

## FASTING: WHY WE FAST

### I. What is fasting?

- A. The primary Hebrew word for fasting in Scripture means "to cover one's mouth". Therefore the inherent meaning is to stop eating and/or drinking in some sense. We can see that fasting in Scripture can vary considerably.

#### 1. Complete Fast: (no food or water).

- A. Moses = "And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments" (Exodus 34:28). "And I fell down before the LORD, as at the first, forty days and forty nights: I did neither eat bread, nor drink water, because of all your sins which ye sinned, in doing wickedly in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger" (Deuteronomy 9:18).
- B. The king of Nineveh and the people = "And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water" (Jonah 3:7).
- C. Esther = "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).
- D. Paul = "And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9:9).

#### 2. Partial Fast (without food).

- A. Jesus = "And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred" (Matthew 4:2).
- B. David = "Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread" (II Samuel 12:21).
- C. Paul and ship's crew = "And while the day was coming on, Paul besought them all to take meat, saying, This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing" (Acts 27:13).

#### 3. Limited Fast (without certain foods).

- A. The Nazarites = "He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. All the days of his separation shall he eat nothing that is made of the vine tree, from the kernels even to the husk" (Numbers 6:3-4).
- B. Daniel = (probably no pork and wine) "But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself" (Daniel 1:8). Daniel said, "Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink" (Daniel 1:12). The pulse is believed to be a mixture of vegetables, seeds, and nuts.
- C. Daniel = (sweet bread, meat, or wine). "I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled" (Daniel 10:3).

D. Certain forbidden foods:

1. No blood or animal fat = "It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that ye eat neither fat nor blood" (Leviticus 3:17).
2. No unclean animals = Leviticus 11:1-47.
3. Meat offered to idols = (knowingly). "If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake. But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof: Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?" (I Corinthians 10:27-29).

E. John the Baptist = "And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4).

However, like other words such as "yoke" there may be other applications to fasting. The people were to stop doing their own pleasures and speaking their own words on the Sabbath which was associated with God's chosen fast. "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honorable; and shalt honor him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words:" (Isaiah 58:13). There can be a fasting from sexual pleasure. "And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes. And he said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not at your wives" (Exodus 19:14-15). Paul also talks about not having sexual relations in marriage during a time of fasting. "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency" (I Corinthians 7:5).

## II. How long did people fast and who fasted?

A. Fasting for forty days.

1. Moses = "And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments" (Exodus 34:28) also see Deuteronomy 9:9, 18).
2. Elijah = "And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God" (I Kings 19:8).
3. Jesus = "And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred" (Matthew 4:2).

B. Fasting for twenty-one days. Daniel = "I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled" (Daniel 10:3).

C. Fasting for seven days.

- 1) The inhabitants of Jabesh = "And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days" (I Samuel 31:13). Also (I Chronicles 10:12).

- 2) David = "David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died ..." (II Samuel 12:16-18a). "Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread" (II Samuel 12:21).
- D. Fasting for three days. Esther = "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).
- E. Fasting for one day or until evening.
- 1) The children of Israel = "Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the LORD, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD" (Judges 20:26).
  - 2) Samuel and the people = "And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the LORD. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh" (I Samuel 7:6).
  - 3) David's men "And they mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul, and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the LORD, and for the house of Israel; because they were fallen by the sword" (II Samuel 1:12).
- F. The Pharisee fasted twice a week. "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (Luke 18:11-12). G. Fasting length not known.
- 1) Ahab = "And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly" (I Kings 21:27).
  - 2) Ezra and the people = "So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us" (Ezra 8:23).
  - 3) Nehemiah = "And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 1:4).
  - 4) Jehoshaphat = "And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah" (II Chronicles 20:3).
  - 5) Jehoiakim and the people of Jerusalem = "And it came to pass in the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, in the ninth month, that they proclaimed a fast before the LORD to all the people in Jerusalem, and to all the people that came from the cities of Judah unto Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 36:9).
  - 6) The king of Nineveh and the people = "And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water" (Jonah 3:7).

- 7) David = "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom" (Psalm 35:13).
- 8) Anna = "And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37).
- 9) The church at Antioch = "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:2-3).
- 10) Paul = "In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings" (II Corinthians 6:5).

### III. Is fasting commanded by the Scriptures?

- A. The Day of Atonement = "Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD" (Leviticus 23:27). The expression "to afflict your souls" meant to fast. "It shall be unto you a sabbath of rest, and ye shall afflict your souls: in the ninth day of the month at even, from even unto even, shall ye celebrate your sabbath" (Leviticus 23:32). David expressed it this way, "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom" (Psalm 35:13). Some believe that Isaiah, chapter 58, may be associated with the day of atonement although it is not specifically stated.
- B. Atonement and Beyond = "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace" (Zechariah 8:19).
  - 1) The fourth month = "And in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, the ninth day of the month, the city was broken up." (Jeremiah 39:2). (This fast was not ordered by the Lord).
  - 2) The seventh month = "Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD" (Leviticus 23:27).
  - 3) The tenth month = This commemorated coming of Nebuchadrezzar to Jerusalem. "And it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, and pitched against it, and built forts against it round about" (Jeremiah 52:4). (This fast was not ordered by the Lord).
- C. Fasting in general is not commanded, but expected!
  - 1) "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14). Again the idea of humbling yourself was generally accepted with fasting being a part of that humbling.
  - 2) Fasting was well associated with observing the Sabbath. "Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? ... If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy

pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honorable; and shalt honor him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it" (Isaiah 58:5, 13-14).

Jesus said, "Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward" (Matthew 6:16). Jesus did not say, "If you fast" but "when you fast."

