

The Neglected Discipline Of Fasting

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Fasting is a neglected spiritual discipline. It is taught in the Bible. It was practised by many godly men in the past. The 1689 Confession of Faith teaches the need to fast on special occasions (chapter 22, paragraph 5), and requires that elders be ordained by fasting and prayer, and the laying of hands (chapter 26, paragraph 9).

Most Christians are ignorant of how fasting is to be carried out. Pagan ideas on fasting are sometimes adopted. Why is there so little teaching given on fasting? The reasons for this may be: (i) It is believed that this is a matter of individual liberty, since there is no clear command to fast as there are commands to pray (e.g. Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Tim. 2:8); (ii) It is not a matter of great importance compared to teachings on salvation, sanctification, soul-winning, etc.; (iii) Fasting has been abused, and is practised also by the pagans.

The tide is changing. Many are beginning to see the relevance, the value, and the importance of fasting. Recent years saw the publication, and republication, of a number of treatises on fasting: “Fasting”, by Rushworth Smith (New Wine Press), “The Duty, The Benefits, And The Proper Method Of Religious Fasting”, by Samuel Miller (Presbyterian Heritage Publications), “Fasting”, by David W. Cloud (Way of Life Literature, 1986).

In this article, we shall examine the biblical teaching on fasting and seek to answer two questions: “Should Christians Fast?” and “How Should Fasting Be Carried Out?”.

I. Should Christians Fast?

The meaning

In the Old Testament, fasting is described by the Hebrew word *sum*, which means “to cover”. Covering the mouth, or not permitting food to enter it, is meant. A common expression which refers to fasting is “afflicting the soul” (Lev. 16:29-31; 23:27; Num. 30:13). In the New Testament, the Greek word for fasting is *nesteuo*, which means “to abstain”.

Fasting may be a condition that is involuntary, that is, forced upon a person by circumstances. In 2 Corinthians 6:5 and 11:27, the fastings referred to are most probably involuntarily. Paul went without food because of the pressing circumstances that he faced in the work of preaching the gospel. Our purpose here is to consider voluntary fasting, that is, the deliberate abstention from food for spiritual reasons, like that seen in Acts 13:3 and 14:23.

The purpose

Many reasons for fasting may be discerned in the Bible. Often, more than one reasons are combined. Why were fastings carried out?

1. To humble oneself before God (e.g. Neh. 1:4ff; Ezra 8:23). This included the confession of sins.

2. To plead for special needs (Neh. 1:4ff; Ezra 8:23; Mk. 9:29). This was, of course, done in connection with prayers.
3. To focus one's attention upon an important event, e.g. the commissioning of missionaries (Acts 13:2-3); the appointment of elders (Acts 14:23).
4. To seek divine help in times of severe spiritual conflict (Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 9:29).
5. As an act of piety (Acts 10:30-31; 1 Cor. 7:5; Lk. 2:37). Note: Bible translations that are not based on the more reliable *Received Text* omit fasting in many passages.
6. In lamentation, i.e. expression of grief:
(i) Over disaster experienced, e.g. defeat in battle (Judg. 20:26); bereavement (1 Sam. 31:13); setbacks in the work of God (Neh. 1:4); plague (Joel 1:14; 2:12-15); (ii) Because of threatened disaster, e.g. enemy attack (2 Chron. 20:3); destruction of the Jews (Esther 4:3; 9:31); impending death (2 Sam. 12:16, 21-23).

It is to be noted that we fast for a spiritual reason. There is nothing particularly spiritual about fasting over somebody's death (2 Sam. 12:21-23; 1 Thess. 4:13). Ofcourse, the situation is different when a death occurs in connection with some spiritual calamity, as for example, when a believer is martyred. Even so, we grieve more for the sins of the people and the prevailing spiritual darkness (cf. Mt. 9:15). We fast to plead for God's mercy upon a nation, and upon His people. We do not believe that those in normal mourning should fast. If anything, they should be encouraged to have food and rest, instead of being overwhelmed by grief.

The value

Contrary to popular opinion, fasting brings physical good to most people instead of harm. Fasting is said to have caused self-induced visions which may prove harmful. That happens more with severe fasting, with which we are not interested. Fasting is said to cause gastritis. Often it is that people have gastritis already, even before they attempted fasting. If anything, fasting has the effect of cleansing the body system. It is a truth that most people over-eat. You may not be particularly fat, but you probably eat more than what you need. And this at a time when people in other parts of the world have not enough to eat! Fasting does the body good in that the blood system is rid of all fat and carbohydrate for a time.

Furthermore, self-control over our bodily appetites is urged upon us in such passages as:

2 Timothy 1:7, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." The "sound mind" there speaks of self-discipline and self-control.

