

Prayer and Fasting



Leads to Finding

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LOSTING

FASTING is a puzzle.

It is a powerful spiritual discipline, yet Satan has warped our understanding of it so much that many Christians don't practise it. How did this happen? Like so many of the enemy's schemes, it began with a distortion of Scripture.

READ MATTHEW 6:18

The Bible instructs us not to make a big deal of fasting. It is properly done so discreetly that others don't even know about it. Satan has exaggerated this counsel into a command never to talk about fasting. As a result, even devout Christians hear so little about fasting that they assume it is irrelevant or obsolete.

READ MATTHEW 6:16

Here, Jesus tells us not to look sombre while fasting, 'as the hypocrites do'. Most Christians rightly recoil as soon as they hear someone say 'hypocrite', so determined are they not to be associated with this ugly word. Unfortunately, Satan has used this impulse as a way to frighten people away from fasting, as though there

is intrinsically a link between fasting and hypocrisy. A classic case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater!

READ MATTHEW 9:14-15

When Jesus is asked why his disciples feast while the Pharisees fast, he replies that you don't fast while you're with the bridegroom for a pre-wedding celebration. Satan distorts this teaching, too, causing many Christians to assume: 'Well, Jesus is still with us and he hasn't actually married "the bride" yet, so I guess fasting isn't necessary!' However, verse 15 states clearly that Jesus would be 'taken away' from the disciples, after which they would fast. If we forget verse 15, we remove a potent spiritual weapon from our arsenal and leave ourselves more vulnerable to temptation.

Many giants of the Christian faith were devoted to fasting. Yet even their example has perversely been used to *dissuade* believers from fasting. There is the argument from modesty: 'Who am I to reach for such heights?' Or the argument from fear: 'What if it's too hard? What if striving to be better prompts a spiritual attack?' Too often, this kind of thinking leads Christians to settle for less than God intends for them.

As well as asking *how* Satan deceives us

in this way. It's also worth asking *why* he deceives us in this way. Our answer: fasting, when wielded by a godly warrior, is a supernaturally powerful weapon.

THE LORD'S EXPECTATIONS

In the Old Testament, fasting is often a pre-requisite for revival.

**READ JOEL 2:15 – GOD'S CHALLENGE
READ JOEL 2:28 – GOD'S PROMISE**

What do you think is the connection between fasting and Holy Spirit outpouring?

How often do we choose self-indulgence and fleshly satisfaction over self-denial and spiritual vitality?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray and fast. It was his expectation that they would do both.

READ MATTHEW 6:5, 16-17

What should our expectation be?

Remember Jesus' words: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself' (Matthew 16:24).

JESUS OUR MODEL

Jesus is truly and properly God. He is our Redeemer and Saviour. However, he is *also* truly and properly human. The signs and wonders he displayed, the purity he exhibited, the compassion and mercy he demonstrated – all of these are possible for us as well.





READ JOHN 20:21 NASB

He is the example for us - not only to imitate, but surpass.

READ JOHN 14:12 NASB

- How can this be?
- How can we do 'greater' things than Christ did?
- What does it mean to be 'sent' by Jesus?

In *The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting*¹, Mahesh Chavda likens our task to that of a gymnast. Just as gymnasts must master elementary moves, such as the forward roll, before they can master more advanced ones, so we must practise the 'first works' of Jesus before we can accomplish the 'greater' works he promised.

READ LUKE 4:1-2, 36

Before commencing his public ministry, Jesus went into the wilderness to fast for 40 days. It was thus after fasting that Jesus began ministering with 'authority and power'. If fasting was a key to Jesus' effectiveness, it must be so for his disciples. Fasting and prayer are the 'first works' we must perform if we want to do the greater works to which Christ calls us.

