

Fasting and Prayer

By E.J. Waggoner

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When Jesus was on earth He taught His disciples how to pray, and the Bible abounds with instruction on this point, both by direct precept and by illustration; yet of the number, of those who profess to pray, comparatively few have rightly understood what real prayer to God is.

What wonder, then, that the matter of fasting, which is associated with prayer, has been very generally misunderstood? The Bible, however, gives us as clear instruction, even if less in quantity, on this point as upon the other.

In the prophecy of Joel we find fasting explicitly commanded, and that with special reference to the last days—the time just before the coming of “the great and dreadful day of the Lord.”

Joel 1

¹⁴ Sanctify 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.

Again:

Joel 2

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly,

¹⁶ And gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children...

¹⁷ Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare Your people, O Lord, and give not Your heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them; wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God?

¹⁸ Then will the Lord be jealous for His land, and pity His people, yea, the Lord will answer.

Christ has also indicated that His people should fast often in the days between His ascension and His return to this earth. When the disciples of John ask Him,

Matthew 9

¹⁴ Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but Your disciples fast not?

He replied,

¹⁵ Can the children of the bride-chamber 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 in those days.

From the instances recorded in the Old Testament, we find that fasting was resorted to in times of great perplexity and distress, in extreme need, when special help and blessings from the Lord were desired.

When Esther was about to go in before King Ahasuerus, to seek deliverance for her people from the destruction decreed against them, she said to Mordecai,

Esther 4

¹⁶ Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also with my maidens will fast likewise, and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law.

We all know the successful results.

Fasting was resorted to by Ezra, when he was on his way to Jerusalem to restore the city and the worship of God. He had a difficult and dangerous journey before him.

Ezra 8

²¹ Thus I proclaimed a fast, at the river Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before God, to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

²² For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way; be-

cause we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon them for good that seek him; but His power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him.

²³ So we fasted and besought our God for this; and He was entreated of us.

What Fasting Is

Fasting, in itself, whether as a religious act or otherwise, is entire abstinence from food and drink.

The case of Daniel (*Daniel* 10:2-3) is sometimes referred to as indicating that eating to a certain extent is compatible with fasting; but the careful reader will note that Daniel does not say that he was fasting, but that he was “mourning three full weeks,” in which time he “ate no pleasant bread.” A person may mourn without fasting, and this Daniel did.

Whenever instances of fasting are recorded in the Bible, we find that neither food nor drink was taken during the time of the fast. It is as impossible for a person to be fasting while eating and drinking, as it is to be awake and asleep at the same time, or to be at once running and sitting still.

Our common word “breakfast,” indicates this. The longest period of abstinence from food is in the night, when we are asleep. When the morning comes, we break our fast by partaking of food, and we do this even though our breakfast be very light.

At the ninth hour of the day Cornelius said

Acts 10

³⁰ Four days ago I was fasting until this hour.

If we should substitute,

“Four days ago I ate very little until three o’clock in the afternoon,”

it would make the whole affair ridiculous. So it is senseless when pope or bishops prescribe how much may be eaten dur-

ing a so-called fast. Each individual must decide for himself whether or not he will fast, and also at what time and how long; but no one can possibly have the choice of eating or not eating during a fast, for as soon as anything is eaten fast ceases.

The Object of Fasting

What is the use of fasting? What is it for? From its connection with prayer, and from the Scriptures that we have read, it is evident that it is for the purpose of gaining special help and strength from the Lord, for the performance of some necessary work or the overcoming of some peculiarly strong temptation. This is indicated in the Lord's description of an acceptable fast, where He says,

Isaiah 58

⁷ Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?

But while fasting means special earnestness and importunity in prayer, it must not be considered as a penance, nor as buying the favor of God by the mortification of the body.

God does not delight in human suffering, and we could not buy His favor even with the sacrifice of our lives. He bestows His grace freely, because He is love and mercy; and as an evidence of His favor He has given Himself for us.

Christian prayer is not like heathen prayer. The heathen think that they shall be heard for their much speaking (*Matthew 6:7*), and in their importunity they lacerate themselves and afflict their bodies (see *1 Kings 18:28*).

God's servants do not do so, for they know that God is their Father, tender and loving, that He knows what we have need of before we ask Him, and that He has already richly provided every necessary thing for us (read *Matthew 6:8*; *Romans 8:32*; *Ephesians 1:3*; *2 Peter 1:2-3*).

True prayer is therefore simply the claiming of the promises of God with thanksgiving (*Philippians* 4:6); by faith demonstrating the reality of those promises.

Since fasting means special emphasis in prayer, it of course means special confidence in God's word, and an exceptionally strong grasp of and dependence upon His promises.

Fasting with prayer indicates such complete dependence on God's word, that we for a season depend on it instead of on the ordinary means of sustaining life.

Living by God's Word

That God's word is indeed food, is clearly set forth in the Scriptures. Jesus said that we should eat His flesh,

John 6

⁵⁵ ...for My flesh is meat indeed.

Afterwards He showed that we take His flesh through the word that He speaks (verse 63). Therefore since His flesh is meat indeed, His words are likewise real food.

Jeremiah said,

Jeremiah 15

¹⁶ Your words were found, and I did eat them; and Your word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart.

Moses told the children of Israel that God suffered them to hunger, and then fed them with manna,

Deuteronomy 8

³ ...that He might make them know that man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live.

These words have special significance in connection with fasting, because Christ quoted them when the devil tempted Him to break His fast by turning stones into bread (*Matthew* 4:3-4).

