

A collage of various foods including brownies, cakes, burgers, pizza, and donuts.

# FASTING

Empowering Prayer

DICKSON

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# Fasting

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Scripture quotations from *International King James Version*

Cover theme: *Temptation*

## INTRODUCTION

While living on a Kansas farm in middle America in our youth, we experienced a natural phenomenon in animal behavior that is common among all animals. It was an inborn behavior of healing that was at first puzzling to us who were in our early years learning life behavior from animals. On numerous occasions, we experienced animals on the farm that manifested the same behavior when they were injured in some way. We thus concluded that this was the way God made animals . . . and humans.

As an example, we had this adventurous dog that we had named Pepper. Pepper was not one of those dogs who would remain at home as a spoiled house pet. On the contrary, he was sometimes a nuisance when he habitually followed us for the adventure and freedom of the field. He followed us continually as we farmed the land with farming equipment that was not that kind to animals. He was astutely brave, and thus, sometimes lacked a spirit of caution that eventually caught up with him on different occasions. On one occasion when he was following us on the tractor, one of his front legs was severed by a mowing machine behind the tractor.

The gallant dog let out one “yip,” and that was the end of his complaints of pain. So we gently cradled the brave victim in our arms and took him to the farm house. We lovingly made a comfortable “hospital” box in which he could lay to recuperate . . . or die. As compassionate nurses, we faithfully brought him food and water. After the first day, Pepper had not touched the water nor sniffed the food. The second and third day were the same. Being somewhat concerned, on the fourth day we brought him a fine rare cooked fillet steak from our dinner table. He would have nothing to do with it, though he did start lapping some water. We were worried that our beloved dog would starve himself to death. He gave no sounds of pain, though in his eyes we could see pain. For about five days Pepper did not even sniff food.

But then on the sixth day we were relieved when our frail-looking Pepper finally nibbled on some food. What the body of Pepper was doing, that we did not understand in those days, was that it shut down

its digestive system. His digestive system shut down in order that his body focus all its energy on the healing of the wound of that severed leg. As a result, Pepper eventually rose from his sick bed, and was again in the fields behind the tractor hobbling along with three and a half legs. Nothing would detour Pepper from the adventure of the field.

On another occasion Pepper's back hip was run over and crushed by a truck. He went through the same process of healing. The joints in his hip healed, but fused together. Nevertheless, after healing, this now two and a half legged dog could still run the fields. It was an amusing sight to see him run, but nothing would detour Pepper from the freedom of the field. On the farm, Pepper taught us a great deal about life. When you are cut down, or knocked down, don't ever stay down.

Doctors have now told us that the human body uses about 65% of its energy in digesting a large meal. At least Pepper's body knew one thing about healing itself. When wounded, body energy was not to be wasted on digesting a fillet steak while it was repairing itself. What God did in creating the body to heal itself, it has taken man a long time to discover through modern medicine. Fasting is a natural mechanism by which the body heals itself.

Fasting is one of those "medical practices" that has long been ignored by self-indulgent humans. Fasting is not something that is commanded by God, but something that is the natural behavior of those who have a deep seated desire to depend on God, and as a serendipitous blessing, reap physical healing. People have discovered throughout millennia of fasting that the body reenergizes itself through the process of fasting.

The Bible never goes into the health benefits of fasting. Throughout centuries of fasting, however, the physical benefits of fasting were discovered when godly people in fasting focused on spiritual matters. The Bible was never meant to be a science book on health, but it is a book on the science of living. And in the science of living, fasting played a very important role in the lives of godly people throughout the centuries.

We seek to understand both the health benefits and spiritual benefits of fasting. In an overindulgent world, fasting is quite difficult to

restore in our behavior as the people of God. Fasting is the forgotten behavior in a world where obesity is characteristic of the majority of people in the developed world that has gorged itself into spiritual poverty. In the lives of the religious in the developed world, it is almost unknown. Nevertheless, when we read through the Scriptures, fasting was naturally connected with prayer, and subsequently was a major spiritual behavior of the saints of old. If fasting will take us to a higher level of spiritual being, we want to go there, for we understand that fasting is more than missing a meal.

When our prayers become monotonous, and seem to reap no results, then it is a time to restore in our personal life the dedication of fasting that is coupled with our prayers. When one has exhausted every option to grow spiritually, and to dig oneself out of the pit of despair, there is only one option. That option is to fast until the spiritual conquers the physiological, until the spirit overcomes the supper. We seek in fasting to walk into the presence of God. And thus, we will stay there until we renew our relationship with a long forgotten Friend.

## Chapter 1

# LISTENING TO THE DOCTOR

Fasting affects every part of our physical and spiritual being. We wish that the Bible had given more details on this matter. If it had, we would probably fast more for physical reasons than spiritual reasons. Fasting is the result of a spiritual commitment that has marvelous physical benefits. Since we are almost always focused on the physical, and if God had explained all the health reasons for fasting, then we would surely neglect the spiritual in order to accomplish the physical results. Nevertheless, God made our bodies in a marvelous way in that it reenergizes itself when we fast. For the Christian, however, fasting is primarily about spiritual matters. Nevertheless, we do not ignore the physical health benefits of fasting that have been learned throughout history.

As an introduction to our study of the historical cases of fasting by the children of God, upon our doctor's advice, it is good to identify some of the physical benefits of fasting that are connected with the spiritual. Only in the last century has the modern medical world "discovered" many of the physical benefits of fasting that many people have known for centuries. We only assume that those who fasted in ancient times understood some of the physical benefits that modern medicine has now confirmed. Though we do not assume that the ancients fasted primarily because of physical benefits, we do assume that they realized many of the health benefits of fasting. At least in the biblical context where fasting is mentioned, there is no mention of physical benefits, though we could assume that the physical benefits played a part in the fasting. As we study case examples of fasting in the Bible, we will assume that the people had naturally discovered many of the physical benefits of fasting.

Generally speaking, some of the mental and physical benefits of fasting that have been discovered by modern medicine and Christians are the following: (1) In fasting, the spiritual part of man has the opportunity to refocus on the mental. (2) The result of focusing on the mental in fasting is that we have better clarity in thought processing. (3)

When we focus on the mental (spiritual), our thoughts are trained to focus clearly on tasks that are at hand. (4) In reference to the Christian, when one focuses in fasting on the spiritual, his or her focus becomes more aware of God's participation in our lives. (5) Fasting gives our digestive system a break. (6) When our digestive system is idle, then the body has the opportunity to cleanse itself through detoxification. (7) The energy saved from digestion is directed to repairing the body. (8) Through fasting our body has the opportunity to refocus on restoring itself in order to be energized after the fast is terminated.

Some doctors have stated that fasting is the "miracle healing" for many of our most common ailments. In his book, *Staying Healthy with Nutrition*, Dr. Elson Haas mentioned twenty-four different health and spiritual benefits that result from fasting. These include a better resistance to disease, better sleep, better creativity, improved senses, more energy, purification of the body and physical rejuvenation. Haas continued to explain that the body has the ability to heal and maintain itself through periodic fasts. Fasting frees up energy to be directed to the healing processes of the body. The old saying, "You must eat to get better," is not necessarily true. If one loses his appetite, his body is saying, "Give me a break so I can heal myself." Listen to Pepper.

Fasting from specific foods and drinks will produce limited results. When we fast from those foods or drinks that we crave, then our mind is being reprogrammed not to depend on those craved foods and drinks. Cravings are a dysfunction of our life-style behavior. When we fast from cravings, we are training our minds to consume all things in moderation.

In America over 50,000 people die every year because of opioid overdose. This overdose of a drug should be a resounding call for fasting from those who are addicted to any drug. The same should be said of the alcoholic and those addicted to smoking. If one is in the bondage of coke or coffee, he or she too is in need of fasting from these cravings in order to know that something outside their bodies does not have control over mind and body.

Fasting is a blessing to the health of both mind and body. During a prolonged fast the body frees up energy to detox and to redirect en-

ergy to repair cells, organs and skin tissues. Fasting reprograms the mind to detour the craving for drugs. This is especially true in reference to long fasts. As in the case of Pepper, it took a long fast in order that the body repair the wound of a severed leg. Lengthy fasts redirect the healing processes of our body and reprogram our minds. Fasting for a long period of time gives our bodies the opportunity to detox in order that the cleansed body better use its own healing processes. In fasting, our minds are delivered from the bondage of outside influences.

Detoxification is one of the greatest physiological benefits of fasting. After about two days of fasting, and when one has progressed through the common “detox headache,” he or she knows that their body stored up toxins that had to be eliminated from their system. Fasting cleans out stored toxins. When the headache is gone, then the toxins are gone.

Detoxification is only one benefit of fasting where the body is doing some house repair in order to come back with more energy after the fast. Those who fast for health reasons must remember that the body is storing up a great deal of toxins from the medication that is consumed on a regular basis. These toxins must occasionally be flushed from the body.

Fasting gives the body an opportunity to readjust itself to normality. Our bodily functions are rebalanced in order to function unhindered in order that the body heal itself with its own power. For this reason, fasting is given credit for allowing the body the opportunity to clear up many allergies, help with arthritis, digestive disorders, skin conditions, cardiovascular disease and asthma. Eating excessively on a regular basis hinders the body from functioning normally in guarding and healing itself. When one is an excessive eater, his or her body is storing away toxins and postponing normal body function to eliminate toxins. It is as if the body is waiting for a time of rest from digestion.

Two thousand years ago obesity was not a problem in societies throughout the world. Archaeological discoveries reveal no fat statues or inscriptions. However, in these modern times of wealth and prosperity, obesity characterizes the majority of many Western societies. When artists paint a true picture of the typical modern person, there is a bulge hanging over the belt. If the world is here a thousand years



from now, we wonder what archaeologists then will conclude from their discoveries of the sculptures and art of this generation.

Some would fast solely for the purpose of losing weight. In fact, many people with whom we have discussed fasting name this as their primary reason for fasting. There is some benefit of fasting for physical goals. But if fasting is solely for the purpose of losing weight, but with no change in mental attitude, then the weight loss is usually undone soon after the fasting. The point is that if one's mind is not connected with the fast, then no mental change is made. Subsequently, one's normal mental attitude toward food will continue after the fast as it was before. And since one's body goes into "starvation mode" when in a fast, immediately after the fast almost all the food intake is consumed by the body. Therefore, regardless of the reason for fasting, one should eat lightly for some time after any fast.

The body can be trained to fast. We have discovered that when fasting on a regular bases, the body can easily go into a two to three day fast without all the agony that comes with initial fasts. Once the body and mind are trained to fast, then it is easy to fast. The Pharisees who fasted twice a week knew this (Lk 18:12). Nevertheless, that first fast is a struggle. The reason so many people give up on fasting is that they cannot mentally get past all the struggles they experienced with their initial fast. But be patient, fasting becomes easier the more one fasts.

Fasting will change your tastes. We once fasted from all carbonated drinks for two years. After about two weeks into the fast, water started tasting better. We were amazed. We just could not drink enough water. What fasting does is also turn one's tastes more toward natural and wholesome foods. We found that fasting moved us to love salads, a food that we were not previously overenthusiastic about eating. It was an interesting experience, discovering that God evidently created our bodies first to be vegetarian.

