

## Fasting – An Appetite for God

Do you have an appetite for God? Has your appetite for His power, for His guidance and wisdom, ever moved you to the point where your appetite for God overwhelms your appetite for food? When this happens, you are engaged in what the Bible calls fasting.

Fasting – it seems to be an increasingly scarce and unknown practice among Christians. We look at fasting as a rather ascetic practice, something like walking up 200 stairs on your knees, or being flogged for your sins. But that is not Biblical fasting, and Biblical fasting is a necessary part of the growing pains of a Christian.

Now a simple definition of fasting would be the abstaining from food. That definition does not include all we want to say about fasting, but it is the bare facts about fasting. Fasting is when, for whatever reason, you abstain from food. Many religions practice fasting. Many non-religious people fast for health reasons. Starving yourself of food to lose weight is a form of fasting. As we can see, fasting itself has no intrinsic spiritual value.

There is nothing virtuous about not eating, any more than there is virtue in eating. **Romans 14:17** says, *“For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”* Abstaining from food does not endear you to God. Indeed, sometimes it can do the opposite.

Paul says that people listening to seducing spirits will preach lies in hypocrisy, and one of them, according to **1 Timothy 4:3**, would be: *“commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.”*

So in a New Testament era, refusing certain foods, or food in general, can sometimes be a negative thing. God has ordained that eating be the norm. Think of how He has filled the world with an infinite variety of tastes. And then think how He created the tongue to be capable of sensing all these different tastes, simply to delight our souls. God loves us, and takes pleasure in our joy. Eating and drinking, enjoying life with thanksgiving, is something God expects.

Much of the book of Ecclesiastes repeats this theme. Rather than being a depressing book about the hopelessness of life that some think it is, Solomon used Ecclesiastes to point out the brevity of life, and necessity of redeeming the time with useful, God-fearing activity: *“There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God”* (**Ecclesiastes 2:24**).

Indeed, there are times when fasting, because of what it symbolises to a Christian, would be inappropriate. For example, Jesus points out that fasting is not appropriate in times of great celebration. Hear His reply to John the Baptist’s disciples:

*Then came to Him the disciples of John, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but Thy disciples fast not?' And Jesus said unto them, 'Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the Bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the Bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.'*

**Matthew 9:14-15**

On the other end of the scale from fasting, you have over-eating. Indeed, it seems some Christians think God permits gluttony on Sunday, for never do we gorge ourselves like at a Sunday lunch. Among the affluent, there is a sad trend of no longer eating to live, by living to eat. But if Scripture has a place for fasting, then it's clear we should be closer to the extreme of abstaining from food, than to the extreme of overindulging in food.

So what then is the place for fasting in Scripture? Was it merely for the Old Testament saints? Are we to practice it today? And if so, how are we to do it? Firstly, let us see, from the Bible:

## **1. The place of fasting**

Now, fasting for the believer is never commanded. The only place where a fast was commanded for God's people was at Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. For the New Testament believer, the Day of Atonement was consummated at Calvary – that day, when Christ paid for our sins, was our final Day of Atonement. But that is the only place it is commanded. We are certainly commanded to pray, but nowhere are we commanded to fast.

However, in **Matthew 6:16**, when Christ is teaching on sincerity and hypocrisy, He says, *"Moreover, when ye fast..."* When you fast, not *if* you fast. He assumes it will be part of our lives. Though the apostles did not command fasting, they certainly practiced it. In **Acts 14:23**, we see them praying with fasting before ordaining elders. Likewise in **Acts 13**, the church at Antioch fasted before sending Paul and Barnabas.

Paul says of himself in **2 Corinthians 6:5**: *"In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings..."* In **2 Corinthians 11:27**, he says: *"In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness..."* And we know Christ Himself undertook a 40-day fast at the beginning of His ministry. So while fasting is never commanded, it took place in the lives of the New Testament saints.