- 3) "And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?
- 4) But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days" (Luke 5:33-35). Jesus said that his disciples (disciplined ones) would fast after he left.
- 5) "Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:19-21). Jesus rebukes his disciples for not fasting in this case and then explains that this kind goes out only by prayer and fasting. Therefore, in this case the disciples were fully expected to fast.
- 6) Logic tells us that if we observe the Sabbath, we should also consider allowing our digestive tracts to rest also.

#### **IV. Fasting is often associated with prayer.**

- A. "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom" (Psalm 35:13).
- B. "And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:" (Daniel 9:3).
- C. "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21).
- D. "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency" (I Corinthians 7:5). "And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah" (II Chronicles 20:3).

- E. "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance" (Ezra 8:21).
- F. "Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD. Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 1:14, 2:12).
- G. "And Cornelius said, Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing" (Acts 10:30).
- H. "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed" (Acts 14:23).

#### **V. Fasting is associated to being filled with the Holy Spirit.**

- A. We find this principle true in the book of Joel.

- 1. The ministers were to fast and cry out unto God.

"Gird yourselves, and lament, ye priests: howl, ye ministers of the altar: come, lie all night in sackcloth, ye ministers of my God: for the meat offering and the drink offering is withholden from the house of your God. Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD" (Joel 1:13-14). "Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12).

- 2. The results was that of the latter rain, ultimately fulfilled with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit" (Joel 2:28-29).

- B. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and power after fasting for forty days.

"Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered" (Luke 4:2). "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about" (Luke 4:14).

- C. Jesus ties fasting with the saying concerning the new wine which is often understood as the filling of the Holy Spirit.

"Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, 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. No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved" (Matthew 9:14-17). (Also see Mark 2:18-22)

D. Paul fasted for three days and was then filled with the Holy Spirit.

"And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9:9). "And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 9:17).

E. Fasting probably was associated with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Although fasting is not specifically mentioned, a fast was commonly associated with prayer and seeking God.

- 1) Jesus told the disciples, "And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).
- 2) "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren" Acts 1:14) (for 7 days).
- 3) "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:1-4).

## **VI. Another look at why Jesus fasted for forty days.**

A. I used to have this picture of poor Jesus who starved himself and then when he was hungry and weak, the devil came to tempt him. However, I am now convinced that my picture was totally wrong. B. Jesus, didn't starve himself to get and weak. He fasted, separating himself from the distractions of the flesh that he could fellowship with the Father and be strong when the enemy did come to tempt him. He received the strength to overcome the enemy through fellowshiping with the Father.

- 1) "But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). 2. "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). The word "wait" means to "join yourself to" (God).
- 2) "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). The word "abiding" refers to fellowshiping with Jesus.

- 3) "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (II Corinthians 12:10). Paul found his strength in God when Paul, himself was weak.
- 4) "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Ephesians 6:10).

## VII. When should one fast?

- A. Fasting may be observed in connection with observing the Sabbath. It is a good day to let your digestive track rest and focus on making God the focus of your life.
- B. Fasting may be used in humbling one's self.
  - 1) "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom" (Psalms 35:13).
  - 2) "And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house" (I Kings 21:27-29).
- C. Fasting may be observed in confessing of sins. "Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them. And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers" (Nehemiah 9:1-2).
- D. Fasting may be observed in preparation for spiritual warfare. "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. "And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered" (Matthew 4:1-2).
- E. Fasting may be observed in setting apart missionaries or in ordination.
  - 1) "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:2-3).
  - 2) "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed" (Acts 14:23).
- F. Fasting may be observed in a time of mourning that one may show sincerity of loss or draw near to God.
  - 1) "And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days" (I Samuel 31:13).
  - 2) "And they mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul, and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the LORD, and for the house of Israel; because they were fallen by the sword" (II Samuel 1:12).
  - 3) "And when all the people came to cause David to eat meat while it was yet day, David sware, saying, So do God to me, and more also, if I taste bread, or ought else, till the sun be down" (II Samuel 3:35). (at the death of Abner).

- G. Fasting may be observed when one grieves over sins (others or their own).
- 1) "And I fell down before the LORD, as at the first, forty days and forty nights: I did neither eat bread, nor drink water, because of all your sins which ye sinned, in doing wickedly in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger" (Deuteronomy 9:18). The people had made a golden calf and had worshipped it.
  - 2) "And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the LORD. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh" (I Samuel 7:6). They people were convicted for having worshiped strange gods.
  - 3) "Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away" (Ezra 10:6). The people had intermarried with the people of the land and taken up their abominations.
  - 4) "And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water" (Jonah 3:7). The Ninevehites repented and sought God's mercy and grace.
  - 5) "And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9:9). This followed Paul's experience on the road to Damascus where Jesus rebuked him and told him to go into the city.
- H. Fasting may be observed when someone wants to return to the Lord. "Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12).
- I. Fasting may be observed when one is praying for deliverance of another. "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21).
- J. Fasting may be observed when someone is praying for someone who is sick. "And Nathan departed unto his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth" (II Samuel 12:15-16).

#### **VIII. A few general guidelines.**

- A. I would suggest that you pray and ask God about fasting as to when to fast, what kind of fast, and how long to fast.
- B. Generally, one should begin with a light fast of a meal or so or possibly fast for a day.
- C. One may use fasting for their cleansing for their health, but there are more important reasons to fast.
- D. We should spiritually have the right motive when we fast, not to be seen of others, but to deny ourselves of the desires of the flesh that we may have a closer fellowship with God.
- E. One should be careful to break the fast with some juice or fruit or with a light meal.
- F. You may want to consult your physician if you have medical problems or if you are interested in observing an extended fast.

- G. Remember that water is essential for health during a fast unless you are supernaturally sustained by God. (Physicians report that about 60 percent of one's body weight is water, about 70 percent of one's muscle mass is water, and about 85 percent of the brain is water).