

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF FASTING?©

By Pastor Greg Hooker

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the least understood and even more so, neglected Christian disciplines, is that of fasting. Fasting often carries with it a mystical connotation, something done by a secluded sect of Monks high in the Himalayan Mountains under the cloak of secrecy. Over the years I have practiced fasting several times, but lacked a true understanding regarding its meaning and method. I thought that if I refrained from food I would gain some kind of supernatural power to move the hand of God like a puppet master to do my bidding. At other times, I fasted with the selfish notion I could lose those extra pounds and possibly, at the same time, rub God's magic lamp and cause my wishes to come true. That, my friends, is far from what fasting entails

So, exactly what is fasting and how do you practice it from a Biblical perspective? When and how long should a person fast? Is fasting for everyone? In this message I hope to shed some light on this misconstrued subject found within the covers of the Bible and maybe dispel some myths that just aren't Scriptural.

I. FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, the subject of fasting is taught and practiced many times. For instance, in the Old Testament fasting, along with prayer, is closely connected to times of deep sorrow, repentance and the need of spiritual renewal. The Prophet Nehemiah fasted over the spiritual condition and desolation of Jerusalem. He sought with intense sorrow and tears the Lord's mercy and grace upon the disobedient people. Moreover, David fasted over the death of his child in II Samuel 12:16. He covered himself in sack cloth and ashes weeping bitter tears of sorrow. Again, in Ester 4:16, Mordecai was exhorted by Ester to fast and pray for her as she went before the King. The Old Testament certainly endorses the practice of fasting among God's people and provides many examples.

II. FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

While fasting occurred in the Old, In the New Testament, Anna fasted day and night in the Temple awaiting the coming of the Messiah (Luke 2:37). She gave herself over to petitioning the Lord in anticipation of the coming King. Also, in the church at Antioch, the young believers fasted and prayed as they sent Saul and Barnabas into the mission field to perform the work of the Lord. So we see that the entire collection of Scriptures speak often of fasting.

III. FASTING AND PRAYER

Fasting is almost always connected to prayer. It's interesting to note, however; fasting is never commanded, while prayer is. In addition, fasting should not be thought of as essential to 'make our prayers work better'. If a Christian chooses to fast, it should be entirely of their free will and not viewed as a 'duty'. To fast with the assumption it is ones 'obligation' is to miss the true spirit of fasting.

Throughout the Scriptures, it seems that the more serious the situation, the more prayer and fasting were combined. For example: Jesus cast out a demon of a boy that the disciples could not (Mark 6:7). When the disciples asked why they were unable to perform this miracle, Jesus told them this demon was so powerful that only prayer, coupled with fasting was effective (Mark 9:24, Matthew 17:21). It seems evident, like a magnifying glass concentrating the sun's rays, fasting focuses ones attention to the task at hand, which is prayer.

IV. FASTING AND ITS ASSOCIATIONS

Most of the time fasting is associated with the avoidance of food, but there are many things a person can fast from. You may fast from watching TV, exercise, shopping, the internet, texting or talking on the phone – anything that would hinder you from focusing and devoting oneself to prayer. Have you ever tried to pray as you watch TV (guilty as charged!)? What about talking to the Lord with your mouth full of rib eye steak, listening to a radio, talking with a friend, etc.?

WORD OF CAUTION: Never practice fasting from food without first consulting your physician, especially if you are diabetic. The Lord expects us to use the common sense he has endowed us with. You can always fast from something other than food.

While it is certainly okay to pray as you go about other things (pray without ceasing), there are times when you just have to stop what you are doing, focus (or fast) all your energies and concentration on getting down to business with your Heavenly Father. Look at it this way: What if you were to go see your friend and the entire time you were with them you nettled around with something else? Again, say your spouse came home from a hard day's work wanting to relax and have a meaningful conversation, but the whole time you kept your nose in a romance novel, occasionally nodding uh huh. Would you say that is focused dialog? Of course not!

Our Heavenly father is the same way, there are times when we just have to remove ourselves from any and all distractions and have a meaningful conversation – no food; no TV; no romance novels; no talking to someone else on the phone; no texting – just you and God, person to person, discussing things of eternal consequences. That's what fasting does – it focuses your attention upon prayer.

CONCLUSION

When should a person fast? A short answer would be anytime the Lord impresses your heart to do so. You may want to fast and pray over an unsaved loved one, a major financial crisis, an important decision affecting your family, a change of occupations, a sick family member – the possibilities are endless. Just keep in mind; fasting is never commanded, it is a free-will expression of love to the Father born deep within the recesses of your heart – something personal and holy, a living sacrifice presented to the Lord.

So my friends, there are special, sacred times throughout the life of every believer when nothing short of entering into the Most Holy Place within the tabernacle of Christ, will bring you into the sweet-smelling aroma of the Father (Hebrews 10:19). Hidden from the outside world with the veil of fasting; our hearts commune with that of our Savior. Nothing can be substituted for this special occasion. Remember: prayer is good, but prayer and fasting together is the "better thing"!