In fact, it seems fasting is assumed to take place in a Christian's life. Paul even includes it almost as a by-the-way remark when speaking about the marriage bed: *"Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer"* (**1 Corinthians 7:5**). Just because something is not commanded, but assumed, does not lessen its place in our lives. If fasting is not commanded but assumed, you could regard it as an unspoken expectation.

The bottom line is, if we take our spiritual lives as seriously as God wants us to – fasting will be included. It will not be a contrived, phony thing – it will be the outflow of a heart that takes the spiritual so seriously, that for periods of time, physical appetite dwindles, and a desire to eat evaporates. So fasting definitely has a place in our lives. Secondly, let us see:

## 2. The procedure of fasting

This is where so many people get mixed up. Fasting, in Scripture, is inseparably bound up with prayer. You cannot separate fasting and prayer. You can look up every reference to fasting, and you will see a direct or indirect reference to prayer. Fasting is never an end in itself. Fasting is never to be thought of as a distinct spiritual discipline apart from prayer.

Unfortunately, that's what many people in the Bible did, and what many do today. They think there is great virtue simply in abstaining from food. They think that being hungry is synonymous with being holy. And so, as they feel hunger pangs, they think, 'Oh, how spiritual of me to deprive myself of food for the sake of the Lord.' But that is not biblical. God is not impressed because your stomach is empty. Fasting is not an end in itself.

Christ specifically chastised the Pharisees for how they had twisted fasting. When Jesus used the parable of the tax-collector and the Pharisee, he said the Pharisee *"stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess'"* (Luke 18:11-12).

The Pharisees fasted twice every week. If fasting was an end in itself – they were surely the masters at it. But Jesus explained why they did it: *"Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward"* (Matthew 6:16).

God is not impressed with fasting that elevates the deprivation of food as an end in itself. Too many Christians fast – and then think more about their own hunger and their 'virtuous' self-denial than anything else! This misses the point. Fasting isn't meant to be a contrived, self-absorbed activity. Anyone who notices themselves when seeking to deny themselves, has just done the opposite.

Israel had become experts at ritualising fasting: *"Then came the word of the LORD of hosts unto me, saying, speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, 'When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?'"* (Zechariah 7:4). Oh, they were denying themselves food – but it was an end in itself to them. It was not done properly. God rebukes them again in Isaiah:

*'Wherefore have we fasted,' say they, 'and Thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and Thou takest no knowledge?' Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?*

**Isaiah 58:3-5**

To fast while living life normally, but simply abstaining from food, misses the whole point and ritualises the affair. God is very strong on warning His people about making a ritual out of fasting – perhaps it is for that reason that He never commands it. Fasting is not an end in itself. No, biblical fasting is the twin of fervent praying. Biblical fasting is when our prayers take on such intensity, such desire, such fervency, that we lose our appetite for physical food. With that statement, let us move on to:

### **3. The point of fasting**

There were many reasons God's people fasted in Scripture. David fasted when praying God would spare Bathsheba's child. Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast when Judah was surrounded by enemies, and facing certain defeat. Daniel fasted in repentance for his people's sins, and when requesting divine wisdom about the revelation he was receiving. Ezra fasted when the returning Jews needed directions on how to get back to the land without asking the king of Persia for help.

The Jews under Nehemiah also fasted after hearing the instructions in the law – it symbolised their deep repentance and desire to serve God. Esther called for a fast before she went in to see the king, risking her life. In the book of Joel, a fast is called for, on account of the lamentation that ought to come for the terrible judgement of God. There, God calls for wholehearted repentance with fasting.

Similarly, the inhabitants of Nineveh repented with fasting when Jonah preached his message to them. In the New Testament, the church fasted before selecting missionaries and elders. Now, all of these things are different in their circumstances, but they have a common theme – a deep, overwhelming desire for God's grace.