Since fasting gives one greater mental clarity and energy, then the conclusion is obvious. Before one seeks to accomplish a particular task, then fasting should be one of the first things to do in order to clarify one's mind. If the task is physically related, then fasting gives the body the opportunity to rejuvenate itself before engaging in the

physical task. If one desires to have a clearer perspective of what is to come, then fasting helps one to think more clearly.

Some tasks that are before us demand a clear focus by the mental/spiritual side of our being. Since our physical being is inseparably linked to our mental being, then fasting refocuses our attention to clarify our objectives. This is one reason why fasting is often linked with prayer in the Scriptures. Fasting helps us to focus in prayer. Instead of gorging ourselves into spiritual frailty, fasting restores our focus on spiritual things.

Prayer becomes more intense when we are on a prolonged fast. When Epaphras “labored fervently” in prayer, we assume that his prayer was connected with fasting (Cl 4:12). The Greek word that the Spirit used to define his fervent prayer was the word that was also used to refer to the labor pains through which a woman goes during childbirth. Fasting will take one to the level of agonizing in prayer. If one is having difficulty with his or her prayer life, then fasting is the cure.

We keep in mind these benefits of fasting as we study various texts of the Bible where the people of God fasted. Knowing what modern medicine has discovered helps us better understand why some fasted in the Bible in reference to great tasks that were set before them. Though there are no commands in the New Testament to fast, there are enough examples to lead us into this behavior as the children of God.

## Chapter 2

### MOURN, FAST AND ATTACK

#### 1 Samuel 7:1-12

The context of this event of fasting on the part of God’s people is explained in 1 Samuel 7:2:

*Now it came to pass while the ark remained in Kirjath Jearim that the time was long, for it was twenty years. **And all the house of Israel mourned after the Lord.***

Samuel's answer to test the sincerity of the mourning of the people was his following mandate:

*If you do return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the Lord, and serve Him only. And He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines (1 Sm 7:3).*

Realizing that one has strayed from the Lord should stimulate sincere mourning. But in order to mourn sincerely, one must know the Lord from whom one has strayed. And there is only one way to know the Lord. *“So then faith comes by hearing and **hearing by the word of Christ**”* (Rm 10:17). One can mourn in ignorance of the word of God, but such mourning is useless in “putting away foreign gods.” Acceptable mourning must be founded upon the word of God from which one has strayed. Sincere mourning is characteristic of those who hunger and thirst after the word of God (See Mt 5:3-6).

In the case of the people in the historical event of 1 Samuel 7, Samuel commanded that the people turn from the gods they had created after their own imagination (1 Sm 7:4). Their next action was to take action. Samuel directed, *“Gather all Israel to Mizpeh and I will pray to the Lord for you”* (1 Sm 7:5). The people immediately obeyed the orders of Samuel to gather at Mizpeh. *“**And they fasted on that day and said there, ‘We have sinned against the Lord’**”* (1 Sm 7:6). Their mourning provoked fasting and confession that they had strayed from the will of the one true and living God. Therefore, in order to prepare their hearts and bodies for war, they fasted. This was a day fast, probably ending in the evening, for on the following days they were going into battle (See Jg 20:26).

In preparation for this fast, they first took ownership of their sin that they had forsook God. They were mourning over something that was wrong in their lives, that is, they had forsaken the will of God for the will of foreign gods. As a result of their apostasy, God allowed the ark of God to be taken from them. The objective of their fast, therefore, was first to restore themselves to God, and then, restore the ark of

God to its proper place.

When righteous people realize that they are not spiritually right with God, it is a time for mourning. But mourning must be followed by action. Feelings profit nothing if they are not objectively carried out in our lives. Once the people of Israel heeded the call to do that which was right, they fasted an entire day in order to prepare themselves in body and mind to engage the Philistines in battle.

This incident reminds us of the physical benefits of fasting that the people surely knew at the time of this conflict. It was not a time to gorge oneself with a heavy meal, and then try to engage the enemy on the battlefield. It would be quite difficult to go into battle and pursue an enemy on a full stomach. The imminent conflict called for a fast in order to energize their bodies and minds for battle.

When the Philistines heard that Israel was serious about retrieving the ark of God, they were terrified. Israel was empowered both mentally and physically through their fasting. They prepared themselves to run great distances in pursuit of the Philistines. They *“went out of Mizpeh and pursued the Philistines. And they smote them down as far as below Beth Car”* (1 Sm 7:11). The end of the story was recorded in 1 Samuel 7:12:

*Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpeh and Shen. And he called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far the Lord has helped us”* (1 Sm 7:12).

If the saints of God today would raise a stone to commemorate their victories for God, then mourning and prayer over that which is not right in their lives must begin. Next comes action and fasting, and action again. Our fasting objectively reveals the sincerity of our mourning and prayers. If we would have God heed the call of our prayers, then our mourning must be in response to His word and will. Religious people who are ignorant of the word of God have no idea what the will of God is, and thus, their pleas to God to act in their lives goes unanswered. And thus, their mourning is in vain in that it is not in response to the word and will of God.

Many years later, Israel again sinned. And again God punished them. On this particular occasion, King Saul had taken apostate Israel into battle with the Philistines. In this battle, the Philistines won because Saul had moved away from the will of God. Consequently, King Saul and his sons were slain in the battle. To disgrace Saul and his sons, the Philistines hung their bodies on a wall at Beth Shan.

Fortunately, there were some valiant men in Jabesh Gilead who *“arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth Shan. And they came to Jabesh and burnt them there”* (1 Sm 31:11,12). When these righteous men had accomplished this good deed, **they fasted seven days** (1 Sm 31:13; 1 Ch 10:12). This fasting was in respect of God’s anointed, but also their cleansing from handling dead bodies. The sincerity of their deed was manifested for seven days in their fasting. When good men do good things, a fast in appreciation for God working through them to accomplish good works for His glory is in order. The valiant men of Jabesh Gilead would teach us a lesson on fasting when we accomplish good things because God worked in our lives.

### Chapter 3

## FASTING FOR LIFE

### 2 Samuel 12:1-23

Because he allowed himself to be tempted, David committed adultery with another man’s wife. The prophet Nathan confronted David on the matter with a parable, and with the following concluding words: *“You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon”* (2 Sm 12:9). Nathan’s judgment of David was not unfruitful. David repented with the words, *“I have sinned against the Lord”* (2 Sm 12:13).

But this story was not over with the repentance of David. When Nathan departed from the house of David, *“The Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife [Bathsheba] bore to David, and he was very sick”* (2

Sm 12:15). Whether David knew that the Lord had taken a direct hand in the matter to strike the child sick, we are not told. We are told, however, that David “*inquired of God for the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground*” (2 Sm 12:16).

David evidently concluded that this was a life-threatening sickness. His love for the child moved him to fast in his petitions to the Lord on behalf of the child. A parent who has not had this experience cannot fully understand the helplessness that David felt for his child. We are told that he fasted. Whether intentional, or because of intense worry, we are not told. But a parent who has a child who wavers between life and death will feel no desire to eat. We view David’s fast in this context to be both the result of intense worry that was combined with his intense prayer that God save the child.

David’s fast was prolonged. “*The elders of his house arose and went to him, to raise him up from the ground. But he would not, nor did he eat bread with them*” (2 Sm 12:17). Realizing that David was as a mourning father on the ground before his sick child, the elders sought to comfort him by raising him from the ground. The elders offered to eat with him in order to bring comfort to this concerned father.

“*Now it came to pass on the seventh day that the child died*” (2 Sm 12:18). We assume that this was the seventh day after the child first fell sick, and for the same amount of time, David was on the ground before the child in fasting and agonizing prayer.

There are those times in a parent’s life that fasting is the right thing to do. When our children are in danger, it is a time for agonizing prayer that is coupled with fasting. We would fast as David until a solution is realized. Unfortunately, in David’s situation, the result of the sickness of the child was death. Since it was God who struck the child with sickness, we wonder why He allowed the child to remain alive for seven days before he died. It could be that God wanted to impress on David the great shame that he, the king, had brought on the people of God through his adultery with Bathsheba, and subsequent elimination of Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, by death in battle (See 2 Sm 12:14). The sin was grievous, and thus the time for sorrow was also to be grievous. And because we have a biblical record of this sin,

God would admonish each one of us never to involve ourselves in such a scheme, which in this case, led to the death of both an innocent man, Uriah, and an innocent child.

## Chapter 4 FAST FOR FAVOR Nehemiah 1:1-11

When concerned people realize that things are not right, they mourn, fast, pray and take action. Such were the actions of Nehemiah in reference to the spiritual condition of God's people while they were residing in the land of their captivity and the condition of a remnant that had returned to Palestine.

When a delegation of men eventually came from Palestine to Nehemiah, who was the cupbearer for the Persian king in the palace of Shushan, Nehemiah asked them concerning the condition of Jerusalem and the returned remnant of God's people who were in the land of Palestine. The delegation replied through Hanani,

*The remnant that is left from the captivity in the province is in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down and its gates are burned with fire (Ne 1:3).*

Godly people are not insensitive to the deplorable situation in which God's mission sometimes exists at any place or time in history. It was God's plan to work through Israel in the haven of the promised land to eventually bring the Messiah and Savior into the world. But according to the report of Hanani who testified concerning the condition of the people of God in the land of Palestine, the situation was deplorable. Those who were in the land were composed of those who were left in Palestine after the captivity of 586 B.C., as well as a remnant of captives that joined them with the restorations led by Zerubbabel in 536 B.C. and Ezra in 457 B.C. Restoration in those days was started on the city, but was eventually terminated.

Godly leaders respond, as Nehemiah, to situations that are wrong in reference to the work of God.

*Now it came to pass when I heard these words that I sat down and wept. And I mourned many days, and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven (Ne 1:4).*

The historical setting of this report is crucial in reference to Nehemiah's response. With the return of captives to Palestine that were led by Zerubbabel and Ezra, the rebuilding of the temple was completed in 515 B.C. (Ez 6:13-16). However, opposition arose against the returnees to the point that they ceased rebuilding the city (Ez 4:1-5,24). God then sent Haggai and Zechariah to motivate the people to continue the rebuilding of the city (Ez 4:24; 5:1ff). But because of opposition, the rebuilding was still not completed. It was not until the coming of Nehemiah in 444 B.C. that the city reconstruction was started again and completed. **This was over ninety years after the initial return of captives in 536 B.C.** Now we can better understand Nehemiah's tearful response to the report of Hanani that the city was still in ruins.\*

In his weeping prayer and fasting to God in response to the report of Hanani, Nehemiah first confessed the sins of the people that had led to the condition in which they existed in the land (Ne 1:6). He prayed, "*We have dealt very corruptly against You **and have not kept the commandments***" (Ne 1:7).

Nehemiah confessed that their predicament was the result of their own sin. In his confession, he remembered the pronouncement that God had made to Israel through Moses before they entered the land over one thousand years before: "***If you transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations***" (Ne 1:8). But in the warning concerning transgression and exile, there was also a promise.

***But if you turn to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though***

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\* Please read: *Justified By Works*, Roger E. Dickson, [www.africainternational.org](http://www.africainternational.org), Biblical Research Library, Book 31, Chapter 2.



*your outcasts be in the uttermost part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place that I have chosen to set My name* (Ne 1:9).

