds us that all will be required to attain unto this "fasting" attitude: [Matthew 25:42-45](#)

And here are the resulting blessings of God for this "fasting" attitude: [Isaiah 58:8-9,11](#): Are we looking for a pulled pork sandwich? Are we just going through the motions and then looking for our blessing like the Israelites? Is our attitude sincere, kind, merciful and generous?



What is the Christian template for fasting and praying?

(Source: Wikipedia) Fasting is primarily an act of willing abstinence or reduction from certain or all food, drink, or both, for a period of time. An absolute fast is normally defined as abstinence from all food and liquid for a defined period, usually a single day (24 hours), or several days. Other fasts may be only partially restrictive, limiting particular foods or substances. The fast may also be intermittent in nature. Fasting practices may preclude sexual intercourse and other activities as well as food.

Fasting isn't just about food; it is about things we do that expend mental and physical energies in other directions. Biblical fasting has the goal of focusing on God.

Matthew 9:14-15: (NASB) ¹⁴Then the disciples of John came to him, asking, why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? ¹⁵And Jesus said to them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. Jesus intimates a need for fasting in his absence - what would it do for us? **Luke 4:1-13:** (NASB) ¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness ²for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, he became hungry. Jesus himself used the tool of fasting as a pathway to God - what did it prepare him for? ³And the devil said to him, **if you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.** ⁴And Jesus answered him, it is written, man shall not live on bread alone. Fasting prepared Jesus for temptations of the flesh! He was focused on something higher. ⁵And he led him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. ⁶And the devil said to him, I will give you all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. ⁷Therefore if you worship before me, it shall all be yours. ⁸Jesus answered him, it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only. Fasting prepared Jesus for temptations of the eyes! Jesus had these Scriptures so clearly in his mind because he spent 40 days meditating on them and his mission. The fast really helped him focus on the most important thing. ⁹And he led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, **if You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here;** ¹⁰for it is written... ¹¹...¹²And Jesus answered and said to him, it is said, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. ¹³When the devil had finished every temptation, he left him until an opportune time.

Show the people how you could be miraculously delivered and how great you are! Fasting prepared Jesus for temptations of the pride of life!

Fasting for the Christian would become a personal method of devotion and not driven by the Law: **Matthew 6:16-18:** Fasting is not done for getting peoples' attention; it is to focus our attention on God.

Acts 13:1-4: Fasting would become a tool of the church to key in on God's will in decisions we make from a Christian perspective.

What makes fasting go wrong?

1 Kings 21:1-4: This was not fasting - it was just pouting.

Queen Jezebel takes the matter into her own hands and unleashes a plot...

1 Kings 21:8-10: Here a fast is used as a tool of deception and greed! Do we proclaim a fast so we can get what we want? What are we trying to gain from fasting? Personal convenience is not the point. We want clarity to do the Lord's will. It is easy to get into the fasting mentality for the wrong reasons.

A misapplication of fasting, among other things: **Luke 18:9-14:** In this story, fasting and tithing were used as badges of honor and proofs of piety. Notice instead of praying to God, the Pharisee *was praying this to himself!* The prayer was not going where it needed to because he was self-absorbed. Do we or our denominations fall into this category of doing the right things for unscriptural and unspiritual reasons? ¹³But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, the sinner! ¹⁴I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be



exalted. The sinner recognized that without God's mercy, he would be lost. Fasting should be about how we can better give.

Bottom line - fasting goes wrong when we use it as a form of idolatry:

Luke 16:13-15: (Fasting for the sake of healing our bodies is not idolatry.) Fasting is not specifically mentioned here, but it involves *those who justify yourselves in the sight of men*. One of the primary ways the Pharisees justified themselves in the sight of men was fasting, outwardly distorting their faces to look like they were suffering. Looking for the praise of men was detestable before God! Fasting is supposed to bring us towards God, not to bring us to others so they can see us supposedly looking towards God.

Fasting can easily go wrong when we use it for our own purposes and not for a godly purpose.

James 4:6-10: Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Do not draw near to your wants. So, God can be opposed to our fasting if it is not an exercise in humility with spiritual focus and discernment.

After Simeon prophesies about the baby Jesus: **Luke 2:36-38:** Fasting and praying provided Anna extraordinary focus to witness to God's plan.

Question: What deeply spiritual people proclaimed the following?

FORASMUCH as it is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with Gratitude their Obligation to him for Benefits received, and to implore such farther Blessings as they stand in Need of:.. It is therefore recommended... That at one Time and with one Voice, the good People may express the grateful Feelings of their Hearts, and consecrate themselves to the Service of their Divine Benefactor; and that, together with their sincere Acknowledgments and Offerings, they may join the penitent Confession of their manifold Sins, ... that it may please GOD through the Merits of JESUS CHRIST, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of Remembrance; ...And it is further recommended, That servile Labor, and such Recreation, as, though at other Times innocent, may be unbecoming the Purpose of this Appointment, be omitted on so solemn an Occasion.

This almost sounds like a "fasting and praying" approach suggested on a national level! What nation is suggesting this? **Answer: These are excerpts from the First Thanksgiving Proclamation made by the United States Continental Congress on November 1, 1777.**

What is the lesson here? Humility before God is ALWAYS appropriate as it refreshes our perspective on who and what are the most important things. God first and foremost - that is what the United States Congress said. Where have we gone since then!?

Christianity can also make mistakes when it comes to fasting: **1 Timothy 4:1-3:** (NAS) This illustrates how Christianity can go wrong in forbidding food. We need to be aware of this. Do our denominations, our "brand" of Christianity, take upon themselves to do things outside of scriptural guidance? Fasting and praying should be for the focus of making scriptural guidelines real in our everyday lives.

Let's take another look at the Apostle Paul: **Acts 14:19-23:** It was all about focusing the brotherhood towards a faith that will not faint. How was this faith manifested? ²³*When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.* Prayer and fasting seemed to follow spiritual awakening anywhere it went - a true sign of humility.

Matthew 26:40-41: *Keep watching and praying* - fasting helps us to watch! Fasting is a tool of watching and praying in our personal lives. By fasting, we become disciplined to be better at watching, which gives us a firmer grip on praying, which provides us spiritual strength and peace beyond our human capacity! As a Christian, fasting is important (but not required) and valuable as long as our heart and mind are truly focused on the word and will of God, seeking clarity and focus. We put ourselves aside.

*So, why focus on fasting and prayer?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*