Here is the point: fasting was a heart purifying itself and making God alone its portion. When God's people fasted in lamentation over sin, they were saying, 'Such is our grief over our sin, and our desire for Your forgiveness, that eating would be inappropriate. We have lost our appetite, so strong is our grief over our sin. We want God's grace in forgiveness more than food.'

When surrounded by enemies, they were saying, 'We are in such fear over possible destruction, we cannot eat. We can't eat; we so need God's grace in delivering us.' When requiring God's direction, they were saying, 'More than food do we desire Your leading, God. We are so perplexed as what direction to go; the food would taste like dirt in our mouths if we focused on anything else but seeking Your guidance.'

When faced with God's judgement, the inhabitants of Nineveh were saying, 'How can we possibly go on eating and drinking when God is going to destroy us? We repent, we grieve over sin, we have lost our appetites, we cannot eat.' Do you see how fasting, in all these cases, was the natural accompaniment to fervent prayer?

It was not that they planned in a very unspontaneous way to not eat, it was that their hearts were so thirsty for God's forgiveness, direction, revelation, deliverance and grace, that they

stopped eating. It could have been for one meal, or for 40 days. Put simply, fasting is where your appetite for God overtakes your appetite for food. You hunger for God's guidance, grace, power, and presence so much – that you lose interest in food.

See, this happens to us naturally in other areas. When we go through a tragedy, or a calamity, or a terrible time of testing – we often lose our physical appetites. Well, when our spiritual lives take on the reality and urgency they ought to have – the same thing will happen. When our hearts are purified – we will fast. We will feel such grief over our sin, we will pray for sanctification with such desire, that eating will seem inappropriate.

Or we will so strongly desire God's leading that we will not think of meals while praying for Him to guide. We will be faced with situations where we are absolutely cornered, and will find refuge in hours on our knees, not in a meal. We will be wrestling with a Scripture, wanting to know its meaning so badly, that we do not stop to eat in our desire for illumination.

Again, fasting purifies your heart. When you pray with such fervency, when your devotion supersedes your natural longing for food – your heart is being purified. See, this was the temptation Satan brought to Jesus during His 40-day fast. 'Turn these stones to bread – You're God. Just like you gave Israel miracle bread during their 40-year wanderings – make Yourself miracle bread right here!'

But Jesus answered and said, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God"* (**Matthew 4:4**). In other words, 'Satan, my ultimate sustenance is not bread, not even miracle bread. It is God Himself. My heart is undivided. I want Him more than food. I want my Father's approval over my ministry more than anything else, so much so, that I do not want to eat during this time of intense prayer.'

Fasting is associated with a time of mourning, deep craving, deep longing. Listen to how James' words fit so well with a time of fasting in our lives: *"Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up"* (**James 4:8-10**).

That's the heart of fasting. Seek to draw nigh unto God. Repent of sin. Purify your heart of all the things it is looking to for joy, for pleasure, for sustenance, outside of God. Be afflicted, mourn, let your soul genuinely feel spiritual realities that cause you to lose your physical appetite. Humble yourself in dependent prayer before God, and He will answer.

God does not answer fasting. He answers fervent prayer. Fervent prayer is often accompanied by fasting. Fasting emphasises how fervent we are in our prayers. It has the effect of reminding us of our true dependence. We do not live to eat. We do not ultimately rely on physical food to live. We need God's very permission to live. We need His grace to live: *"For in Him we live, and move, and have our being"* (**Acts 17:28**).

By God, all things consist, including the atoms of our bodies. We are totally dependent on Him, and when we go without food in a time of fervent prayer – it underlines this fact. 'I skipped

some meals, but I'm still alive. God sustains me. I need Him more than food.' You state your dependence upon God in no uncertain terms when you fast, for you are saying, 'My prayer is so urgent, my need of God so strong, my longing for Him so intense, that I will not stop to eat.'