AUTHORITY VS. POWER

READ MATTHEW 17:14-21

The Gospel of Matthew tells us of the disciples' inability to free a boy from demonic torment. After driving out the demon himself, Jesus rebuked his disciples for their ineffectiveness. He expected them to perform miracles; after all, he had given them the authority to do so (Matthew 10:1). However, only those who have been spiritually and physically disciplined through prayer and fasting can exercise such authority. As believers, we will face challenges and confront evils that can only be overcome in this way. We therefore neglect the 'fasted life' to our own detriment.

THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

Fasting has often been one means of 'self-denial'. It is a voluntary practice whereby we lay down certain privileges and deny or delay our appetites. Short of physical death, fasting is one way to relinquish aspects of life such as food, comfort, appetites and indulgences.

Today most societies in the West are prone to overeating. It might even be said of us what Paul said of the 'enemies of the cross of Christ. Their god is their stomach' (Philippians 3:18-19). In such a context, fasting is a radical practice. Through fasting we affirm that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. By fasting we declare that our hunger for God is greater than our hunger for our next meal.

God does not change and cannot be manipulated. Our fasting does not persuade him to do something against his will. *We* are the ones changed through

'Our fasting does not persuade *God* to do something against his will. *We* are the ones changed through fasting'

fasting. The psalmist David wrote that he humbled himself with fasting (Psalm 35:13).

When we are aware of someone in trouble, we can enter into fasting and prayer for them, setting aside our appetites and physical comfort for the sake of that person. Fasting helps us redirect our energies toward God, toward the Scriptures and toward intercession. It is one way to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24).

BENEFITS OF FASTING

- Through fasting we humble ourselves. We know that God gives grace and favour to the humble. James 4:10
- Fasting gives us power over temptation. Luke 4
- Fasting and praying gives us a clearer understanding of God's will. Acts 13:1-3, 14:23
- What would happen if we fasted when approaching important decisions?

PIONEERS OF PRAYER AND FASTING

- Queen Esther – Esther 9:29-32
Called her people to enter a corporate fast for their deliverance.
- John the Baptist – Mark 1:1-8
Lived perhaps the ultimate 'fasted lifestyle'.
- Cornelius – Acts 10:30-33 *NKJV*
God spoke to him about visiting Peter, an encounter that led to a pivotal new understanding of the gospel's universality.
- Daniel – Daniel chapter 9
As a gesture of both personal and collective repentance
- Jesus – Luke 4:1-2
Began his public ministry immediately after a fast.

The church fathers Polycarp and Tertullian fasted. So did Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox. John Wesley was so committed to fasting that he would not approve candidates for ministry who did not fast twice a week! How would that policy affect leader recruitment today?

Whenever he felt that his spiritual strength was waning, Charles Finney would immediately enter a three-day fast. After a fast, Finney would be so filled with the Holy Spirit that people felt an overwhelming sense of conviction at the mere sight of him.

¹Mahesh Chavda, *The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting*, Destiny Image, Shippensburg, PA, 1998.



refreshing

passion

hunger for God

Prayer
and
Fasting

FASTING

Jonathan Edwards and Charles Haddon Spurgeon fasted in order to be more effective in the pulpit. Surely a worthwhile investment!

WHICH FAST?

There are many ways to fast. Some fasts are routine, others are extraordinary or 'occasional'. God may call you to refrain from something harmless simply in order to re-establish your priorities, or to abstain from harmful practices.

In *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough: A Guide to Nine Biblical Fasts*², Elmer Towns catalogues the various fasts described in the Bible. These include:

- The 'Samuel fast' – a way of seeking the Lord's guidance (1 Samuel chapter 7)
- The 'Ezra fast' – a way of seeking his protection (Ezra 8:21-22)
- The 'Elijah fast' – individuals crying out to God in times of trouble (1 Kings 19:2-8)
- The 'Disciples' fast' – a way of developing the spiritual authority to heal and cast out demons (Matthew 17:21 *NASB* [this verse is not in all translations])
- The 'Saint Paul fast' – for individual spiritual insight (Acts chapter 27)
- The 'Daniel fast' – for physical health and strength (Daniel 1:8-16)
- The 'Esther fast' – a fast for deliverance (Esther 4:16)

'WHEN YOU FAST...'

