

# TRUE FASTING

A HEART IN ANGUISH IN SEARCH OF GOD'S GRACE

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## TRUE FASTING

A HEART IN ANGUISH IN SEARCH OF GOD'S MERCY

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## **DEDICATION**

To the memory of all Christians, disciples of Jesus, who desire and thirst for love for God and faithfulness to his written word, with a courage that insists on fidelity to scriptures rather than partake in the spiritual corruption that exists today

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

## **PROVERBS 3:3-5**

**A** successful, close relationship with God is founded on a love for God and faithfulness to his word. For the disciple of Christ (a Christian) that means loving God and being obedient to Him as Jesus was when he walked the face of the earth. What I have learned is that the daily struggles to stay faithful and pleasing to God then comes down to making a choice between my way or God's way with regard to life's decisions. That is why the Proverbs admonish us to trust God and his word and not to lean on our own understanding. This is a lesson that the Pharisees - the most religious group in Jesus' day - had to learn the hard way. They followed their own understanding and in the end wandered away from scriptures, in favor of their own traditions, man-made rules and regulations that had a very powerful, yet false semblance to worship of God.

As Jesus told his disciples "*The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.*" (Matthew 23:2-3). The Pharisees knew what scriptures taught, but because they leaned on their own understanding, what they practiced was contrary to what was written in scripture. Jesus therefore admonished his disciples not to use the Pharisees' way of life as the standard for their lives, but to use what the scriptures teach. The fact of the matter is we are all, at heart, like the Pharisee. It is not difficult to find oneself selectively obeying scriptures or not having personal examples for others to imitate. How many of us,

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who are in Christ, used to complain about hypocrisy in religion and yet never offered our own examples to demonstrate to those we called

hypocrites how a life of truth is supposed to be like?

For disciples of Christ, we are blessed to have Jesus as our standard and example. The legacy of his relationship with God is the written word of God that ever guides us to become like him. His unique faithfulness to God and trust in God is shown in his reliance on scriptures. For example; as he was being tempted by the devil in the desert, he called to his defense the written word of God, emphasizing '*It is written....*' (Matthew 4:4, 4:7, 4:10). Where disciples fail to hold to that which is written, then they are bound to repeat the error of the Pharisees, leaning on their own understanding. Such error is what leads to divisions in the church and unfaithfulness, as Paul had to admonish the Corinthian church; "*Do not go beyond what is written*" (1 Corinthians 4:6). When we go beyond what is written, there is bound to be all kinds of practices that make a mockery of God's word, and such is what has happened today with regard to biblical fasting.

There is a misunderstanding about fasting that is gradually causing today's disciples to go beyond what is written and in effect giving birth to practices that could cause us to stray in other areas of discipleship. It is not uncommon these days to find disciples doing all kinds of 'fasting'. One Christian brother 'fasts' from meat to be fruitful, while another does a 'juice-only fast'. One Christian sister 'fasts' from caffeine (abstaining from coffee), while another 'fasts' from coke that she may be humble. Yet another 'fasts' from bread that her best friend may become open to the Bible. The fact that individual disciples choose whatever each person determines fit for a fast, should be of major concern to us. Thanks be to God that we are called to walk like *Jesus*. If I should pray, my goal is to pray like Jesus prayed. If I should love, my goal is to love like Jesus loves, and when I fast, my goal *should be* to fast as Jesus would.

The danger that we face is best summed up by what Thomas Paine once said "*a long period of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it an impression of being right*". Some of these practices of brief abstentions (from all sorts of

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things we choose) that purport to be fasting, unfortunately, are very prevalent today and such prevalence leads others to engage in similar practices without questioning their fidelity to the word of God. Even though we may have seen other well-intentioned disciples practice all kinds of such 'fasts', the fact that someone else does it is not enough reason to think it right. This is exactly the kind of error that Jesus admonished his disciples against. I have fasted several times in the past, but as I examined my fasts in light of the word of God, it became clear to me that there were only three occasions in nine years that my fasts had been consistent with scriptures. As I examined my life with regard to fasting, one principle of scripture I had to always remind myself of is that *with man, the end justifies the means, but with God, the means justifies the end*. If

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may illustrate this with what I refer to as 'Climbing Jacobs Ladder or Is it

really Jacobs Ladder?' Just imagine climbing up a ladder, placed against a wall, to get to the top where you will meet God. Anyone, who climbs up a ladder, knows very well the excitement that comes the higher you climb. The question, however, is are you getting closer to meeting God the higher up you go? No, not if your ladder is placed on the wrong wall. However, Yes, if your ladder leans against the right wall. The lesson is that the fact that you are going up, does not mean you're climbing on the right wall. With God, the result does not justify the means. However, the right, scriptural means will always achieve the results God intends. Times in the past that I fasted and had some kind of results did not necessarily mean, my fast was consistent with the word of God. Jesus and God's word constitute the standard and my fasts should uphold the word of God. That pleases God.