See, we will interrupt almost everything in our lives to eat – because it is necessary. But in fasting, we say, 'More than food, God, do I need You. More than the physical nutrients my body requires, do I need Your grace. Be my portion.' Jesus said in **John 15:5**, "*Without Me, ye can do nothing.*" Fasting is the statement of our lives that believes this.

It is not, 'Without breakfast, I can do nothing' or 'Without a good meal, I can do nothing' – but fasting says, "Without You, Lord God, I can do nothing.' Fasting is a statement of a need that only God can fill. The lack of food symbolises this lack – it emphasises we want God to fill the need, more than we want food to fill our stomachs. Your heart is purified because God is the One you depend on.

There's obviously another purifying effect of fasting. When we are in these times of devoted, fervent prayer, where we do not eat, we elevate the spiritual above the physical in our lives. We make a very important statement to ourselves: the invisible, spiritual life is more important to me than the physical life.

Too many Christians carry on like God is the means to achieving all their physical ends. He is just a vending machine that provides food, clothing, accommodation, a job, health and protection. We become attached to our physical lives and protective of our comfort. Pretty soon, we lose the eyes of faith the heroes of **Hebrews 11** had, who regarded this world as foreign. We put down roots, and decide to build bigger barns to store our accumulated earthly goods.

Well, fervent prayer that goes with fasting says, loud and clear, 'I live for more than just the here and now. I want God, and His grace, more than food. If my physical body is suffering now, so be it – the spiritual necessity of prayer takes priority. I can go without some meals – but I cannot go without God.' Your heart is purified. The spiritual is elevated above the physical in your own eyes.

Fasting also shows us what controls us. When fasting, you see if you are truly exhibiting the fruit of self-control, or if you are under the control of anger, impatience, striving, bitterness, unforgiveness, pride, and so on. We sometimes turn around and say, 'It's the hunger that's making me edgy or hangry, it's a lack of food making me impatient.' In actual fact, the fasting is bringing out what is really in your soul, and what really controls you.

There, like fasting can bring out the physical toxins in our bodies, it does the same spiritually. We see the sins in our lives, the things that are controlling us, the things we are depending on, the things we look to for joy. See, too often, we use food like a spiritual anaesthetic. We use meals and food to numb us to our consciences, to drown out God's Spirit drawing us, to tone down the alarm bells in our hearts calling for change – to purify our hearts of idols.

It is in the absence of food that we finally hear, and hopefully listen, to those pangs of conscience, to the convicting of the Spirit – so that our hearts are purified. The satisfaction of a full stomach all too often postpones our dealing with the impatience, irritability, cruelty, anger, and selfishness in our hearts. We blame it on hunger. Hunger is not the root of sin. Sinful hearts are the root of sin – and fasting often leaves those hearts naked and exposed.

Fasting, put simply, is a hunger for God that overwhelms a hunger for food. It is a spiritual devotion that so grips us, as to neglect our bodies in favour of prayer. It is a place of lamentation, or humbling, of craving direction, wisdom, deliverance, grace and mercy. Above all, it is a telling statement of our love for God. Fasting says, 'More than myself – I love You. More than my physical need, I need and desire You. You are my portion, more than anything, God, I want You.'

In this way, the heart is purified. So then, let us pray for revival in our own hearts. Let us pray for increased spiritual vision. Let us pray for a depth of soul towards things eternal. Let us pray for a sense of the reality of hell, and of the condemnation of sinners. Let us pray for a deeper understanding of the holiness of God. Let us pray for a depth of sorrow over the travesty of loving anything more than God.

It is as God inflames our hearts that we will pray fervently, and fast biblically. Let us not get the cart before the horse. Let us not ritualise fasting. Rather, let us with repentance mourn the dullness of our hearts, that we have never felt so strongly about spiritual matters as to lose our appetite. Let us beg God that He will increase the hunger our hearts have for Him, that our lives will be perfumed with the sweet scent of fervent prayer.

How is your appetite for God? Has it ever been stronger than your appetite for food? If not, pray God will give it to You, and seek it with all your heart.