Nehemiah realized that if the people of God would be restored to their mission to continue the purpose of God, then it was a time for mourning, confession, fasting and prayer. **The sincerity of Nehemiah's prayer for the restoration of Israel was revealed in his mourning and fasting over the past sin of the people.** Because of his intense emotional response to the report of the men from Palestine, he took a lead in setting the example for the people to do likewise. His reaction to the report was a call for mourning, fasting and prayer on the part of the people.

Nehemiah realized that he must first lead in mourning and fasting for the people in order to plead with God that restoration occur. Nehemiah's prayer, therefore, was backed up with the intensity of his fasting. After he had fasted, he prayed,

*O Lord, I beseech You, let now Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name. And make Your servant prosper today and grant him compassion before this man [the king of Persia]* (Ne 1:11).

Results happened in answer to Nehemiah's fasting and prayer. Nehemiah subsequently was released from his duties as cupbearer to the king in Shushan. He then led a group of repentant captives back to Palestine. Ezra had previously led in restoring captives to the land not long before Nehemiah's restoration. It was a time in Israel's history for rejoicing. It was a time of reading from the word of God in the land. But it was also a time for action. Prayer and fasting produce results when those who pray and fast do their part. The theology to pray and fast, and then wait on God to act, is a self-deception. James was right, "Faith without works is dead" (See Js 2:17).

In order to activate the request of their desires, the people gathered together in the land for a special assembly. They called on Ezra to

bring and read the law of the Lord (Ne 8:1-3). The people also “*assembled with fasting and with sackcloth and dust on them*” (Ne 9:1). For one-fourth of the day at this special assembly, Ezra “*read in the book of the law of the Lord their God*” (Ne 9:3). The people realized that their obedience must be according to the word of God.

The people also realized that their situation in captivity was the result of their fathers’ forsaking the word of God. And now that they were restored to the land, they understood that in order to stay in the land to accomplish the work of God through them, they must stay close to the word of God. Fasting and prayer for restoration can be profitable and sure only when people are driven to the word of God for direction. It is only the word of God that will keep people close to God, and consequently, God close to their desires to work to His glory.

All these events happened in fulfillment of a promise that God made to Israel many years before when they were still in the midst of apostasy in the land. God promised through Isaiah, the prophet at the time, that upon their return to Him, they would be restored from captivity:

*Then your light [after captivity] will break out like the dawn and your health will speedily spring forth. And your righteousness will go before you. The glory of the Lord will be your reward. Then you will call and the Lord will answer. You will cry and He will say, “Here I am.” (Is 58:8,9).*

Because of Nehemiah’s righteous leadership, he and the captives saw in their lives the fulfillment of God’s promise through Isaiah. In captivity, the people mourned over their sin. They prayed and fasted and the Lord heard. When they were restored to the land, they fasted and prayed in thanksgiving. They made a commitment to stay close to the word of God lest they repeat the apostasy of their fathers.

God had answered their prayer for restoration because they mourned and fasted over their apostasy from Him. The people, through the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra, committed themselves never to make the same mistake of turning from the word of God. The sincerity of their

commitment was based on the intensity of their prayers and fasting. It could be concluded that their fasting kept them in prayer and their prayer kept them close to the word of God. And when people stay close to the word of God, they stay close to God.

We glean a great deal from the events of this historical account of Nehemiah in reference to the importance of fasting in our lives. Prayer was the communication of the people to God concerning their repentance and desires. But it was fasting that communicated to God the intensity of their requests. Their requests through the communication of prayer was made sincere through their fasting, and by fasting their prayer was made complete.

Through fasting they were able to clearly focus on their goal of rebuilding the wall of the city. We might conclude that the success of their focusing through fasting was that *“the wall was finished in the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days”* (Ne 6:15).

After this period of rebuilding the temple and city of Jerusalem, the Jews rejoiced over God fulfilling His promises. Four new national fasts were announced by Zechariah. The people would fast, and then there would *“be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah”* (Zc 8:19; see 7:1-7)

## **Chapter 5**

# **FASTING IN FACE OF CALAMITY**

### **Esther 4:1-17**

The historical setting for this fast by Mordecai and Esther came as a result of Haman orchestrating a scheme to have all the Jews massacred throughout the Medo-Persian Kingdom.

*When Mordecai perceived all that was done [by Haman], he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes. And he went out into the middle of the city and cried out with a loud and bitter cry* (Et 4:1).

What was happening was a potential national calamity for the Jews.

They were about to be exterminated from existence. The king's decree to kill all the Jews went throughout the entire Medo-Persian Empire and ***“there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting and weeping and wailing”*** (Et 4:3). When a nation of people are about to suffer a great calamity, **it is time for national mourning and fasting.**

In this case, the Jews were innocent. The calamity was not their making. There was an outside evil that was coming upon them because *“of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews in order to destroy them”* (Et 4:7).

Queen Esther was informed of the wicked scheme of Haman. Now Esther was in a dilemma. It was the law of the land that no one could approach the king unless he held out the golden scepter so that the one who approached him would live (Et 4:11). But Mordecai exhorted Esther, *“Do not think that you will escape in the king's house more than all the Jews”* (Et 4:13). Her life, too, was in danger, for she was a Jew. Therefore, it was a time for Esther to risk her own life for her nation. Mordecai encouraged her with the words, *“And who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”* (Et 4:14).

Esther's response to the calamity was heroic. *“Go,”* she said to Mordecai. ***“Gather together all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me. And do not eat or drink three days, night or day”*** (Et 4:16). Esther would take her life into her own hands by approaching the king without an official invitation. *“I will go in to the king that is not according to the law. And if I perish, I perish”* (Et 4:16). And she did not. The Jews were saved from an ethnic cleansing at the hand of wicked Haman when the king realized that the genocide scheme was against some of the people of his kingdom, particularly the Queen.

When righteous people rise up and realize that calamity is upon them as a people, it is a time for mourning, fasting and petitions to God. When the decree of the king went throughout the Empire, the Jews knew that they were in trouble. In this case, the people against whom the evil was intended were the people of God. It was an evil scheme of Satan to terminate the fulfillment of the promises that God had made to the fathers concerning the coming of the Redeemer into

the world through the Jews. When schemes are engineered on earth to thwart the eternal plans of God, then God's children must renew their commitment to God, for God is about to act through some unknown manner.

Mordecai knew that the genocide of the Jews could not happen because he knew the promises and plan of God through Israel. For this reason he said to Esther, "*For if you hold your peace at this time, **then relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place***" (Et 4:14). Though we may know the plan of God to act in whatever way He chooses, this is not an excuse to sit by in idleness. It is a time for fasting and praying. For example, God promises to forgive and remember our sins no more. But we still must pray and confess our sins (1 Jn 1:9). **Knowledge of the plan of God is no excuse for neglecting fasting and prayer for that which will come.** We know that Jesus is coming again. This is certain. However, it is something about which we fast and pray in order that He come now (See 1 Co 16:22; Rv 22:20). We would, therefore, fast and pray for that which the Lord has promised He will do. Fasting and prayer put us on the side of God who will carry out His plans for the redemption of His people.

From the time of Esther until this present day, the Jews initiated, and honor during the Feast of Purim, the Jews' deliverance from the wicked scheme of Haman. In connection with the Feast of Purim, the Jews first fast to commemorate the fast for which Esther called (Et 4:1-3,15-17). It is an ethnic fast, though in Israel today, it would be a national fast. Such would be a good idea in reference to nations throughout the world who want to restore themselves to God and thank Him for all the deliverances they have had throughout their history.

We can think of no better way to conclude this chapter than with the words of a great American President, Abraham Lincoln . President Lincoln made the following proclamation while the United States was in the throes of a civil war that divided the nation. Senator James Harlan of Iowa, who was the son-in-law of President Lincoln, introduced a unique Resolution in the Senate of the United States on March 2, 1863. A request was made of President Lincoln to proclaim a national day of prayer and fasting for the United States of America during its time of

national division. The Resolution was subsequently adopted on March 3<sup>rd</sup> and was later signed by President Lincoln on March 30<sup>th</sup>. This was one month before the day of fasting was observed on behalf of the nation. Notice carefully the spiritual language of the Resolution. We wonder if such a Resolution could ever be introduced into the present Senate of the United States.

By the President of the United States of America.

A Proclamation.

Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme Authority and just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day of National prayer and humiliation.

And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.

And, inasmuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to

feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views of the Senate, I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer. And I do hereby request all the People to abstain, on that day, from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this thirtieth day of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty seventh.

By the President: Abraham Lincoln  
William H. Seward, Secretary of State

## Chapter 6 DAVID LEADS THE WAY

Remember when Jesus said, “*Love your enemies and **pray for***”

***those who persecute you***” (Mt 5:44)? He said that we do this so that we *“may be the children of your Father who is in heaven”* (Mt 5:45). This is hard. Our resentment seeks to lash out against our enemies with an “eye for an eye” and a “blow for a blow.” But Jesus enjoined on us the attitude that when we are persecuted for doing good, we should respond positively: *“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven”* (Mt 5:12).

David took this one step further. We struggle under the instructions of Jesus to love and pray for our enemies. The carnal side of our humanity seeks to retaliate with equal harm to our enemies. But what if the Holy Spirit called on us not only to pray, but also to fast for our enemies? This is what David, the “man after God’s own heart,” did in response to his enemies. We humbly listen to the Holy Spirit speak to us through David in Psalm 35:

*They [David’s enemies] rewarded me evil for good to the sorrow of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth. I humbled my soul with fasting, and my prayer returned to me unanswered. I behaved myself as though he [my enemy] had been my friend or brother. I bowed down heavily as one who mourns for his mother* (Ps 35:12-14).

Would we mourn in sackcloth with fasting for those who lash out against us? David turned his enemies over to the Lord through prayer and fasting. *“And let the angel of the Lord persecute them”* (Ps 35:6). But as for him, he would fast for them as one would fast for his own brother or mother.

In view of one’s struggles through fasting, we find it amazing that David would behave so toward his enemies. It is easy to utter a momentary prayer for an enemy and move on. We comfort ourselves that we have legally satisfied Jesus’ command to pray for our enemies. But with a lingering and prolonged fast, it is not so easy to dismiss our responsibility to “pray for those who persecute us.”

A prayer is for a moment, but a fast is for a prolonged period of time during which one is self-inflicting oneself on behalf of his enemy. In this behavior we realize the longsuffering of God who lingers for us



when we go astray from Him. We begin to understand how, not why, “*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son*” (Jn 3:16). In fasting for our enemies, we are given a brief glimpse into the longsuffering of God that the Holy Spirit sought to explain through Paul in the following statement: “*But God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Rm 5:8).

David was a person who identified himself so much with the character of God that he put himself in the place of God in this world. He sought to be a child of His Father who was in heaven. He wrote, “***For the zeal of Your house has eaten me up. And the reproaches of those who reproached You are fallen on me***” (Ps 69:9). David was so in tune with God that the unrighteous could not comprehend the spirit and purpose of his fasting. “***When I chastened my soul with fasting,***” he wrote, “***men jeered at me***” (Ps 69:10).

In fasting, the righteous will often be ridiculed by the unrighteous today because they do not understand the spiritual purpose for which the righteous fast. If one does not believe this, then try fasting at the time when there is an office party. Try to maintain a fast during a family reunion or during a birthday party.