What is the fasting disciples are called to? What is the purpose for it? What drove men and women in the Bible to fast? How does God regard fasting? and When should a disciple fast ?

In the Bible, fasting done by the great men and women of God always meant one thing; *"a conscious decision to desist from eating and drinking, while devoted to prayer, to weaken the physical forces within them, humbling themselves before God in a period of unfaithfulness, spiritual crisis or urgency, that God may intervene on their behalf."* The focus being the humility of our hearts shown in personal righteousness, and the object being the mercy of God.

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As humans, we are very physical beings, perceiving physical realities well and yet having difficulty accepting the spiritual as reality. When we are in sin and the spirit that lives in us is crying out to God in anguish, God sees an emaciated soul, thirsting and hungering for righteousness. A fast then helps us understand in the physical realm the spiritual realities that exist within, with the hope that it might inspire humility of the whole man to God, so we can thirst and hunger for God within the physical realm. The worse abuse of fasting is the disciple or Christian who fasts thinking he or she does so to move God or for his prayer to be answered. A specific example is a disciple who fasts to 'get closer to God' or 'so God can grant a specific request'. God's ear is not so dulled that he can not hear your prayer nor is his arm so short that he can not save<sup>1</sup>. The bible also teaches that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective<sup>2</sup>, and that God's eyes are constantly roaming out through the world to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, God hearing our prayer and us being closer to God is predicated on our humility and the consequent obedience to righteous living. Fasting then is neither a way to getting closer to God nor securing our wishes from God, but a way to securing a level of humility or dependence on God at a time when our spiritual lives or worship of God is threatened, either by a period of unfaithfulness or circumstances beyond our control. For the men and women of the Bible, times of fasting were times when joy had dried up in their lives and were in dire need of God's mercy because their

spiritual lives were either in danger or there was hardness of heart that threatened the work of God. If a man needs to know the depth of spiritual hunger and thirst for God needed in our lives for God's grace to be at work in our lives, let that man suffer hunger as he focuses on God. At the end of that experience lays a lesson that inspires humility in our souls and brings about the compassion and grace of God. However, if a man already possesses the humility and righteousness inspired by this lesson, then he is in no need of fasting.

What God wants is a disciple who has humility of heart and a repentant heart that bears the fruits of a godly life. Fasting with prayer is there by design to help us get the spiritual hunger and thirst for God in times that our hearts are struggling. That is true fasting.

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 59:1-2

<sup>2</sup> James 5:16b

<sup>3</sup> 2 Chronicles 16:9

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Fasting together with prayer is difficult. It is something you learn to do and not compromise on it. It is not a command of God, but rather a privilege that God extends to us in our time of need, knowing the efficacy it has for helping us humble ourselves before him. Understand this: a man who is destitute at heart and already stands before God humble and righteous, with no impending spiritual urgency, is in no need of fasting. However, it ought to be noted that the fact that you fast, does not mean God will automatically be pleased. The goal of fasting with prayer is our humility and the mercy of God, and therefore a time of fasting has to be accompanied by a righteousness that comes from a man who needs God. As we embark on understanding what the Bible truly teaches on the subject of fasting, remember; there is an invaluable spiritual blessing that will overflow into the lives of others and help keep many faithful to God, if we pay close attention to what scriptures teach on this subject. Our example, however, will either lead someone to be faithful to scripture or will add to the many hypocritical examples that contradict scriptural examples. The admonishing of Paul is worth our utmost attention here; *Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save*

*both yourself and your hearers.* (1 Timothy 4:16).

With an open heart and a mind ready to be faithful to God's word, let us remember also these words of Paul; *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope* (Romans 15:4), as we seek to understand the things we have in Christ.

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## WHAT IS FASTING?