Philippians 3:18-19, "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end *is* destruction, whose god *is* their belly, and *whose* glory *is* in their shame - who set their mind on earthly things."

Romans 14:17, "...for the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

1 Corinthians 7:4-5, "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."

Many of us will be helped by a period of discipline in fasting and abstention from bodily appetites.

Apart from physical benefits, there are also spiritual ones. In the Bible, we find that voluntary

fasting is always done in conjunction with prayer. You may have prayer without fasting, but you cannot have fasting without prayer. Most Christians would have heard of prayer, meditation and fasting mentioned together in relation to the Christian life. When one engages in fasting, the other two matters - namely, prayer and the contemplation of spiritual truths - will be there at the same time. We are, of course, talking about correct fasting. Fasting that does not involve at least prayer is not correct fasting. Samuel Miller calls fasting a "precious auxiliary to devotion" (ibid., p. 13).

Benefits apart, we have yet to deal directly with the question, "Should Christians fast?" One key passage to consider is Matthew 6:17, "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,..." This verse is parallel to verse 5, "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites." The phrase "when you fast" in the original Greek is in the "subjunctive mood". The Lord was not referring to a single specific act of fasting that the disciples were soon to engage in. Rather, the action was conditional and and to be repeated. The disciples were not **commanded** to fast, just as they were not commanded to pray in verse 5. The Lord, however, expected His disciples to pray, and He **expected** them to fast as well.

Unlike prayer, however, there is no command in other parts of the Bible for Christians to fast (cf. Mt. 26:41; Eph. 6:18; 1 Tim. 2:8; etc.). Since fasting is not commanded, and not forbidden, but expected, we draw the following conclusions:

- (i) It is no sin not to fast. Christians who do not fast are not necessarily less spiritual than those who do.
- (ii) It is a spiritual discipline that is very beneficial and is approved by the Lord. Christians should, therefore, voluntarily practise fasting.
- (iii) It is required of certain Christians, by virtue of their special calling, to fast on special occasions (Mk. 9:29; Acts 14:23). Missionaries working in pagan situations may need to fast when faced with the more obvious manifestations of spiritist activity. Elders need to fast when ordaining another man to be an elder.

What of corporate fasting in the church? In the Bible, fasting is carried out individually (Neh. 1:4; Mt. 4:2), or corporately (Neh. 9:1; Jonah 3:7; Esther 4:16; Acts 13:3). Just as the church may organise corporate prayer, it should also organise corporate fasting. The church is a covenanted community of baptised believers and it should engage in certain spiritual activities together, as a body. Many churches find it useful to set aside a week in the year to pray. But why not have fasting as well? Our own church has a "Prayer and Fasting Week" every year, which has proven most beneficial.

Individual Christians need to learn to fast. The church together needs to learn to fast.

The abuse

As with anything right, good, and useful, there is always the possibility of its abuse. Fasting was abused very early in the nation of Israel. The law of God required only one compulsory religious fast, namely that on the day of atonement (Lev. 16:29-34; 23:26-32; Num. 29:7-11 cf. Acts 27:9). The Jews multiplied that by many more: fasts on the fifth and seventh months (Zech. 7:3-5); and on the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth month (Zech. 8:19). Voluntary fastings were to be performed with spiritual ends in mind. The Jews abused it for other ends (e.g. Isa. 58:6-7; Zech. 7:1-10). The climax of it all was the twice a week fast, which became the boast of the Pharisees (Lk. 18:12).

In view of the great possibility of its abuse, we must carefully guard against allowing fasting to degenerate into an empty formal observance, or a device for attempting to manipulate God. More specifically, we note that fasting is abused when:

- 1. It is done to gain salvation, or merit of any kind, with God (Eph. 2:8-10; Lk. 17:10; 1 Cor. 10:31).
- 2. It is done for show before men. That would be hypocrisy (Mt. 6:17).

3. It is made compulsory to individuals in the church. A “witch-hunt” will inevitably follow, to weed out those who do not fast. That would be contrary to the word of God, which warns against adding to the gospel any religious observance (Col. 2:11-23; Gal. 1:6-10; 6:15).
4. It is emphasized at the expense of other biblical teachings. Beware of “straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel” (Mt. 23:24)!
5. Weightier spiritual and moral duties are neglected (Isa. 58:6-7; Jer. 14:12; Zech. 7:1-10).
6. When the spirit underlying the fast is lost (Rom. 14:17). Examples: drinking glucose solution or some other liquid food to make up for abstinence from solid food; gobbling up a large amount of food when breaking fast; becoming unduly downcast when the fast is unintentionally broken.
7. When the purpose for which it is carried out is not attended to, e.g. self-humiliation and confession of sins; prayer and meditation on spiritual truths.