We have found that it is quite difficult to have a lengthy fast in a world that seems to consider the eating of food on a continual basis a necessary part of connecting socially. The world jeers at the one who would discipline himself in a prolonged fast. There is no respect for the one fasting because those around him are deep into the world. Imagine drinking no coffee at the office for a week. It would be as David said, “***I made sackcloth also my garment, and I became a proverb to them***” (Ps 69:11).

When in a prolonged fast in these modern times, it will be sometimes as David, who lamentably wrote during his fast for his enemies:

*Reproach has broken my heart, and I am full of heaviness. And I look for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none*” (Ps 69:20).

Nevertheless, one's fast must continue if he or she has determined to reconnect with God in deliverance from the foes of this world. We must fast until we feast on the sweet morsels of spiritual energy that flows freely from the throne of our Father. David would walk us through this journey. "**My knees are weak through fasting,**" He wrote, "**and my flesh fails of fatness**" (Ps 109:24).

David fasted to the point that his body was manifesting to those around him the loss of weight. This was not a day fast. It was not for two or three days. It was a fast that could be identified by his loss of "fatness" over a long period of time. But in such a fast, one must be prepared for the jeering of the unrighteous. David again wrote, "*I have become also a reproach to them [the unrighteous]. When they look on me, they shake their heads*" (Ps 109:25).

There may be times in our lives when we should fast to the point that unbelievers shake their heads concerning what we are doing to ourselves. At least this was what David did. Our unbelieving friends will never understand why we would go on a fast to the point that our bodies would show a tremendous loss of weight. The non-spiritual have no idea what the spiritual are trying to accomplish through fasting. If there were a time when the spiritual are not on the same page as the non-spiritual, it is in the realm of fasting.

Fasting by the spiritual proclaims to the world that our Father reigns in our lives. The one who fasts, however, **must not** put on a show of their fasting as the hypocrites. Jesus said of them, "*Do not look gloomy as the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so that they may appear to men to be fasting*" (Mt 6:16). The righteous must wash and cloth themselves in an ordinary manner in order to manifest to the world that their fast is inward, not outward (Mt 5:17,18). Fasting is never to be for the purpose of manifesting one's self before the world, lest the purpose for fasting be defeated.

It is interesting to note what David concluded should be one of the outcomes of a prolonged fast: "**So that they may know that this is Your hand, that You, Lord, have done it**" (Ps 109:27). We would fast until the unbeliever comes to the conclusion that we fast in order to reconnect with our Father in heaven.

## Chapter 7

# THE FAST OF FAITH

There are three types of fasting that are mentioned in the Bible: (1) Fasting without food and water, (2) Fasting from food only, and (3) Fasting from specific foods. All fasting in the Bible involved going without food. In the case of Daniel, the third fasting characterized his eating habits at a particular time in his life when he realized that God's promises of Israel's restoration were coming to fulfillment.

The first mention of Daniel's fasting in reference to the fulfillment of God's promise to restore Israel took place in the first year of Darius, "*who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans*" (Dn 9:1). It was at this time that Daniel ...

*... understood by scrolls the number of the years revealed as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem (Dn 9:2).*

Daniel understood that the end of the seventy years of captivity were coming to a close. He understood that it was now time that the people of God be restored to the land of promise in fulfillment of the prophecy that was made by Jeremiah (See Jr 25). It was a glorious realization to know that Israel was going to be nationalized again in their homeland of Palestine. The response of Daniel to the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy moved him to prayer, supplications and fasting:

*Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make requests by prayer and supplications, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes (Dn 9:3).*

Though Daniel knew that God would bring about the fulfillment of what He had promised, he still prayed and fasted. Sometimes fasting is for the purpose of giving thanks to God for fulfilling His promises.

Daniel's prayers and fasting, however, were based on his confes-

sion of the sins of the people of God for what led to their captivity. “*We have sinned and have committed iniquity,*” he prayed. “*And we have done wickedly and have rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and from Your judgments*” (Dn 9:5). He continued, “*Neither have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God to walk in His laws that He set before us by His servants the prophets*” (Dn 9:10).

As many other prophets who realized that the apostate state of God’s people resulted from the turn of the people from the commandments of God, Daniel responded with mourning, prayer and fasting (See 1 Sm 31:13; 2 Sm 1:12; 3:35; Ne 1:4; Ps 35:13,14). His mourning, prayer and fasting for joy was first introduced, as other prophets, with a confession of sins on behalf of the people (See 1 Sm 7:6; 1 Kg 21:27; Ne 9:1,2; Jh 3:5-8). Daniel, as other prophets, first sought to humble himself through fasting, and then, in this case rejoice over God’s promise to restore His people to the land of promise (See Er 8:21; Ps 69:10).

In cases of rebellion against God’s word, prayer and fasting must be based on a true confession that one has rebelled against God. Unless one is willing to restore his life to obedience of the word of God, all prayers and fasting to be restored to God are in vain. The greatness of Daniel was that his prayers and fasting were in view of the fact that the nation of Israel must first return to God by returning to the law of God. Fruitful fasting is founded upon this realization: “*Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, even by departing, that they might not obey Your voice*” (Dn 9:11).

God yearns for the repentance of His people. In Israel’s case, the people were to fast, weep and mourn over their rebellion. When Israel was in rebellion before the captivity, the Lord pleaded with them: “*‘Now, therefore,’ says the Lord, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, and with fasting and with weeping and with mourning’*” (Jl 2:12). In captivity, this is exactly what Daniel did for the people. His mourning over their previous rebellion, combined with prayer and fasting, revealed the sincerity of the repentance of the people. When one realizes that he has strayed from the word of God, it is a time for prayer and fasting. If one seeks to secure the help of God to be delivered from the despair of the

world, it is a time for prayer and fasting (See Ex 34:28; Dt 9:9; 2 Sm 12:16-23; 2 Ch 20:3,4; Er 8:21-23).

People who rebel against the word of God are unprofitable. This was the problem with Israel before they found themselves in captivity for seventy years. Daniel wrote, “*Yet we have not made our prayer before the Lord our God so that we might turn from our iniquities and understand Your truth*” (Dn 9:13). Before the captivity, the people fasted, but they sought to live in rebellion to the righteousness of God. Isaiah wrote of their state of rebellion:

*“Why have we fasted,” they say, “and You [God] do not see? Why have we afflicted our soul and You do not acknowledge it?” **Behold, in the day of your fast you find pleasure and exploit all your laborers. Behold, you fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high*** (Is 58:3,4).

If one is not willing to turn from his way of iniquity, his fasting will be in vain. God will not hear the voice of one’s prayer. The purpose of the fasting of the wayward, therefore, should first restore him to the word of God (See Is 58:5-12; Jr 14:11,12; Zc 7,8). There is no profit in fasting if one refuses to be led in belief and behavior by the word of God.

People who are not students of the word of God are people who pray and fast in vain. One cannot pray about where to go unless he follows the road map of God’s word. Before fruitful prayer and fasting begin, therefore, there must be a commitment to follow the will of God. Before we begin our prayers and fasting, we must open the word of God in order that we not be following after our own desires. When prayers and fasting are combined with one’s study of the word of God, then the fasting reveals the sincerity of the repentant.

In the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia, God sent another message to Daniel. The message was one of “*great conflict*” that was to come in the future of Israel after they were restored to the land (Dn 10:1). It would not be a conflict that they would bring upon them-

selves, but a conflict that would prevail between the nations that surrounded Israel. The Jews would suffer as a result of the wicked foreign rulers of Egypt and Syria who struggled for power over Palestine before the Roman Empire brought peace to the land.

Daniel understood the message of conflict, and because he did, he began to mourn and fast, which mourning and fasting continued for three weeks (Dn 10:2). Daniel later wrote of this period, *“I ate no delicacies, nor did meat or wine come into my mouth”* (Dn 10:3). This was a fast for three weeks from specific foods.

What is interesting about this time of mourning and fasting is that Daniel fasted and prayed by faith. There was no answer from God. But *“in the twenty-fourth day of the first month”* Daniel saw a vision (Dn 10:4-6). God finally showed up with an answer to Daniel’s prayer and fasting. For three weeks, therefore, Daniel had prayed and fasted in faith that God would reveal something.

In answer to his prayer and fasting, God sent a vision that was so overpowering that there was no strength left in Daniel (Dn 10:8). Daniel wrote, *“For my natural color turned to a deathly pallor, and I retained no strength”* (Dn 10:8). *“And when I heard the voice of his words, I fell unconscious with my face to the ground”* (Dn 10:9). It was a “powerful” vision in the sense that Daniel was physically affected. God need not answer our prayers and fasting with a vision as He did Daniel. But our reconnecting with Him through fasting can be quite powerful.

What is significant about this event in the life of Daniel was the result of Daniel having committed himself to prayer and fasting in faith on behalf of God’s people. Nothing had happened from his initial prayers and fasting from the first of the month. But on the twenty-fourth day the vision came that was an answer to his prayers. Daniel 10:12 is significant in reference to this period of God’s silence throughout the days of Daniel’s prayers and fasting. God encouraged Daniel,

*Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and to discipline yourself [through fasting] before your God, your words were heard and I have come in response to your words* (Dn 10:12).

And how powerful is that. God listens to those who offer their prayers and supplications that are offered to Him on an empty stomach. It took three weeks of fasting before an answer came, but it eventually came. What is important to remember is that when we start praying and fasting God starts to work, though we might not realize His work in our lives until much later. But He will come when we pray according to His will. God started to act upon Daniel's requests on the first day of his fast, but did not show up until the twenty-fourth day of the month.

God does not work on our time line in reference to our fasting. Fasting that is combined with prayer is always a walk of faith. However, we must remember that simply because we fast and pray does not mean that God will give the answer that we expect of Him. James exhorted the one who expected God to answer every prayer: "*For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord*" (Js 1:7). Prayer and fasting do not obligate God. We are not as the ancient Greeks who created gods after their own imagination, which gods could be manipulated by the whims of the worshippers.

The prayer of faith that is according to the word of God will avail much. But foolish prayers for material blessings should not be uttered in order to obligate God to satisfy our carnal desires. "*A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways*" (Js 1:8). Those who try to focus on the carnal things of this world, while at the same time they seek to live spiritual lives, will find that their prayers for carnal things will go unanswered.

Fasting reveals that one is seeking to keep his or her mind focused on the spiritual. Fasting reenergizes the spiritual part of man. It rejuvenates the spirit by suppressing the carnal. And in this transforming experience our minds are turned from the carnal to the spiritual. If one fasts for spiritual strength, but at the same time prays for carnal things, then the contradiction will annul God's answer.

## Chapter 8

# TRANSITION TO THE NEW COVENANT

From this point on in our study we seek to look into the fasting behavior of Jesus and the early disciples. Fasting was a part of the religious behavior of those who lived under the Sinai covenant that God established with Israel. There were national fasts, specifically in reference to the Day of Atonement (Lv 16:29,31; 23:27-32; Nm 29:7; see At 27:9). There were also many individual fasts (Jg 20:26; 2 Sm 12:22; Ne 1:4; Dn 9:3; Jl 1:14). But other than the national fasts in reference to the Day of Atonement, and the four fasts initiated after the reconstruction of the temple and city after the captivity, there is little evidence of Jesus fasting during His ministry. In fact, He was accused of not regularly fasting on a personal basis as the established religious leadership of the time. His opponents accused, “*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a winebibber’*” (Mt 11:19; see Lk 7:34).