Which type of fast does God desire for you? Are you called to enter a short-term

'refreshing' fast, or a long-term season of fasting, such as over the 40 days of Lent? God may be calling you to a lifestyle of continuous abstention from something. Fasting is one of the best ways to re-establish – in your spirit and in your habits – God as the foremost passion of your life. No matter how innocuous it may seem, anything that crowds out God should cede way to him through fasting.

FASTING AS A CALL TO VOLUNTARY WEAKNESS

Fasting embodies the paradoxes of God's kingdom. Look at its manifestations:

Losing leads to finding

Matthew 10:39

Dying leads to living

2 Corinthians 4:11

Romans 4:25 and 5:10

1 John 3:14

Giving leads to receiving

Luke 6:38

Colossians 3:22-24

Matthew 10:8

Humility leads to exaltation

James 4:10

1 Peter 5:6

Weakness leads to strength

2 Corinthians 12:9

Fasting is about God's strength revealed in our weakness. It is about denying oneself for the glory of Christ – and for the benefit of others.

2 Corinthians 12:15 *This is a kingdom principle.* There are two kinds of weakness: involuntary and voluntary.

Involuntary weakness arises from persecution, calamity and demonic attacks. Fasting is a form of voluntary weakness: its purpose is for God's power to be perfected in us.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

DISCIPLINE THE APPETITES, NOURISH THE SPIRIT

Why fast?

Traditional fasting: physical nourishment is sacrificed for spiritual nourishment.

Prayer: time is sacrificed for communion with God.

Giving: resources are sacrificed for others.

Silence: pride is sacrificed for spiritual attentiveness.

You are not your own; you were bought at a high price. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. You belong to God. He wants your spirit fed as well as your body. We often forget that when our physical appetites are not in sync with the Holy Spirit, our spiritual capacity is diminished.

What are you doing to nourish your spirit?

In the desert, the Israelites put their appetite for food and drink before everything else – even freedom.

Numbers 11:4-6

The Psalmist tells us that God granted their desire, but at a steep cost.

Psalms 106:15

Your stomach is a false god and will leave you unsatisfied. Dethrone it...through fasting!

² Elmer Towns, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough: A Guide to Nine Biblical Fasts*, Regal Books Publications, Ventura, CA, 1996

Synopsis of Scriptural Fasts

Why not try each of these seven fasts this year?

1

To avert calamity:

- 1 Samuel 7:6
- Jonah 3:3-5
- Joel 1:14

2

To experience the power of God in personal ministry:

- Jesus
- Elijah (1 Kings 19)
- Martin Luther, John Wesley and Charles Finney

3

For revival:

- John the Baptist (Matthew 11:18)
- Anna (Luke 2:37)
- Apostle Paul (Acts 13:2-3)
- Joel 1:14 and 2:15ff
- Matthew 6:16-17

4

As an expression of sorrow or mourning:

- David's sorrow (Psalm 69:10)
- Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:12)
- Abner (2 Samuel 3:35)
- David's infant son (2 Samuel 12:16-23)

5

Over the sin of a nation or city:

- 1 Samuel 7:6
- Nehemiah 9
- Jonah 3:5

6

Preparation for a divine assignment:

- Nehemiah 1:4
- Ezra 8:21
- Daniel 10:2-3
- Acts 13:1-2
- Acts 14:23

7

**The 'bridegroom fast':
Matthew 9:15**

This Bible study is taken from chapter five of the book *Army on its Knees* that is reviewed in this edition of *Revive*.

• How would routine fasting and prayer affect your lives, both individually and as a community of faith? How would it help you to become more like Christ?

• How are you willing to sacrifice – what appetites are you willing to deny – in order to establish God's kingdom on the earth?

• Are you seeing 'greater works' in your community? What is the relationship between these works and the discipline of fasting?

May God inspire us to enter into the 'first works' of Jesus and may the result be a surge of 'greater works' in our midst.

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