II. How Should We Fast?

The limits

It is known medically that a man can survive up to three days and three nights without food and water, and up to forty days without food but with water. For any longer periods than these, the man’s life will be endangered. Exceptional situations do occur, but we should not make exceptions the rule. There was a case of a man who survived for six days when buried in a collapsed building during an earthquake in Philippines. He drank his own urine, until he was rescued.

How did Moses manage to survive when “he neither ate bread nor drank water”, for forty days and forty nights, at the time he met with God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:28; Dt. 9:9, 18)? There are two possible answers:

(i) Moses did not take food and drink of any kind, and yet survived because God miraculously sustained him. He was an exceptionally tough person, anyway. His years of wandering in the wilderness, leading the nation of Israel, shows this. The Scripture declares that “Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eyes were not dim nor his natural vigour abated (Dt. 34:7).” Furthermore, that was a period when there was a prevalence of miraculous activities: the ten plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna and quails from heaven, the shoes of the Israelites not wearing out, etc.

(ii) Moses did not take bread and water, but he ate other food (e.g. wild fruits) and drank other fluid (e.g. milk, or sour wine). In the Bible, the word “bread” is used generally to mean “food” (e.g. Mt. 4:4; 6:11; Acts 2:46), although strictly it means any baked food, especially loaves. The main drink of the Israelites was water. Milk was also extensively used, but it was considered a food (hence the expression “milk and honey”). For better quenching of thirst, the common people used a sour drink (Ruth 2:14) - a sort of vinegar mixed with oil, or sour wine. The well-to-do drank wine, mixed with water and often spiced.

Also, it would appear that Elijah took some drink, possibly water, during his forty days journey without food. We are told in 1 Kings 19:8, “So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God.” “Food” obviously included the drink he had taken, perhaps milk. We are not told that he did not drink any water during the journey.

In the case of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are told in Matthew 4:2, “And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.” We are not told that He was thirsty. A person who has gone without food and drink would crave more for his thirst to be quenched than for his

hunger to be assuaged. We conclude that the Lord did sip water during the period of His fast.

The point we wish to make is that there are limits to a person's ability to live without food and water. Fasting for spiritual reasons is not intended to put us in danger of our lives, nor to harm our health.

The methods

From the Bible, we may discern three types of fast:

- (i) **Total fast**, in which no food or drink of any kind is taken (e.g. Esther 4:16; Jonah 3:7).
- (ii) **Normal fast**, in which no food is taken but water is sipped (e.g. Mt. 4:2). As noted already, milk is regarded as food. Today, there are various types of liquid food, e.g. malt drinks, fruit juice, etc.
- (iii) **Partial fasting**, in which certain types of food and drink are taken while other types abstained from (e.g. Dan. 1:12; 10:3).

Furthermore, we may clearly discern two ways of fasting in so far as the duration is concerned

- (i) **Severe fasting**, for a full day of twenty-four hours (e.g. Esther 4:16). It is to be noted that the severe, total, fast never lasted more than three full days. This seems to be in keeping with the recognition that a person's life will be endangered beyond that.
- (ii) **Moderate fasting**, for part of a day, e.g. from sunrise to sunset (Judges 20:26; 1 Sam. 14:24; 2 Sam. 1:12; 3:35). Moderate fasting may be done for a day or more, e.g. seven days (1 Sam. 31:13). If it is done everyday, or most days in a year, it is no longer fasting but a normal way of life (or eating habit).

From these, six possible combinations are possible. In Matthew 4:2, the Lord practised severe-normal fast, in which only water was taken throughout the day and night. Esther and the Jews practised severe-total fast, in which nothing entered the mouth for three days and three nights (Esther 4:16). (Although our concern is not with other people, we note that the Muslims practise moderate-total fast in which nothing enters the mouth from sunrise to sunset.)

Ways \ Types	Total Fast (No food, no drink)	Normal Fast (No food, sip water)	Partial Fast (Certain food & drink)
Severe (for a full 24 hrs. day)	<i>Severe-total fast</i>	<i>Severe-normal fast</i>	<i>Severe-partial fast</i>
Moderate (for part of the day)	<i>Moderate-total fast</i>	<i>Moderate-normal fast</i>	<i>Moderate-partial fast</i>

Different methods of fasting

The recommendations

Since no directions are given in the Bible on how we are to fast, it is left very much to our discretion in this matter. Common sense, and the purpose to be accomplished, must determine to a great extent how one is to fast. A severe-total fast might have been appropriate to Esther and the Jews in view of the

impending carnage of God's people throughout the kingdom. It would not be appropriate as a spiritual discipline for our personal piety, since we would be placed in great discomfort while having to carry on our daily routine without even quenching our thirst.