This statement should be understood in the context of the fasting of the self-righteous behavior of those who were making the accusation. The Pharisees fasted twice a week on every Monday and Thursday (Lk 18:12). Since Jesus ate His food as others, their accusation against Jesus would have been that He was not living up to the standard that they had set for themselves as religious leaders concerning the behavior of a “rabbi.”

At the beginning of His ministry, it is stated, “*Now when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry*” (Mt 4:2). We assume that this was a voluntary fast because Jesus voluntarily went to the wilderness where there was little food. But we must also consider that this “fasting” was involuntary simply because there was little food in the wilderness. This may have also been the situation with Moses (Ex 34:28) and Elijah (1 Kg 19:8), who also “fasted” in the wilderness.

The word “fast” is also used in the New Testament in reference to involuntary fasting, that is, going without food simply because of the circumstances in which one found himself. When Paul spoke of his



hardships in preaching the gospel, he spoke of being “*in weariness and hardship, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness*” (2 Co 11:27). “Fastings” in this context would have been voluntary only indirectly in the sense that Paul voluntarily dedicated himself to the preaching of the gospel (See At 14:22). His going without food (fasting) on many occasions would have been involuntary. Such could also have been the case when he mentioned “fastings” in the context of 2 Corinthians 6:4-7.

There is questionable manuscript evidence for the word “fast” to be retained in four scriptures in the New Testament (See Mt 17:21; Mk 9:29; At 10:30; 1 Co 7:5). Later versions of the Bible rejected the inclusion of the word in these texts because of weak manuscript evidence. However, the fact that the word “fast” was included in these texts indicates that fasting was a vital part of the behavior of some Christians in the early centuries when the manuscripts were produced.

Jesus’ ministry was to the Jews who lived under the Sinai law, and before the institution of His new covenant with His disciples after the cross. During His ministry of teaching, He dwelt on the subject of fasting only twice (See Mt 6:16-18; 9:14-17). In fact, there are only four references to fasting in the New Testament era that would be indisputable references to voluntary fasting by Christians. Two were mentioned by Jesus, and two in the book of Acts that refer to the behavior of the disciples (At 13:1-3; 14:23).

Some might wonder why there is less emphasis in the New Testament by Christians on fasting than with the Jews under the Sinai covenant. This may be easier to understand than first thought. For example, consider the annual fast that was required in reference to the Day of Atonement (Lv 16:29,31; 23:27-32; Nm 29:7). This was a national voluntary fast that was held in conjunction with the remembrance of sins by people as a nation. But in reference to the redemption that Christians enjoy under the grace of God after the cross, consider the annulling of this fast in reference to the following statement in the book of Hebrews:

“... *who [Jesus Christ] does not need daily as those high priests [under the*

Sinai covenant], *to offer up sacrifice, first for His own sins, and then for the people's, for this He [Jesus] did **once for all when He offered up Himself*** (Hb 7:27).

And again: “*By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all***” (Hb 10:10).

Jesus was the termination of the Day of Atonement when He offered up Himself for all our sins. This was the meaning of what Paul wrote: “*You also became dead to the law through the body of Christ*” (Rm 7:4). There need be no more offerings for sin, and thus, there need be no more fasting on the Day of Atonement, for the Day of Atonement was annulled by the redemption of Christ on the cross (See Rm 7:1-4).

When the temple and city of Jerusalem were reconstructed after the captivity, God instituted fasts of thanksgiving in reference to the feast of rejoicing over God's fulfillment of His promise to rebuild the temple and city after the captivity (Zc 8:19). The church is now the temple of God (1 Co 3:16; 1 Tm 3:15). There is no longer any physical temple of God, for the disciples are the temple. Therefore, there are no longer any fasts in reference to any physical temple of God. And just in case some Jewish Christians might forget this, God destroyed the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70 through His proxy judgment of the Roman Empire. Christians are not obligated to fast in reference to any physical things of this world.

All national fasts in reference to Esther and the feast of Purim are no longer applicable. Paul reminded all Christians, especially Jewish Christians, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek*” when discussing the present temple of God (Gl 3:28). “*For you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gl 3:28). Physical Israel no longer exists as a chosen people to bring the Messiah and Savior into the world. The Savior has arrived, and thus the vehicle through whom God brought the Savior into the world, national Israel, was no longer needed. God has fulfilled His promises to the Jewish fathers (Lk 24:44; Jn 19:28-30; 2 Co 1:20). The blessing through the seed of Abraham has been fulfilled (Gn 12:1-4). We have been delivered spiritually from the bondage of sin by the cross of Christ, and thus the vehicle of national Israel through which the Savior was

brought into the world was dissolved in Christ.

All national fasts of Israel have now been dissolved. They are not binding on Christians today. Fasts of the Old Testament that were individual and voluntary are now only an example for us today. Those fasts that were voluntary and individual, as David's for his son, Daniel's and Esther's for the nation of Israel, and Nehemiah's for the reconstruction of the city of Jerusalem, were individual fasts that were characteristic of their lives for specific purposes. However, the purposes for which they fasted are long gone. These individual and voluntary fasts are a good example for us today. *"For whatever things were written before were written for our learning ..."* (Rm 15:4). It is not wrong to refer to the fasts of the Old Testament heroes as an example for fasting today. However, we must keep in mind that their fasts are only an example for us today. Their example is not a mandate that Christians should fast today.

The fulfillment of the promises of God in Jesus was the end of those fasts that were held in conjunction with the coming of the Savior. Fasts that were enjoined on the Jews as a special covenanted people with God at Mt. Sinai are also gone because God dissolved Israel in the church.

When we work our way into the New Testament, we must keep in mind that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are recorded histories of Jesus' ministry to the Jews in order to bring them to Him as the Messiah and Savior of the world. These books are actually Old Testament books, for Jesus, and the Jews to whom He ministered, were living under the Sinai law. When Jesus speaks of fasting in these books, we must keep this in mind. This brings us first, therefore, to the fasting of the aged woman Anna at the temple. Her's was an individual and voluntary fast in reference to the coming of the Messiah.

## **Chapter 9**

# **THE MINISTRY OF FASTING**

*Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the*

**tribe of Asher.** *She was of a great age and had lived with a husband seven years from her marriage. And she was a widow of about eighty-four years. She did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day* (Lk 2:36,37).

Anna, as the other Jews who were contemporary with her, lived under the Sinai covenant and law. She was aware of the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah and that these prophecies were nigh unto being fulfilled. All the Jews sensed that the fullness of time was upon them, and thus, she too prayed and fasted in order to encourage God to bring forth the Messiah and “the redemption of Israel” (See Gl 4:4,5).

It is significant to note that Anna was of one of the tribes of the northern ten tribes of Israel who were formerly taken into Assyrian captivity in 722/721 B.C. In fulfillment of the promise of God to return a repentant remnant to Palestine, Cyrus of Persia released captives of all twelve tribes of Israel in 536 B.C. As a result of the decree by Cyrus, some of the ancestors of Anna had returned to Palestine with either Zerubbabel, Ezra or Nehemiah. Therefore, a remnant of the tribe of Asher, as well as a remnant of all twelve tribes of Israel, were at the time of the coming of the Messiah, in Palestine and waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promise of a new covenant. Anna, as well as all Jews, realized that the return of the remnant of Israel would signal the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophecies that related to the coming of the Messiah.

Once the repentant remnant was restored, God promised that He would establish a new covenant with His people. This covenant would include all nations (See Jr 31:31-34). At the time Anna was fasting and praying, the restored remnant was also fasting and praying for the coming of the Messiah of Israel who would deliver the people from the oppression of Roman occupation. The coming of the Messiah meant freedom for all Israel, though the Jews did not understand what this freedom entailed. Because most Jews were looking for a physical redemption, instead of a spiritual redemption, they had a difficult time understanding the true meaning of the promise of the “redemption of Israel.”

Depending on the translation of verse 36, Anna was either a widow

unto her age of eighty-four, or she had been a widow for eighty-four years, thus making her at this time in her life an aged woman of ninety-one years. Regardless of our understanding of her age, it is evident that she was an aged woman who had given herself to prayer and fasting at the temple in reference to the hope of Israel. Hope for the redemption of Israel was the impetus for her prayers and fasting.

The text says that Anna “*served God with fastings and prayers night and day*” (Lk 2:37). She had thus given herself to a specific ministry for the Lord. It was a ministry that aged believers could do. According to this statement, fasting is a service (ministry) to God. Older brothers and sisters who cannot give themselves to the physical demands of some ministries, can at least give themselves to the ministry of fasting and praying. This is a ministry that older brothers and sisters can do on behalf of those who are engaged in conflicts with the forces of evil throughout the world. In other words, write a world evangelist and tell him that you are fasting and praying for the success of his efforts.

Faithful Jews came to Jerusalem every year for the annual Pass-over and Pentecost. When they came, there was a great deal of discussion concerning the coming of the Messiah. All Jews who came to Jerusalem were looking for the “redemption of Israel,” that is, that Israel would be restored to her former glory as an independent state. Though their ambitions were wrong, these faithful Jews were living in anticipation of something to come. They did not understand all the implications of the “redemption of Israel.” Nevertheless, they prayed and fasted in order that God fulfill His promise. We do not believe that Anna was unique in her ministry of praying and fasting for a future that she did not completely understand.

It was a common hope among the oppressed Jews that God would eventually bring forth the Messiah in order that the Jews be delivered from the occupation of foreign powers, which in this case was the Roman Empire. Even Jesus’ immediate disciples had this hope (See At 1:6). Though their hope was in reference to physical nationalism, our hope as Christians is in view of being delivered from this physical world. Our fasting and prayer today would be for the coming of Jesus to deliver us from this world of struggle (See Rv 22:20). And though we do

not understand all that will transpire when Jesus comes, we hope and pray and fast for His coming.

Whenever God promised something in the future of His people, He never gave all the details of what was coming. Therefore, His people have always hoped for that which was promised, but also, they had anticipation about that for which they hoped. We do not have to understand completely that for which we hope.

There was purpose in the prayers and fasting of Anna. We would glean from her ministry that in our prayers and fasting that there must also be purpose. In the case of Anna, she knew the promises of the prophets in reference to the coming of the Messiah. A similar purpose would be applicable to Christians today in reference to the coming of Jesus. We know the promise of Jesus that He will come again. To the apostles, and to the rest of us, Jesus promised, *“I will come again and receive you to Myself, so that where I am, there you may be also”* (Jn 14:3). And He will come again (1 Th 4:13-18; 2 Th 1:6-9). In view of this promise, both Paul and John urged Jesus to come even in their lifetime in the first century, though it is more likely that their prayer for the immediate coming of Jesus was that He come “in time” in judgment on the persecuting Jews, and later, the Romans (See 1 Co 16:22; Rv 22:20). But we should do the same in reference to Jesus’ final coming. Though Jesus may not come until after we die, as He did not come in time until both Paul and John died, He will come. Anna had no assurance that the Messiah would come in her lifetime. Neither are we assured that Jesus will come in our lifetime.

