

Fasting

Jesus taught about fasting¹, the early church fasted both corporately² and individually³. There are many reasons why fasting may be appropriate for a individual or group of believers. Some examples include: during times where there is a particular awareness of sin - and the need to humble oneself before God; at a particular cross roads in one's life, or in the life of a group of believers - one can think of times of important decisions where there is a special need for guidance; where there is a deep need of the Holy Spirit.

As we read the gospels we see that Jesus took times of extended prayer. At critical moments we see him alone with his Father - before his public ministry, before the choosing of the twelve, after one of the miraculous feedings, before his betrayal and death. At times he went without food; at other times he went without sleep - though clearly not all the time. His daily dependance on his Father, and these special times of extended prayer were the pattern by which he lived.

So we see Jesus at times of decision and pressure, or after particular fruitfulness in ministry, taking time out to seek his Father. These were the times where Jesus had significant need of his Father's comfort, support, wisdom, direction, power and help. As his followers there will be particular times in both our individual and our corporate lives where it will be appropriate for us to have special times of seeking our Father.

2. Fasting as following the Spirit:

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert and there he fasted⁴. In fasting we are to follow the Spirit's leading. It is not about the power of self mastery - as in seen in some other faiths⁵.

¹ e.g. Matthew 6

² e.g. Acts 13:2 The church at Antioch fasting, during which the Spirit sets apart Barnabas & Saul for their missionary work

³ e.g. Acts 14:23 Paul & Barnabas fasting as they appoint elders; see also 2 Corinthians 6:5 & 2 Corinthians 11:27 The first of these is voluntary fasting, the second is involuntary.

⁴ Matthew 4:1

⁵ This is not to say there is no personal effort involved. Effort and resolve are indeed involved. Like prayer, fasting does not come naturally to us. Paul describes Ephaphrus at prayer for the Colossians in this way: "always wrestling in prayer for you." (Colossians 4:12) Fasting, closely aligned with prayer, takes a similar form.

So what is fasting? It is a voluntary giving up of one of God's good gifts for a temporary time and for a greater purpose. Usually the gift that is denied for a time is food.⁶

In fasting we say to our Father: "I need you and your help to do your will more than this good gift" - "I am ill-equipped in myself; you are everything - unless you go with us we can not glorify your name" - "I am yours; teach me your ways - grant me a willing spirit to sustain me."

Centrally fasting is about our inner attitude towards God. We learn humility and how dependent we are on our Father. In fasting we have greater time, and less distractions than we usually do. A greater opportunity to look to his purposes; a time to re-align ourselves with these.

Fasting should not be seen as separate from the rest of life - it is a part of the warp and woof of our lives - we can not expect God to hear us simply because we fast. Our desire is for all aspects of our lives to be transformed to how he would have us be⁷.

3. Fasting and feeding on the word of God:

In Deuteronomy we read that "man does not live on bread alone."⁸ Clearly there is more to life than the food we consume which sustains us. God has made us that our central need is for him⁹. In the general course of life it is easy to forget this. In fasting we are reminded of this reality.

The setting for Deuteronomy is the Israelites desert trial where normal provision was not open to them. It is here that they are given manna to eat. It is here that they are given the law. It is here they are instructed to follow all the commands of the LORD - all that He desires for them. The quote that we have just looked at goes on to say that we live by

⁶ see 1 Corinthians 7:31-7 for an example of a different kind of fasting

⁷ Isaiah 58:3-9 warns us not to think that God will hear us simply because we fast. "Why have we fasted and you not seen it" say the people. The LORD replies by pointing out that they exploit workers, they do not challenge injustice, they do not care for the needy - how can they expect to be heard if they are so flagrantly disobeying his commands? Then the LORD gives the encouragement that if we do amend our ways, then when we do call upon him we will be heard. In a series of beautiful statements we are told that LORD will guide us always; he will satisfy our needs; we will obtain a good reputation; we will find joy in the Lord and our "light will break forth like the dawn". Clearly the whole of life devoted to the LORD is for our good, our joy and satisfaction - it is not enough to simply fast and go on in the rest of life without obedience to his commands.

⁸ Deuteronomy 8:3

⁹ The Israelites in their desert trial were provided with manna to teach them that all their needs were provided by God - the God who was leading them to the land of plenty that he had promised.

“every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD¹⁰.” Fasting provides more opportunity for feeding on the Scriptures.

Jesus quotes this same passage of Scripture in his desert fast¹¹, as he prepares for the next stage of his life. To each of Satan’s temptations we see him answering with truth from Scripture. If our Lord, in his desert trial, was meditating on Scripture how much more should we be reading and considering Scripture as we fast. In fasting there is to be a feeding on Scripture¹².