**In** the Bible, fasting is not equivalent to abstinence as used in

standard English today. One of the problems of biblical interpretation these days is the temptation to superimpose on scriptural passages present day societal meaning of certain words. There is a tendency to look up biblical words in, for instance, Webster's Dictionary and superimpose their meaning on scriptures. Unfortunately, standard English Dictionaries, unlike Bible Dictionaries, only reflect how society uses words and therefore have no obligation to remain true to scriptural passages and Christian doctrine. The meanings of biblical words in standard English Dictionaries then are likely to lead you to an understanding that may not be true to the Bible. A classic illustration will be looking up the word "baptism" in Webster's Dictionary, the meaning of which erroneously leads one to believe that sprinkling and any supposed religious rite involving water could be considered baptism (the real meaning of which is immersion according to the literal Greek). With regard to fasting, standard English Dictionaries define it as 'to eat sparingly, abstain from some foods or as a practice of self-denial'. As I have learned in my life and will further be seen from scriptures later, this definition is a very loose one that does no justice to what biblical fasting is. God's word and Jesus constitute our standard, so let us throw aside society's view of fasting and rather seek to embrace scriptural understanding of it. To do this requires a unique sense of honesty towards what is written. An honesty that is consistent in all areas of scripture, one that recognizes that the wider road often embraced by many tends to stray from truth, and an honesty that works for the interest of God.

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### **The Meaning of the word**

Fasting shows up in the scriptures in one of three forms <,FJ4F (hungry, fasting), <,FJ,L@ (to hunger, fast) or <,FJ,4" (suffering hunger, fasting), derived from the two Greek forms <, (not) and *etheo* (to eat). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew equivalent used is *sûm* (verb) and *sôm* (noun), and in some instances (such as in I Samuel, Chapter 1) the expression *innâ nâp šî* meaning *to afflict the soul*, is used to describe fasting. The first of the Greek forms <,FJ4F (*nêstis*) means *one who has not eaten* and the second <,FJ,L@ (*nêsteúō*) means *to be without food*, and it involves a decision to go without food as opposed to being hungry from lack of access to food. As shown in the scriptures, it goes hand in hand with prayer to God and therefore it is meaningless to talk about fasting without a devotion to prayer during the fast. Biblical fasting then makes sense only in the context of prayer to God. Therefore, if you do not intend to devote the time to prayer, a fast is meaningless.

### **Self-denial and fasting**

Unlike prayer by itself, fasting was done for specific purposes and under specific situations or state of mind. The challenge for disciples today is to remain faithful to what is taught in the scriptures for the sake of our own

spiritual survival and that of our children. It is critical though to understand that fasting is not abstention from whatever you, in your own judgment, decide to abstain from. There is a practice of "fasting", that has become common in Christian worship today, and I am concerned because it misrepresents the scriptures and the spirit of being faithful to what is written. One disciple wants to "fast from sweets, in order to be fruitful", "fast from jewelry, until someone studies the Bible", "fast from Television to get a pure heart" or "fasting from my bed, so I will be more humble". There is nothing wrong with abstaining from things that a brother or a sister may deem fit - often things that the brother or sister has indulged the self in. As a matter of learning discipline, a person may practice self-denial in things he or she likes, to ensure that such things do not become a master of the self. For example, a person may deny the self

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much liked pleasure to show that he or she is in control and not being controlled by the pleasure in question. Or a person may forego the use of a means of transportation that he or she may learn gratitude for or the value of such a privilege. Such practices of self-denial in things one likes are *not* the fasts the word of God teaches. In the scriptures, disciples are called to crucify the desires of the sinful nature, deny themselves daily and to be controlled by the desires of the Spirit of God. That is why Peter, for instance, urged the disciples in 1 Peter 2:11, saying "*Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul*". So such self-denial in things that have a potential to master or enslave us, is just a nominal issue of discipleship to Christ. Sadly though, these practices of self-denial or abstentions are often misconstrued for biblical fasts and the more these practices deviate from biblical examples of fasting, the more they become a basis for human regulations and teachings similar to what Paul admonished about as; "*such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence*" (Colossians 2:23). Meaning at the end these practices, those who engage in them are still left with their sinful indulgences, unrepented. These brief abstentions from indulgences have no value whatsoever towards godliness and make a mockery of biblical examples of fasting.