If Anna prayed and fasted that the Son of God come in the flesh as the Messiah of Israel in her lifetime, then certainly it would be a time for aged brothers and sisters today to pray and fast that Jesus come again, though He may not come until after we are dead. Our prayers may not always coincide with God’s calendar of events.

After we once preached a sermon several years ago on the final coming of Christ, an aged sister came up and said, “I am not sure I can pray for Jesus to come again right now. There are some things in my life I would like to get straightened out first.”

It is always a time to pray, with fasting, that Jesus hurry up with

His program to come again. If we do not have things straightened out in our lives, then it is a time for prayer and fasting in reference to our repentance. Anna believed that her fasting would lay her prayers before God to bring the Messiah into the world in her lifetime. This aged woman had no promise that she would be alive when the promise was fulfilled. Nevertheless, she continued to fast and pray. It would be a good ministry to do the same today that Jesus come again to bring our hopes into reality. It is not necessary to know God's calendar of fulfilling promises in order to pray for the fulfillment of His promises.

Jesus will certainly be coming in order to deliver us from this world of trials and tribulations. Who would not want this? Unfortunately, it is a manifestation of our love for this present world that hinders our prayers and fasting in reference to the termination of this world. Our love for the shopping mall often supersedes our love for the new order that Jesus promised He would bring. The fact that we enjoy this world too much is evidence of our lack of prayer for the realization of what Jesus will bring. We must ask ourselves, when was the last time we came into fellowship with the hope of Paul and John who urged Jesus to come quickly?

Paul and John made their requests over two thousand years ago. They did not know, as we know today, that Jesus would not come for over two thousand years after they died. Nevertheless, they made their requests by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for the requests were recorded in inspired literature. The Holy Spirit did not deceive them into believing that Jesus would come in His final coming in their lifetime. However, Jesus did come in time in judgment on the persecuting Jews, and eventually, the Romans. Their prayer for the "coming" of Jesus was answered.

We have an advantage over Paul and John today in reference to the final coming of Jesus. We know that our redemption from this world is closer today than it was when they lived. It would be reasonable to conclude, therefore, that we should be urging the Lord through prayer and fasting that He come in His final coming in order to deliver us out of this world of trials and persecution. How bad will things have to become in this world in order to drive us to prayer and fasting for Jesus

to come and deliver us? Are we too comfortable with this world to urge Jesus to come and disturb us?

At the time of Anna, all the Jews were suffering under the oppression of Roman occupation. It was surely the stifling of their freedoms that compelled them to pray and fast for deliverance. Since freedom is the ultimate impetus to drive us to yearn for deliverance, maybe our prayer and fasting for the “redemption of the church” into eternal glory will happen only when we lose either our freedoms.

In the context of Luke 21, Jesus was speaking specifically of the redemption of the church from Jewish persecution when He would come in time in judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Jesus came in time in judgment on Jerusalem in order to deliver His people from Jewish persecution. He did the same in reference to the Roman Empire. He will do the same for His people at the end of time in His final coming. The following statement that He made in reference to His coming in judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70 would illustrate what He will do for His people when He comes in His final coming:

*And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up and lift up your heads, **for your redemption draws nigh** (Lk 21:27,28).*

And for this we would pray and fast in reference to Jesus coming again for our deliverance from the oppression of this world. Yes, we would sit beside Anna in the ministry of prayer and fasting that the Son of God show up before the calendar of our life runs out.

## **Chapter 10**

### **FASTING TO FOCUS**

*Then Jesus was **led up by the Spirit into the wilderness** to be tempted by the devil. Now when He had fasted **forty days and forty nights**, He then became hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread” (Mt 4:1-3; see Mk 1:12,13; Lk 4:1-13).*



As previously suggested, this may have been a somewhat involuntary fast on the part of Jesus because He was in a wilderness where there was no food. However, He knew the environmental circumstances of the wilderness. He knew that there would be no food and little water. He thus voluntarily allowed the Spirit to lead Him to the wilderness where there was no food. Jesus voluntarily placed Himself in an environment where He had to fast for forty days and nights in preparation for His ministry.

When God starts great movements among men on earth, His messengers are often called to a wilderness to fast. Moses, Elijah, Jesus and Paul all went to the desert before going to the people. In the case of Jesus, it was God's will that He be placed in an environment that would present the opportunity for Him to be tempted in all ways as those He would save (Hb 4:15). In fact, the text says that the Spirit led him to the wilderness "*to be tempted by the devil.*" He was thus led to the desert in order to fast forty days, which fasting was followed by the temptations of Satan. This occasion of fasting on the part of Jesus was meant to be more than going without food. It was to place Him in a physically weak state where He would be most vulnerable to temptation.

Matthew mentions that the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at His baptism that preceded His time in the wilderness (Mt 3:16). Luke recorded, "*And Jesus, being full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness*" (Lk 4:1). At His baptism, He had received the miraculous power of the Spirit in order to manifest the works of the Father throughout His ministry. However, being filled with the Spirit did not guard Him from yielding to the temptations of the devil. Neither did He use His power to create fish and bread when He became hungry during His fast (See Mt 14:13-21).

Matthew emphasizes the fact that Jesus was led to the wilderness specifically for a period of fasting. Our fasting must be specific. In fasting one is able to focus specifically on what is set before him. Because we know that fasting aids in our mental processes to focus clearly on what is before us, we would assume that Jesus' time in the wilderness was for the purpose of focusing on the purpose for which He came

into the world. *“I do not seek My own will,”* He said to His disciples, *“but the will of the Father who sent Me”* (Jn 5:30). On another occasion Jesus said, *“For I came down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me”* (Jn 6:38). We would assume that one reason why Jesus allowed Himself to be led into the wilderness was to focus on His destiny. These forty days of fasting were the initiation to begin His ministry that would conclude with the cross.

If fasting helped Jesus to focus on the will and work of the Father through Him, then we would conclude that fasting would accomplish the same in our own lives. We sometimes have a difficult time determining what we should do in our ministry for the Lord. This is the time for fasting. Through fasting our thinking becomes clear and focused. If we feel that in our ministry we have come to a dead end, then it is time to end our food intake. Before He started His ministry, Jesus wanted to focus clearly on the purpose for which He was sent into the world. He came *“to save the world”* (Jn 12:47). He thus allowed Satan the opportunity to dissuade Him from this destiny.

If we have lost our way, or forgotten our purpose as a disciple of Jesus, then it is a time for fasting. It is a time to go into a wilderness place in order to remind ourselves of our destiny for Jesus as His disciple. What is significant about this fast of Jesus was that He went to a place where He could be alone. He stayed there alone for a long time in order to prepare Himself for what lay ahead.

For spiritual growth, and refocusing our lives, there is no experience like the experience of a prolonged fast in a wilderness place. In a social world where people feel almost afraid to be alone, fasting alone in a wilderness place is an opportunity to reconnect directly with God without the aid of someone else. In the mission of Jesus to the cross, He would lead alone. His disciples would be with Him on the pathways of Palestine. But when it came to the final journey of His mission to the cross, all His disciples would forsake Him. Fasting in the wilderness is an opportunity to discover what it is like to be alone with God.

Many people fast while carrying on with their regular schedule and with their fellow acquaintances. This is the normal environment in

which most people fast. But the challenge with this environment of fasting is that we are often distracted from the One on whom we are to be focusing when we are fasting. Fasting in a wilderness place is for the purpose of not being distracted by friends and family. We remember one time when we secluded ourselves alone for three days in the desert in order to think clearly concerning a challenging mission that was set before us. After the three days in the desert, we had the opportunity for a reality check, and thus reevaluated clearly what God would have us do in our ministry to His glory. Even if one does not fast in a wilderness place, being in such a place with God alone helps one to clarify his or her destiny.

There is no experience like being alone with God in a desert. It is a spiritually exhilarating experience. When all distractions are alleviated from one's thinking and environment, the task of focusing on an objective is easier. In a modern urban life, such environments for fasting are quite difficult to find. But if one does have the opportunity to fast in the wilderness, it will be a memorial experience that will change one's life.

In the case of Jesus' fasting in the wilderness, the text says that He became hungry. Satan came to Him at a time when He was weakest. One must keep in mind, therefore, that when fasting, Satan will seek to stop one's fast with the temptation of food. Satan will seek to take our minds off that for which we are fasting and place it on the physical craving for food.

We must not think that Satan does not know the spiritual benefits of fasting. Therefore, we must keep in mind that the purpose for fasting is to focus on our spiritual goals, not on our physical needs. In fasting we are disciplining our minds to focus on that which is greater than the physical. In order to accomplish the goals of our fast, it is good to set a specific number of days or time of fasting. One of the first goals to accomplish in fasting is to fulfill one's determined goal for his or her time of fast.

Jesus went without food for forty consecutive days and nights. Moses did the same (Ex 34:28), as well as Elijah (1 Kg 19:8). We are not told why Jesus fasted specifically for forty days and forty nights,

unless there is some significance to the forty years the nation of Israel wandered in the wilderness of Sinai because of their refusal to immediately conquer the land of promise. It may be that the significance is only in the length of time. Regardless of the reason for the forty days, Jesus evidently had set a goal for the time He would fast.

One can physically go without water at the most for three or four days, and without food for about six weeks, depending on one's body mass. But in each situation, one cannot carry on with the normal pace of life during a prolonged fast. Jesus was not in a situation where He maintained an active schedule during His forty days of fasting. The text says that He went only without food during this time, though water may have been limited in the wilderness.

Because Jesus was vulnerable during and immediately after His days of fasting, Satan continually tempted Him in order to make Him turn from both His fasting and the destiny of His ministry (Mk 1:13). It was at the end of His fasting that Jesus would be most vulnerable to any temptation. In the same manner as he tempted Eve in the garden of Eden (Gn 3), Satan tempted Jesus after the lust of the eyes and flesh, and the pride of life (1 Jn 2:16). However, even at this time when Jesus would have been most vulnerable to yield to temptation, He did not give in to the lure of Satan's temptations. At the end of His fasting, He was clearly focused on His destiny, and thus, Satan had no chance of changing Jesus' walk to the cross.

One of the purposes for fasting is to place one in a vulnerable situation in reference to the lust of the flesh. If one can prove to himself that he can conquer the lust of the flesh for a determined period of time, then one gains great confidence by the disciplining of the body. It is food that is often our worst enemy in destroying our self-discipline. And thus one of the serendipitous results of fasting is that we become more disciplined in controlling the intake of food. We become more reassured that we are in control of our physical and spiritual being.

## Chapter 11

### “WHEN YOU FAST”

*Moreover, **when you fast**, do not look gloomy as the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so that they may appear to men to be fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, **anoint your head and wash your face**, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you* (Mt 6:16-18).

These were the first words that Jesus spoke concerning fasting during His ministry. At the time, fasting was a common practice among the religious leaders of the Jewish culture, and thus, it was only natural that He would explain fasting in reference to the disciples' response to His lordship in their lives. And since it was common for all religious leaders to lead in the behavior of fasting, there would later come some complaints as to why Jesus' disciples did not fast during His ministry (See Mt 9:14,15). But in the Sermon on the Mount in this context, Jesus wanted to establish some behavioral principles that should later characterize the fasting of His disciples.