4. Fasting: not our everyday posture before the Lord

As we approach this subject of fasting we firstly remind ourselves that food is a good gift of our loving heavenly Father¹³. It is the means by which we sustain ourselves, without which we die. In Genesis we see our Creator’s lavish provision for human-kind, part of this is the rich variety of food we have been generously given. Food is good - this is why it is entirely appropriate to give thanks at meal times.

We think of Jesus’ merciful and miraculous provision on a hill far away from provisions in the feeding of the thousands¹⁴. We think of his preparing a barbecue of fish for his disciples at the shore of Galilee after his resurrection¹⁵. Food is clearly a good thing, and so it is a distortion of Scripture for anybody to forbid eating of certain foods¹⁶. Food is not to be despised, rather it is to be gratefully received¹⁷.

Fasting is not our usual practice; eating of food with thanksgiving is. It is in this context that there may be times where it is entirely appropriate to fast.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 8:3

¹¹ Matthew 4:4

¹² We see this elsewhere in Scripture as I will go on to show.

¹³ Food and celebration frequently go together in Scripture. In the same way that fasting and humbling oneself goes together.

¹⁴ Matthew 14:13-21

¹⁵ John 21

¹⁶ Indeed the new testament teaches that those who teach such things are taught by doctrine of demons.

¹⁷ 1 Tim 4:4 Note also that Jesus encourages us to pray for “daily bread”

5. For whom fasting may not be appropriate:

Fasting may not be suitable for all. For example those who have irregular blood sugars, and perhaps certain constitutions should consider carefully whether it is the Lord's call for them to fast. Equally one should consider carefully medical advice¹⁸.

Certain life-circumstances may mean that fasting may not be appropriate. A particularly physically demanding job may be another reason. If we are not used to fasting it may be wise to start off with a short period of time, or hold off until you have a free day from employment.

Those with a problematic relationship with food - for them it would be more glorifying to God to continue to seek help in this area and not to take part in the fast.

The decision is before God for each individual. We are not to judge each other about this¹⁹. One must not look down on one-self if one does not fast - for food is good. God looks on the inward disposition of the heart. If one is fasting self-righteously it is far better that one does not fast and maintain a sense of inadequacy and dependence before God, than that one does²⁰.

6. Fasting and the advance of God's kingdom

It was with a backdrop of prayer and fasting that some of the advances were made in the spread of the gospel in the early church²¹. Luke's account in Acts provides several examples of this.

It was when the church in Antioch were "worshiping the Lord and fasting" that they had the specific guidance to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work God had appointed for them²². This event marks the start of Paul's missionary journeys, the outworking of the call he had when he was converted. Luke writes his narrative in such a way as to show a connection between the churches worship with fasting, God's clear direction, and the gospel advance.

¹⁸ With some medications it is not wise take them without food.

¹⁹ Indeed it should not be apparent to others that we are fasting - see Matthew 6:16-18 - clearly in certain circumstances it is impossible for others not to know.

²⁰ One thinks of the Pharisee at prayer in the temple whose confidence was in his own practice - including fasting - rather than in a reliance on his God (Luke 18:9-14) - entirely the reverse of what fasting is about!

²¹ This should not surprise us if fasting is appropriate for believers.

²² Acts 13:1-3

Old Testament examples to highlight are found in Ezra²³, Nehemiah²⁴ and Esther²⁵. We do not have time to go into all these here, but they are deeply encouragements accounts showing the significance of fasting in the advance of God's purposes and the display of his glory both to the people of God and the surrounding nations. Clearly the narrators wishes to show how significant prayer and fasting was in establishing God's work.²⁶

May our times of prayer and fasting, as we seek the Lord, bring glory to him. We can be confident that he is no ones debtor.

“When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”²⁷

²³ Ezra 8:12 Note Ezra's desire for God's reputation. It was this which led him to proclaim a fast by the Ahava canal.

²⁴ In Nehemiah Chapter one we are introduced to him in his every day job as cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes. We are told that he is fasting and that this because he is distressed by the news he has heard of the disrepute in which Jerusalem now stands. In this account we see much including: 1. the centrality of prayer in fasting. 2. the centrality of concern for the work of God in fasting. 3. Appropriate confession of his own and his people's sins in fasting. 4. Calling on God to remember his promises in fasting. In Nehemiah 9:1-37 we see the Israelites gathering to fast corporately. See again the connection in fasting with confession, Scripture reading, worship and prayer.

²⁵ See Esther 4. See how the extermination of the Jews was prevented by her courage and her actions which including calling a fast. Mordecai tells Esther “Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:13-14) Clearly God has promised will be fulfilled, but we have the immense privilege of playing our part.

²⁶ Note that the practice of fasting is seen towards the end of the Old Testament. The people at this point knew of God's power and his works - they knew they could seek him and pray for a renewal of them in their day - we too live in similar times. Their stories are encouragement for us as we seek God's purposes in our day.

²⁷ Matthew 6:17-18