The concern here is disciples gradually drifting away from what is written (by command, example or inference) and misconstruing fasting to mean abstention from anything they, in their own eyes, see fit. One has to wonder by what criteria individual disciples decide what to abstain from. The disciple who decided to 'fast' from caffeine apparently had difficulty giving up coffee or, more appropriately had become dependent on caffeine. Another who decided to 'fast' from Television watched too much television. Yet another who decided to 'fast' from sweets, had been working hard at losing weight. These individual disciples had decided on

what to abstain from based on what is difficult for them to give up. *Biblical fasting is not about giving up something that is difficult for you to give up.* If something has become difficult for you (too much television, too much sweets, debauchery etc.), you have to deny yourself and repent lest it

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becomes your god. The concern with these practices, besides their not being faithful to scripture, is that issues or habits that are a matter of repentance (from indulgences and the cravings of sinful man, *1 John 2:15*) are being misrepresented as fasting. Our hearts can not approach God with our indulgences as acceptable sacrifices. In the Bible, fasting with prayer has a specific purpose and these so-called 'fasts' make a mockery of God's will in this.

Fasting with prayer, in the scriptures, has always meant one thing and nothing else. That is deciding to suffer hunger for a set period, to devote yourself to praying to God. When one talked about fasting in the Bible, the only legitimate question then for the person fasting was 'for how long should I fast?' A period of fasting could be as long as a day<sup>1</sup>, or three days<sup>2</sup>, or seven days<sup>3</sup>, or even as long as forty days as done by Moses<sup>4</sup> and Jesus<sup>5</sup>. How long a Christian disciple should fast and devote himself or herself to prayer is an issue addressed in the last section of this book. The bottom-line is that there is only one kind of fasting in the Bible done by Jesus, Moses, Esther, David, Hannah, Daniel, Paul, and many others like the people of Nineveh, and that is a decision to suffer hunger in time of prayer to God.

<sup>1</sup> Judges 20:26

<sup>2</sup> Esther 4:16

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 31:13

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:28

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 4:1-2

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## WHY FAST, WHILE DEVOTING YOURSELF TO PRAYER?

**It** is critical that we understand what the purpose of fasting together with prayer is, because it will help us approach God in an acceptable manner, being faithful to what is written in his word. The fact is if God, who knows our hearts, provides us with the purpose for fasting in the scriptures, then we will be blessed if we correctly fast for that same purpose. Fasting, however, is different from prayer in what it achieves in the one who fasts. Daily prayer to God, in the life of a disciple, is essential to spiritual survival and growth. However, fasting in the scriptures is very rarely practiced in times of prayer, and whenever it was done, it was for specific reasons and in specific situations.

The book of James teaches that *the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective before God*<sup>1</sup> and the book of Hebrews also teaches that *Jesus' was heard by God, because of his reverent submission*<sup>2</sup> to man and God. What these



passages teach us is that if we are leading a righteous life and a life in submission to God's will, our prayers will always be effective before God. The question then is why would I need to fast and pray if I stand before God blameless and humble as an obedient child of His? As we will learn from scriptures, fasting is for our own benefit and not for that of God. The fact is a man or a woman who stands before God blameless and humble ought to be confident that God is ever attentive to them.

### **Humility of Heart**

Fasting for the men and women in the Holy Scriptures was not something that was engaged in frivolously. They fasted in specific situations, for fewer times than is commonly done today and for a specific purpose. The purpose for fasting may be illustrated using the situations of Ahab and David, and may be summarized as to "*humble*

<sup>1</sup> James 5:16

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 5:7

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*yourself, to overcome a hardness of heart, that God may relent".*

### **A LESSON FROM AHAB'S LIFE**

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. Say to him, *'This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?'* Then say to him, *'This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood--yes, yours!'*" Ahab said to Elijah, "So you have found me, my enemy!" "I have found you," he answered, "because you have sold yourself (*you have exalted yourself*) to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. 'I am going to bring disaster on you..... I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.' "And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.' "Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country." There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel. *When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son."*

### **1 KINGS 21:17-29**

Ahab had sinned against God and had also instigated the people to sin by stoning an innocent man to death. God was about to destroy him, because he had exalted himself to do evil in the eyes of God. As the Psalms teach "*In his pride the wicked does not seek Him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God*". Ahab had become so wicked that the pride in his heart had made God unimportant in his life and in his wickedness "*he lies in wait near the villages; from ambush he murders the innocent, watching in secret for his victims*" (Psalm 10:8). However, when the prophet Elijah confronted him with his sin, he put on sackcloth and fasted. "*Have you noticed how Ahab*