The statements that Jesus made here in reference to fasting should be considered in the context of His introductory statement concerning prayer that He previously made in the text: “*And **when you pray** ...*” (Mt 5:5). Jesus assumed that His disciples would pray. Prayer would be a part of their lives as His disciples. It was not “if” they prayed, but “when” they prayed. They would be a discipleship that continued to lay their requests before God (1 Th 5:17). There was no need, therefore, to command prayer, as there was no need to command fasting. It was simply something that His disciples would do as His disciples.

With almost the same statement that Jesus used to introduce prayer, He also introduced fasting: “*Moreover, **when you fast** ....*” It was not “if” the disciples would fast, but “when” they would fast. Jesus assumed that His disciples would in the future fast as a part of their discipleship. Fasting would be the natural response of those who would

respond to His lordship.

Since this specific teaching of Jesus on fasting took place early in His ministry, we must assume that His disciples were somewhat confused concerning the traditional manner of fasting that was common among religious leaders. The religious leaders had established a traditional schedule and manner of fasting. The Pharisees fasted twice a week, once on Monday and again on Thursday (Lk 18:12). They had also established an outward appearance of fasting that would identify to the public that they were in a fast. Jesus explained that they "*disfigure their faces so that they may appear to men to be fasting*" (Mt 6:16). We would assume, therefore, that Jesus gave His instructions on fasting in this context in view of the concern of some among His disciples who saw the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in their fasting.

Since fasting would be the natural response of those who would seek to depend on God's work in their lives, then Jesus in this context seeks to enjoin on His disciples some simple instructions concerning fasting. The Jewish religious leadership often let their hair go uncut when they had lengthy fast. They would put ashes on their heads and show a disfigured face in order to be publicly identified to be in a fast. But none of this behavior would be characteristic of His disciples when they were in a fast.

The contemporary religious leaders' emphasis on fasting was not primarily to plea for God to work in their lives, but to manifest the meritorious performance of fasting as a religious rite. By an outward show they sought to lead the people to fast regularly. However, by fasting in such a manner, and for such purposes, the only reward they received for their fasting was the praise of men. Their outward show in fasting nullified God's response to their requests. They were perceived by the public to be spiritually minded because they put on a "fasting show." What they forgot was that in fasting one must focus on the inner self, not on an outward portrayal of a legal code of religiosity. They nullified the purpose for fasting by their theatrical performances in fasting.

One fasts in order to take his or her mind off the physical needs of the body in order to focus on the spiritual needs of the inner man. When

the outward man has continuously overindulged in food, it is time for the inner man to overindulge in the spiritual. Obsessive eaters have need of obsessive fasting in order to readjust their thinking from focusing on the physical to focusing on the spiritual. But in this transition of focus, fasting must never become a show time performance. Therefore, Jesus instructed His disciples in their fasts, "*Anoint your head and wash your face*" (Mt 6:17).

It is not the desire of the disciples of Jesus to fast meritoriously, nor to fast in order to draw attention to one's performance of religious rites. In fasting one focuses on the inner man in order to reconnect this man with God. By concentrating on the inner spiritual part of man, the disciples of Jesus should give no outward indication of their struggle to reconnect with God through fasting. The purpose of fasting is to humble oneself inwardly before God in order to call on God to work in his or her life.

The fact that one was not to give an outward appearance of fasting indicates that one can fast during his normal function of life. He or she does not have to go to a desert place, but can carry on with a normal life while fasting. At least this seems to be what Anna was doing at the temple. The only time others would know that he or she is fasting is when he or she allows the food tray to pass.

It is noteworthy that Anna fasted in a public place at the temple. But there seems to be no indication that she put on any intentional show of her fasting. Everyone simply knew that this was her personal ministry in reference to the coming of the Messiah. We assume also that she was not the only one fasting and praying for the coming of the Messiah. It is not wrong to inform others that one is in a fast. It is pretentious, however, to expect others to give one glory for his or her fast.

In the statement, "*so that you do not appear to men to be fasting,*" means that our fasting should be in secret, and thus seen only by our "*Father who is in secret*" (Mt 6:18). If there is any showmanship before men in fasting, then we defeat the very purpose for our fast. If we focus on some outward appearance in order to manifest the conviction of our fasting, then the purpose of "afflicting our soul" through

fasting is defeated. The disciples of Jesus seek only to be noticed by their heavenly Father. In fasting, therefore, they seek to call the attention of their Father to focus on their pleas.

## Chapter 12

### FASTING IN ANTICIPATION

*Then the disciples of John came to Him [Jesus], saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, **but Your disciples do not fast?**” And Jesus said to them, “Can the attendants of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, **and then they will fast** (Mt 9:14,15; see Mk 2:18-22; Lk 5:33-39).*

This is the second time Jesus dealt with the subject of fasting. In this context He deals with the subject only because it is brought up by others. This occasion, and His answer to the question, are recorded both in Mark and Luke. According to the record of Mark and Luke, the question that generated Jesus’ teaching on the subject came from the disciples of John, the scribes and Pharisees (Mk 2:18; Lk 5:30). Luke records, “*And **they** said to Him, ‘**The disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees. But You eat and drink**’* (Lk 5:33).

When all three accounts are considered together, it seems that scribes and Pharisees were the root of the complaint, particularly the scribes. In Luke’s account, it was the scribes who actually posed the question to Jesus, presumably on behalf of the Pharisees. The scribes were the “they” in Luke’s account.

If the above was the case, then the complaint was sharp. The Pharisees and scribes had a long history of tradition on their side in this matter. And then along came the disciples of John. They fasted in expectation of the Messiah, who was actually standing their midst. They had conformed to the purpose for which Anna had fasted. They just had not yet realized that Anna’s prayers and fasting had already been



answered. The Messiah was there. Nevertheless, the scribes sought to intimidate Jesus into teaching His disciples to conform to the religious codes of the day on fasting.

So the religious leaders asked Jesus why He had not taught His disciples to fast (Mk 2:18). Since their question was a complaint, then we might assume that it was an accusation against Jesus concerning His supposed lack of responsibility to carrying on with the accepted culture of fasting that conformed to Jewish religious traditions (See Mk 7:1-9). They presumed to be spiritually minded in their fasting, and thus set themselves up as judges concerning all fasting. If Jesus were a spiritual leader, then according to their thinking, He would certainly teach His disciples to fast. Evidently, the scribes and Pharisees in this conversation were not previously present in the multitudes when Jesus earlier gave instructions on fasting in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6.

In order to understand what Jesus taught on fasting in the context of this complaint, we must understand what He said immediately after He made these statements on fasting. He spoke to them a parable that *“no one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old”* (Lk 5:36). *“And no one puts new wine into old wineskins”* (Lk 5:37). Jesus emphasized that something new was coming. Therefore, on this occasion His accusers could not compare the requirements of the past with that which was to come. Regardless of their traditional manner of fasting, there were changes coming. If they tried to “patch” the new onto the old, or “pour” the new into the old, the old would be “torn” by the new patch, and the old would be “burst” by the new. For this reason, the old had to be taken away in order that the new be established (Hb 10:9). In other words, change was coming.

It is interesting to note that the question they posed did not focus on whether the disciples of Jesus fasted, but when they fasted. Of course they asked in reference to fasting, but Jesus’ answer was in reference to when His disciples would fast.

Fasting by the Jews was a part of the religious culture of the first century. It was practiced by the Jews, and it was taught also by John the Baptist. This discussion on fasting took place at a time when the

disciples of both the Pharisees and John were fasting and praying (Mk 2:18; Lk 5:33). But the purpose for which each fasted was different. The Pharisees had their various reasons for fasting as a religious order, but the disciples of John were fasting in reference to the coming Messiah.

Jesus' answer seems to be in the context of changing the fasting behavior of the disciples of John the Baptist, which thing happened when John was imprisoned and beheaded. Jesus answered the disciples of John by stating that it was not the time to fast when the bridegroom was in their presence. Mark records, "*As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast*" (Mk 2:19). However, there would be a time when the bridegroom was taken away. It would be at that time that His disciples would fast.

The attendants of the bridegroom need not fast while the bridegroom was still in their presence. In this context Jesus described Himself as the bridegroom. The time to fast would be when He was taken from their presence. In Jesus' situation, He was taken away from them and crucified. He was then taken away from them when He ascended to heaven. Since Jesus, as the bridegroom, has been taken away, then it is now the time for the disciples of Jesus to fast. The disciples of John fasted in order that the Messiah come. At the time these disciples lived, the Messiah had already come, but would soon be taken away. For Christians today, therefore, it is now a time to fast in order that He come again.

Jesus assumed that after His death and ascension, His disciples would fast. Those who are disciples of Jesus in this present age are fasting. This text makes it very clear that the disciples of Jesus in this time are to be fasting. We would conclude from Jesus' statement that His disciples would be identified by those who would be fasting in His absence.

## Chapter 13

# LIFE-STYLE FASTING

The context of the fasting that is mentioned in Acts 13 emphasizes the ministry of fasting as a normal part of the behavior of the disciples. At least this was the case among the disciples in Antioch. Since the disciples in Antioch were Gentiles, and not Jews, then we must assume that the fasting that was common among them was taught to them by those who first preached the gospel in the city. We might assume, therefore, that when evangelists go into new areas to preach the gospel, fasting and prayer is something that should be discussed among the new Christians. We wonder, therefore, how many of our “schools on missions” are teaching their students the subject of fasting in preparation to teach others also on this subject?

*Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Separate for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away (At 13:1-3).*

Antioch of Syria was the third largest city of the Roman Empire. It was the ideal location from which the gospel could go forth to the unbelieving Gentile world. Therefore, the Holy Spirit chose this predominantly Gentile church to accomplish a major evangelistic outreach.

The Spirit’s choice of the disciples of this city was based on who was there at the time He called Saul, who was later called Paul, and Barnabas. These were a very dedicated group of disciples who could identify with the culture to whom the evangelists would be sent. The very fact that these were a group of disciples who were in constant ministry, with prayers and fasting, qualified them to produce evangelists who could go forth into all the world.

What is significant in reference to those who are dedicated disciples is that they minister, fast and pray on a continual basis. In their ministry to the Lord, these disciples fasted. Their fasting was thus a part of their local ministry. We would compare their ministry of fasting with what transpired a few years later among the disciples in Derbe. Luke recorded,

*And when they [Paul and Barnabas] had designated elders in every church, and had prayed **with fasting**, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed (At 14:23).*

It is not stated in the preceding text that the disciples fasted **with prayer**. The text actually says that they prayed **with fasting**. Fasting was the foundation upon which the prayers were offered. The fasting was a continual practice in their behavior as disciples who offered prayers for specific things. We might conclude that their prayers were validated by their fasting. We would not assume that the fasting here was a prolonged fast during which they prayed. We would simply conclude that as those in Antioch, fasting was a part of the discipleship of those in Derbe. They carried on with a life-style of fasting periodically, and thus prayed on the foundation of their fasting.

In both Antioch and Derbe, the fact that the prayers of the disciples were coupled with fasting manifested that they were serious about God working in their lives as they ministered. They were serious about depending on God. Their prayers and fasting manifested that they were serious about world evangelism, and thus, the Holy Spirit gave them a serious evangelistic task.