This is not a mere figure of speech, but a reality. It is a lit-

eral fact that men live by God's word, whether they realize it or not. By the word of the Lord everything came into existence (*Psalms* 33:6), and by the same word are they still upheld (*Hebrews* 11:3).

There is no question but that we live by the food we eat. But all the life there is in the food we eat, is the life that is in the growing plants, and that life comes from the word which said,

Genesis 1

¹¹ Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed after his kind, etc.

Although God has ordained that ordinarily we shall obtain life from His word through the grains and fruits which that word causes the earth to bring forth, it is certainly as possible to live directly from the word as from the grain, which gets its life-giving power only from the Lord. When Daniel was absolutely destitute of physical strength, he received full strength at once from the words spoken by the angel of God (*Daniel* 10:17-18).

Many suppose that fasting is simply for the purpose of making the mind clearer. It does indeed for a time have that affect on one whose mind is beclouded by overeating, but not on one who habitually eats only according to his needs.

Our brain power, as well as our muscular force, is derived from the food that we eat. If under ordinary conditions we go without food for an unusually long time, we become weak in body, and our thinking power is correspondingly weakened. A brain worker requires more nourishment than one who exercises only his muscles. The natural effect of fasting is to diminish one's thinking power, as well as to weaken the body.

Fasting Not Penance

Are we then to understand that fasting is after all only a sort of penance, a mortification of the body? Not by any

means. Instead of its being a burden, it is the means of undoing the heavy burdens (*Isaiah* 58:6); instead of being a sorrowful affair, it is a matter of choice and gladness, for Jesus said that when we fast we should not be of a sad countenance, but should anoint the head, an act indicating rejoicing (*Matthew* 6:17).

So in immediate connection with the exhortation to fast, we read also,

Joel 2

²³ Be glad then, you children of Zion; and rejoice in the Lord your God; for He has given you the former rain moderately, and He will cause to come down for you the former rain and the latter rain.

God's people are to rejoice in Him all the time (*Philippians* 4:4; *1 Thessalonians* 5:16), and especially in view of Christ's near coming (*Luke* 21:28); and yet they are to fast at times.

Do we fast because we are in trouble? We are commanded to rejoice and be of good cheer in tribulation (*John* 16:33).

Do we fast because we desire deliverance from temptation? The exhortation is,

James 1

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into divers temptations.

There is no time when a man has so good a cause for rejoicing as when he is mourning for his sins; because mourning for sins implies acknowledgment of them; and

1 John 1

⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Matthew 5

⁴ Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted.

“But how can we rejoice when both the mental and physical powers are almost exhausted by fasting?”

That question arises from a misconception of what an acceptable fast is. An acceptable fast is not the mortification of the body, for God does not delight in that; but it is coming into the closest possible connection with God's Word.

It is true that the natural result of a protracted abstinence from food is exhaustion of the powers the body and mind; but a fast to the Lord is not like a forced fast, where one is all the time longing for food. On the contrary, an acceptable fast is one in which we take the living Word in the place of ordinary food, and are so supported by it as not for the time to be conscious of the absence of ordinary food.

Note particularly the fact that when Jesus had fasted forty days and forty nights,

Luke 4

² He afterward hungered.

Naturally, He would have hungered during that time of fasting, in conflict with the devil; but His mind was instead occupied with God's Word, which for the time was food both to body and soul.

He who, while fasting, has a continual longing for food, and who by force of will resists the desire to eat, because he has determined to abstain for a certain length of time, is fasting to little or no purpose. His fast does not indicate undivided faith in God's Word. Instead of thinking only of God and His all-powerful Word, he is thinking largely of himself. Of such a wavering, but doubting one, the apostle says:

James 1

⁷ Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.

Whoever fasts should have some definite object in view. This is self-evident, for fasting is inseparably connected with prayer, and prayer that has no definite object is only empty words.

The faster must desire special grace for overcoming, or to help in some special time of need. Then when his confidence in God's living Word is so vivid and strong that he takes it as the reality that it is, and lives for a season upon it instead of upon his ordinary food, he knows that he has his heart's desire. God, who by His Word supports the physical wants, will much more supply the more essential spiritual needs.

By our fasting we indicate that the Word of God is indeed our life, and that of course means that we fully yield ourselves to it. We show our dependence on God's Word, and our confidence in it for all things that pertain to eternal life and godliness, by taking it for a season absolutely for the support of our physical necessities, letting it take the place of ordinary food, and deriving equal or greater strength from the Word than from ordinary food. Thus the mind is indeed more clear through fasting.

The effect does not end with the season of fasting, but from that time we realize and acknowledge more fully than ever before that even while eating our daily food we are living only by God's Word, which works effectually in all who believe.

This recognition of our dependence on God,—the knowledge that He not only gives us our food, but is able to sustain us by His Word when food is lacking,—tends directly to that dealing of our bread to the hungry, which characterizes a true fast (*Isaiah* 58:7). As we receive the gift, we minister the same to others,

1 Peter 4

¹⁰ ...as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

May our perception of God's Word, and our confidence in it be so great that we may fast in spirit and in truth, and thus experience the fullness of the promise,

Isaiah 58

⁸ Then shall your light break forth as the morning, and your

health shall spring forth speedily; and your righteousness shall go before you; and the glory of the Lord shall be your rearward.

¹¹ And the Lord shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and make fat your bones; and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.