*humbled himself before me?"* was God's response and as a result Ahab's life was spared. The question to ask is "What is it about Ahab's response that made God spare his life?" The quickness to repent and the eagerness to humble himself. The scriptures teach that Ahab had sold himself to do evil and had lost all respect for God. For a man to come to such heights of arrogance, he ought to have lost all conscience and sensitivity to sin. When God, however, made his wrath known to Ahab, he was quick to

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respond. If Ahab had not proceeded to fast, he would have greatly deceived himself. For when a man has given in as many times as temptation has come to him, his soul has forgotten its maker and his heart knows not how to submit to God. For Ahab, the goal in the face of the wrath of God was to submit wholeheartedly that he may become obedient to God. The means to help him get there, however, was fasting and mourning over his sins before God. His humility of heart achieved through his devotion to fasting with prayer, indicative of true repentance, is what ultimately brought the mercy of God.

In Psalm 35:10-17, David also states the purpose for his fasting as *to humble himself before God*, as we learn from the following scriptures.

#### **A LESSON FROM DAVID'S LIFE**

"Who is like you, O LORD? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them." Ruthless witnesses come forward; they question me on things I know nothing about. They repay me evil for good and leave my soul forlorn. Yet when they were ill, *I put on sackcloth and humbled myself (humbled my soul) with fasting.* When my prayers returned to me unanswered, I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother. I bowed my head in grief as though weeping for my mother. But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee; attackers gathered against me when I was unaware. They slandered me without ceasing. Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked; they gnashed their teeth at me. O Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue my life from their ravages, my precious life from these lions. **PSALM 35:10 -17**

Here David, a man whose soul is in anguish as he puts it "*..they repay me evil for good and leave my soul forlorn (deserted, without hope)*", puts on sackcloth and fasts to humble himself. [ As in several other biblical examples, both Ahab and David put on sackcloth as they fasted to humble themselves. The sackcloth was a hairy garment, rough on the skin, and worn as a sign of mourning, as a matter of Jewish tradition. In effect, what these two men did was to humble themselves before God and to mourn over their own spiritual condition or that of others. ]

The example of David in the Psalms teaches us a lot about the humility of heart that fasting helps us achieve. David began his prayer to God by recanting God's kindness and mercy in rescuing those in need. He then concluded with a request for God to rescue him from people, who he

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considered friends and yet were out to harm him. In our sinful nature, it is very difficult not to respond in kind to relentless slander and accusations, as David was subjected to, that we know nothing of. It is

just not easy to keep doing good to someone who constantly curses at us. Who among us is not always tempted to pay back evil for evil? Indeed it is in our nature to even feel relieved when those who constantly hurt us also suffer. However, to pay back evil for evil will be to subjugate God's will to ours. Such a response belongs to a heart that is not willing to leave room for God to judge. Jesus taught that a child of God ought to pray for those who persecute and love those who hate<sup>1</sup>. That takes a humility of heart that allows God to be sovereign with respect to judging men's heart, while rendering us blameless as children of God. When those who attacked David fell ill, it would have been natural for David to rejoice at what had befallen his enemies. However, because of his desire to be righteous, he sought to fast to humble himself that he may pray for them, instead of cursing them for all the evil they had paid him. The lesson here is that he put on sackcloth to mourn for what had happened to them, but fasted to humble his own soul that he may remain righteous at such a time.

### **Prayer of a Righteous Man Is Powerful**

If the bible teaches that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective before God, then why will a man need to fast instead of just praying without the hunger and thirst? The answer obviously may have something to do with the level of righteousness in a person's life, because God promises an attentive ear to the righteous and blameless. From the examples of fasting we have looked at so far, we can conclude that none of the men stood blameless before God prior to their fasting. Let's consider another example illustrating the lack of righteousness that necessitated fasting – the example of Ezra. This example hints at one of the most misunderstood reasons for fasting - disciples who fast, thinking they do so to move God. If you stand before God blameless and have been leading a humble, righteous life, why won't God hear your prayer

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:44

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without you resorting to a fast? Much can be learned from the example of Ezra.

### **EZRA CALLING FOR HUMILITY BEYOND PRAYER**

Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Sherebiah's sons and brothers, 18 men; and Hashabiah, together with Jeshaiiah from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 men. They also brought 220 of the temple servants--a body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites. All were registered by name.