In the case of Antioch, the local Christians were evidently praying and fasting about sending evangelists out to preach the gospel to other regions. We would not assume that it was the idea of the Holy Spirit to send someone out. The local Christians already knew what their responsibility was in order to be obedient to the command of Jesus that the gospel be preached to all the world (See Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16). The Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas on this particular occasion as a specific answer to the prayers and fasting of the Antioch disciples. We wonder how many

other times He did the same in answer to prayer and fasting by the early disciples that are not recorded in the New Testament (See At 8:4).

Someone came to Antioch and preached the gospel, and thus, the disciples in Antioch took ownership of the mission to do likewise in reference to other areas. The Antioch disciples were praying and fasting that something be done in reference to missions, not to be motivated to do missions. All the Holy Spirit did in this case was to make the selection of who would go. We would assume, therefore, that their praying and fasting was to make a decision as to who would go, as well as where they should go.

When Christians are in ministry, they pray with fasting in order that their local ministry may extend to other areas. When this behavior and aspirations characterize the life-style of the disciples today, then the Holy Spirit is going to show up in order to move someone into all the world. In the case of the Antioch church, the mission was to move some of the local teachers into the rest of the world. Because this is what happened in Antioch of Syria may explain why many today do not pray and fast that someone be sent out to preach the gospel to other regions of the world. In the case of Paul and Barnabas, they too were involved in the prayers and fasting. Though Paul and Barnabas may have been praying for direction, it may have been that did not know that it would be them that the Spirit would chose to send out. Be careful concerning that for which you pray in reference to doing the work of God.

During one of their fasts, the Holy Spirit called through them as a group the two teachers, Paul and Barnabas. These two teachers had special talents for ministering the word of God among the Gentiles, and thus, the Spirit called them to go on a specific cross-cultural work of evangelism among the Gentiles to whom they would be sent (See Gl 1:15; 2:9).

Through their active local ministry, the two men had qualified themselves to be sent out. Since neither Paul nor Barnabas were native residents of Antioch, it seemed only logical that they be the two who would go back to their homelands. Barnabas was from Cyprus and Paul from Cilicia. These were the two regions to which they would go

on their first missionary journey. Once the Spirit had tapped them on the shoulder, fasting and prayer was a means by which they continued to prepare themselves for the mission that was before them.

Now in Acts 13:3 a significant statement is made in reference to their prayers and fasting. After the Spirit made known to Paul and Barnabas their mission, the entire group of disciples fasted and prayed for the two evangelists for the special mission to which they had been called. Since these two evangelists were to be sent on an extensive journey, it was time, through fasting and prayer, to focus their minds and bodies on what lay before them. Fasting clarified their thinking and changed their focus from local ministry to international ministry. It also prepared their bodies physically to tackle the challenging journey that was before them.

It was the Holy Spirit who made the selection of the evangelists. But it was the local disciples who sent them on their journey. Whenever there is a challenge set before those who are going forth, it is a time for fasting and prayer. In fact, this text uses the passive tense. Before the evangelists stepped one foot out of Antioch, the disciples fasted and prayed. The statement, "*Then when they had fasted and prayed,*" indicates that this was more than one prayer and fast. Once the mission was determined, the Christians in and around Antioch carried on with a behavior of fasting and prayer in order that God lead the way of the evangelists.

We are not told how long it was between the time the Spirit separated Paul and Barnabas, and when they actually left on their journey. But between the call and the departure we can assume that the focus of the disciples' customary fasting and prayer simply changed from their local ministry to the foreign ministry in which Paul and Barnabas were to be involved. If the example of the disciples in Antioch teach us anything on discipleship, it is that disciples fast and pray on a regular basis, and also for specific missions to which some of the local teachers are called to go into all the world.

## Chapter 14

# SPIRITUAL CONQUESTS

We can become no greater than those things in our lives over which we do not discipline ourselves to conquer. The control of our destiny is always limited by our lack of control over those obstacles that limit our dreams. We can thus better understand why the Holy Spirit exhorted that we give “***all diligence***” in order to add to our “*faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge **self-control** ...*” (2 Pt 1:5,6). Fasting energizes our self-control, and when self-control is energized, we are able to do great things for God.

The apostle Paul realized that any lack of self-control in his spirit or behavior could disqualify him from receiving the crown for which he so diligently struggled: “***But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified***” (1 Co 9:27).

This is the reason for which we fast. We seek to discipline our bodies and spirit in order that we bring under control those areas of our lives that may be out of control. This was Paul’s admonition and example for those who would be disciples of Jesus. He admonished the Achaian disciples, “***And every man who strives exercises self-control in all things***” (1 Co 9:25). If one would strive to receive the crown of life, then he or she must exercise self-control in all areas of life (1 Co 9:25). For this reason, we are exhorted, to “***continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control***” (1 Tm 2:15). Fasting trains our minds in self-control.

Children who are undisciplined will often lead undisciplined lives in their adulthood. Undisciplined children who do not learn the emotional skills of self-control are often out of control as adults. The lack of discipline in our childhood is carried out in an adult that has little direction and determination. Nevertheless, the lack of discipline in our childhood is no excuse for not disciplining ourselves when we are adults. Paul wrote, “***When I was a child I spoke as a child. I understood as a child. I thought as a child. But when I became a man, I put away***

**childish things**” (1 Co 13:11). Christian maturity comes through self-realization. For this reason, no saint can use his or her childhood as an excuse for undisciplined behavior as an adult.

We must take ownership of our minds and bodies when we put away childish things. This is specifically true in reference to our spiritual behavior. Through fasting and prayer we seek to put away our lack of discipline in order to train our minds to be in control of our being, and thus, our future. In this context of behavior, Paul exhorted the Achaians, “*Brethren, do not be children in thinking. ... but in thinking be mature*” (1 Co 14:20). Fasting is a means by which we seek to put away all childish behavior in order to be spiritually mature in Christ. Spiritually mature Christians have taken ownership of their destiny.

If there are areas in our behavior where we lack discipline, then these areas of personal dysfunction hinder our function as disciples of Jesus. God seeks to help us in these areas of personal dysfunction. As adults in Christ, therefore, God deals with our spiritual dysfunctions in order to mature us in Christ: “*My son,*” the Hebrew writer reminded his readers, “*do not despise the disciplining of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked by Him. For whom the Lord loves He disciplines ...*” (Hb 12:5,6). Because we understand that God disciplines us through trials, we can rejoice in our trials (See Js 1:2).

Discipline should be associated with God’s love for us, because in discipline God is working with us in order that we become the best we can be as His children. We do not despise the discipline of the Lord, for through discipline the Lord is trying to spiritually mature our being for a better future. The Lord seeks through discipline to help us “put away” childish behavior that holds up spiritual development in order that we think and behavior as mature saints in Christ.

Though the preceding statement of the Hebrew writer was stated in the context of outward discipline that God would allow to come into our lives in order to build our character, through fasting we can help ourselves in this spiritual transformation of our character by working on the inside. God allows of outward disciplining to aid our personal inward disciplining. All disciplining, both from God and from ourselves, therefore, is for the purpose of building a better future, as well



as making us better candidates for eternal dwelling.

It is interesting to see the reaction of those who have committed themselves to the world to satisfy the lusts of the flesh. When they encounter the self-control that is revealed through the behavior of the children of God, they fear, or at least, are intimidated by self-control and godly behavior. Paul once spoke of these things to a worldly leader in government. When Paul “*reasoned about righteousness, self-control and judgment to come, Felix became frightened ...*” (At 24:25). Felix evidently saw in Paul’s behavior a man who was in control of his entire emotional being. He was not like other prisoners who had stood before him with fear and trembling.

Self-control and fasting certainly frightens a great number of people. Just the thought of going without food for any period of time in order to grow in self-control is not a pleasant thought to some. Hunger pains will strain one’s lack of self-control. But once the hunger pains are gone in a prolonged fast, the “muscles” of the soul can be strengthened on the nourishment of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, we must continually keep in mind Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 9:27. As a disciple, and as a Christ-sent apostle, Paul said that if he did not discipline himself and bring his body into control in all aspects of life, then he could be disqualified for eternal dwelling.

Our deepest secrets that are out of control must be brought into control. We fast in reference to all aspects of our life in order that our total being be brought under the control of the Spirit of God. That which is outside the body that has control over the body must be brought under control. That which is within the body that has control over the body, must also be brought under control. In reference to married couples, Paul even speaks of bringing under control the sexual drives of individuals:

*Do not deprive one another [of sexual intercourse] except by agreement for a time so that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer. And come together again so that Satan not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Co 7:5).*

All those emotions within the body that war against the Spirit must be brought into control in order that we lead the disciplined life of a child of God. Fasting in all aspects of our lives is the means by which we gain confidence that we are not out of control.

The reason we must seek to bring under control all physical and emotional characteristics of our being is that Satan is looking for areas in our lives that are not under control. “*Be sober, be vigilant,*” therefore, “*Your adversary the devil walks about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*” (1 Pt 5:8). Satan is seeking to devour us in our weakest areas. When he sees a weak point in our character, it is there that he attacks. It is in these areas where we are weakest, therefore, that we fast in order to conquer, lest we be conquered by him who wars against us in the flesh and spirit (See Ep 6:12).

Those who are specifically designated to be leaders among us must be “*self-disciplined and sober-minded*” (1 Tm 3:2). God expects the same character of every disciple of Jesus who is led by the disciplined. These two characteristics of Christian living are strengthened through prayer and fasting. The early Christians realized that they must bring under control through prayer and fasting the totality of their physical and spiritual being.

It may be significant to conclude this book with a variant reading in the text of the book of Mark that indirectly reveals that fasting was commonly practiced among the Christians of the second century. The variant reading is in Mark 9:29. The event in the context was in reference to the disciples’ not being able to cast out a particular evil spirit. “*Now when He [Jesus] came into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’*” (Mk 9:28). Some manuscripts give the reading that Jesus replied with the words, “*This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer **and fasting***” (Mk 9:29 - King James Version).

All recent renditions of this text leave out the reading, “and fasting.” Because the manuscript evidence is weak for this reading, and because those manuscripts that have the reading are late in reference to the original autograph, the reading was deemed by many translators to be an addition by a later scribe.

The manuscript evidence is indeed weak to include “with fasting,” but there is an important point why the reading does show up in later manuscripts, if indeed it was not in the original autograph. We would conclude that prayer “and fasting” were so commonly practiced among the early Christians into the second and third centuries that the reading may have been added. The practice of prayer with fasting was so common that some scribe may have thought that the reading “with fasting” was possibly forgotten by some earlier scribe in copying the text. Or maybe a particular scribe at the time thought that fasting was so important in the lives of the disciples of Jesus, that he added the reading. We will never know why the reading is in the text of some manuscripts.

Our point is that fasting was very common among Christians in the centuries that followed the first Christians. It was so common that some scribe possibly concluded that fasting was commonly linked with all prayer, and through fasting, prayer was empowered to accomplish the most difficult tasks in our lives.

Fasting certainly accomplishes some great things physically in our bodies. However, this is not the primary purpose for the fasting of the Christian. The Christian seeks those great things that originate spiritually from fasting. These benefits would be in reference to our behavior as the children of God. But in reference to this, we would also conclude that fasting empowers our prayers in reference to calling on God to be attentive to our pleas for His help.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

### NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**