The following is recommended:

(i) **Moderate-normal fast**, once a week throughout the year, for personal piety. The weekly cycle of labour-and-rest sets a good rhythm for fasting (Ex. 20:8-9). Preferably, choose a week-day since much energy is expended in the Lord's work on Sunday (preaching, outreach, etc.), and fellowship with other believers on that day often involves taking food and drink. Moreover, the week-days are the days when we spend most time in eating and interaction with the world, and least time with the Lord. It makes good sense to interrupt our daily routine by fasting and reminding ourselves of spiritual perspectives.

(ii) **Severe-normal fast** for one or more days is recommended when there are special needs, such as when one is sorely tried by a temptation, when a Christian is about to be martyred, or when persecution is about to burst forth upon the church. The *Directory for Public Worship* of the Westminster Assembly appears to recommend moderate-total fast (i.e. total abstinence from sunrise to sunset, "which is to continue the whole day") for every situation, and moderate-partial fast for the weak.

(iii) **Moderate-normal fast** is recommended to a church corporately, lasting one week once a year. It is good to take stock of ourselves as a church, to thank God for blessings and gospel progress, to repent of sins, and to seek His blessing and guidance in the year ahead. Just as the individual believer may casually allow the days to pass by, the church may take for granted the years that pass by without proper reference to God. A *Prayer-and-Fasting Week* serves to jolt us to remembrance of these things.

(iv) **Moderate-normal fast** should be practised by church leaders, and encouraged to church members, for important events such as the appointment of elders and the sending out of missionaries, the launching of new gospel ministries, etc. (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

(v) **Moderate-partial fast** is recommended to those who are sick, have gastric problems, or are with child. It may simply involve the abstention of luxurious items such as cream-cakes and ice-creams, for the day. Or it may involve limiting oneself to a fruit and milk diet. With some individuals, it may not be practical to fast in any way. Note, however, that some physical sicknesses are brought about by sin, including gluttony (1 Cor. 11:30).

It is clear that the **moderate-normal fast** would be the most commonly practised method of fasting. An individual who chooses to fast every Friday should eat as normal on the Thursday, and abstain from food from bedtime through to, say, 5.00 p.m. on the following day. Water is sipped as necessary throughout the day. He does not drink mugs and mugs of water to assuage his hunger, since that would be contrary to the spirit of fasting. A person who is fasting would not want to be distracted from a prayerful frame of mind by constant thoughts of food and drink! He then breaks fast by taking a light meal, perhaps a drink and some biscuits. This is in order not to excessively load the stomach immediately after the fast. Dinner follows an hour or two later.

During the annual *Prayer-and-Fasting Week* practised in our church, which begins on the Sunday night through to Saturday evening, the church members would gather for a time of prayer at 8.00 p.m. everyday of the week in various homes, depending on where they live. The prayers will revolve around a theme for that day - confession and repentance, thanksgiving and praise, intercession, petition, and consecration. On the last day, Saturday, the whole church gathers together to have a time of sharing and prayer, after light refreshment has been served. A meal follows.

The incentives

We have noted the reasons for which we fast, as well as how fasting is to be carried out. It remains to

note some benefits that may be expected from fasting:

1. **Physical well-being**. Since body and soul are intimately united, we may expect that the spiritual discipline of fasting, in which both body and soul are involved, will lead to a sense of well-being. Moses came down from Mount Sinai with his face shining (Ex. 34:29). Daniel and his friends were visibly more healthy (Dan. 1:15).

2. **Spiritual well-being** includes a clear conscience before God, a sense of God's smile upon us, clarity of mind with regard to the things of God, calm resolution with regard to life, trust in God's promises, and the certainty of reward in this life and the next (Mt. 6:18; 25:34-36).

3. **Effectiveness** in Christian service (Mk. 9:29). Special wisdom will be given in understanding the times, discernment will be given in perplexing cases, divine help and strength will be experienced in dangerous or difficult situations, as one serves the Lord.

Conclusion

By practising fasting for the right reasons, we stand in the tradition of all the godly men and women who believed in fasting, whose lives had been signally blessed by God. Apart from those characters in the Bible, we have the examples of Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, etc. To the Lord we fast, unto the Lord we are accountable, and... (echoing M'Cheyne):

*When this passing world is done,
When has sunk yon radiant sun,
When I stand with Christ on high,
Looking o'er life's history:
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.*

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