There, by the Ahava Canal, *I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey* for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." *So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.* **EZRA 8:18-23 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup>I proclaimed a fast there by the Ahava River to afflict ourselves

before our God to beseech Him for a smooth journey for us and for our children and for all our possessions; for I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us against any enemy on the way, since we had told the king, "The benevolent care of our God is for all who seek Him, while His fierce anger is against all who forsake Him". So we fasted and besought our God for this, and He responded to our plea. **EZRA 8:18-23 (JPS)**

For us to understand the purpose for fasting as illustrated in the above scriptures, we need to know "why Ezra proclaimed a fast and not just resort to prayer?" "Did he proclaim a fast because of the dangers they faced on the journey?" Not at all. In fact, Ezra was convinced that the 'gracious hand of God' was on them working on their behalf. He had assembled the people to journey from Babylon with over 1,500 men. When he realized that there were no Levites among the men to carry the ark, he requested the assistance of the Levites who served at Caiphia and they quickly came. Ezra therefore knew how to make his case for what he needed.

However, with regard to protection on the journey, Ezra spoke too quickly and found himself to be in an embarrassing position if he were to

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ask the king for protection. The interesting thing is that God had already placed it on the king's heart to provide Ezra with whatever he needed for the journey. In fact, in his letter to Ezra, the king put the whole treasury at Ezra's disposal for what was needed to build the house of God. Ezra himself acknowledged that God was working in his favor through the king as he stated; *"Blessed is the Lord God of our fathers, who put it into the mind of the king to glorify the House of the Lord in Jerusalem, and who inclined the king and his counselors and the king's military officers to be favorably disposed toward me."*

So Ezra already had the military at his disposal, all he needed to do was ask. However, he was ashamed because he had told the king he did not need it, and in the process missed an opportunity that God had provided through the king. This is certainly a reminder of the Christian who finds himself or herself in financial predicament and yet rejects an offer of help, falsely believing that God would take care of him in some other way. The fact is God works through all kinds of people, even our enemies, to take care of our needs. Who knows, your humility to accept help from those who do not know God, may be the example that will help such see the hand of God in the life of a Christian. Ezra, though, after refusing an opportunity afforded by God through the king, was wise enough to realize that he needed the mercy of God. He then proclaimed a fast, then made his request to God to protect them. The fast was therefore proclaimed for the sole purpose of helping him and his cohorts' approach God in humility, that whatever they ask might be granted. Again here we see the purpose of fasting; to help the person suffering hunger humble himself or herself before God.

So far, it has been clear from scriptures that the purpose of fasting is to humble the whole man before God, that he may show mercy and come

to our aid, as we pray to him.

### **Restoring the Heart's Freshness**

Well, since as disciples we always need to be humble before God, why not fast then each time we pray? We pray all the time, on all occasions, so why not do the same with fasting? As we will learn later on, unlike prayer, which fuels our spiritual life daily, fasting with devotion to prayer

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is needed in specific situations. The three scriptural passages above, representative of true biblical fasting, point to the main purpose of fasting as enabling the one who fasts to submit to God.

There is no doubt that the central foundation of a Christian life is submission to God in all areas of our lives. In our day-to-day living, however, we do know how to make decisions to submit to God in areas that we clearly perceive personal sin. Things that we know are clearly wrong, we quickly repent and submit to scriptural teachings, because we are committed to the fact that Jesus has to be Lord in these obvious areas. Such daily accounting of sins in our lives and whether we are submitting to God's righteousness or not is not the focus of biblical fasting. However, the areas of our lives that we come to take for granted, areas where our convictions erode, often become the focus of fasting, because from such areas the seeds of pride begin to grow. What we will find as we examine the men and women who fasted in the scriptures is that, the areas of their lives that they took for granted and lost God's perspective on became the areas that revealed their lack of humility.

These areas ultimately prompted them to fast.

The whole process of our convictions eroding in areas we come to take for granted can be illustrated with the cobweb example. Anyone who has ever owned a house or an apartment will know that for the place to be clean, you have to clean it daily. However, when time has past we suddenly realize that the place is not as clean as it seemed when we decided to move that one piece of furniture. Behind our favorite furniture are cobweb, dust and all kinds of trash. All of a sudden, the place does not smell quite as fresh. To restore the freshness of the place, we need to realize how far we have become lax and lost our need for freshness of our habitats. Often at times a situation, such as parents accidentally stopping by, has to occur for us to realize the scruffiness of our habitats. With courage, we devote several days of free time and do a thorough house cleaning. That thorough house cleaning to restore the freshness of our place and our need for such freshness for our parents to feel welcome, may be likened to fasting that humbles the inner being that God may work through us. The situations or circumstances that called

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for fasting in the lives of these men and women in the Bible is what I want to point out in the next section. For it is important that we recognize why and when we ought to devote ourselves to prayer with fasting, that we may be faithful to God and gain the benefits of fasting

with prayer.

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**MOVED BY GOD, NOT BY MAN, TO FAST**

**A**hab (*1 Kings 21:17-29*) was moved to put on sackcloth and fast at a time when he had strayed from God. His heart had become callused with sin. As scripture teaches "...*there was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel*". A period of sin had made Ahab's heart so callous that he no longer feared God and had become a partaker in murdering a man for a piece of land. It was no longer an issue of praying for forgiveness, because his heart could not bow down his soul to God, until he fasted and mourned for his sins, in true repentance.

In *Psalms 35:10-17*, David was moved to mourn and fast when his enemies became ill, not because his enemies were in need of his prayers, but to bow down his own soul before God that he might not repay them with evil. David was struggling, a man whose soul was in anguish. As he put it "...*they repay me evil for good and leave my soul forlorn (deserted, without hope)*". He was moved to fast because of the spiritual struggle to remain humble and not to repay his enemies for hopelessness in his heart, that had resulted from bearing their constant insults.

**Joy dried up among men**

It is clear from the scriptures that men and women were driven to fast either after a period of sin and unfaithfulness to God or during a spiritual crisis that required a total submission to God's will and a plea for divine intervention. Well, let us take a look at more of these circumstances that drove godly men and women to fasting. In *Joel 1:12-2:17*, we read about God calling the people to repentance after a period of unfaithfulness that brought spiritual destitution to them.

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**BECAUSE HE IS GRACIOUS AND COMPASSIONATE**

The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree-- all the trees of the field--are dried up. Surely the joy of mankind is withered away.

Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. *Declare a holy fast*; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.....

*'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing-- grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.*

Blow the trumpet in Zion, *declare a holy fast*, call a sacred assembly.

Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, 'Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'

**JOEL 1:12-2:17**

*"Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning",* so that the Lord may be gracious and relent from sending calamity. The message through the prophet Joel begins with God calling their attention to the fact that there is desolation in the land. Not any ordinary form of desolation and unfaithfulness, but one that had never occurred even in the days of their fathers<sup>1</sup>. When a people cease to grow spiritually, unfaithfulness and decadence grow. Ultimately such unfaithfulness manifests itself in desolation in the lives of the individuals. Such was what had happened in the days of Joel; offering and libation to God had ceased, no one prospered from the fruits of their labor, the lands lay wasted, and *"joy has dried up among men"*. Their hearts had become so callous and strayed that it was no longer a matter of simple prayer for

<sup>1</sup> Joel 1:2

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forgiveness, but rather they had to mourn and humble themselves with fasting, that God might relent. The lesson here is that a period of unfaithfulness always leads to spiritual destitution and brings us to a point where we risk missing God's grace and falling away. Such spiritual dearth and the accompanying callousness of heart was one of the situations that motivated biblical fasting.

Another biblical example is Nehemiah, in the midst of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He called the Israelites to repentance with fasting and mourning, that God may forgive them for their sins and that of their fathers;

**Moved by God's Kindness to Petition for Forgiveness SS**

The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great. Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, *the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads.* Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and *confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.* They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God. **NEHEMIAH 8:17-9:3**

Again God, through the prophet Jeremiah, called his people to repentance saying *"...Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I*

*plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive*

*their wickedness and their sin”;*

#### **INSPIRED BY GOD'S WRATH TO SEEK FORGIVENESS**

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now. Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every

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disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin."

So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll. Then Jeremiah told Baruch, "I am restricted; I cannot go to the Lord's temple. *So you go to the house of the LORD on a day of fasting and read to the people from the scroll the words of the LORD* that you wrote as I dictated. Read them to all the people of Judah who come in from their towns. *Perhaps they will bring their petition before the LORD, and each will turn from his wicked ways, for the anger and wrath pronounced against this people by the LORD are great.*" Baruch son of Neriah did everything Jeremiah the prophet told him to do; at the Lord's temple he read the words of the LORD from the scroll.

In the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, *a time of fasting before the LORD was proclaimed for all the people in Jerusalem and those who had come from the towns of Judah.* From the room of Gemariah son of Shaphan the secretary, which was in the upper courtyard at the entrance of the New Gate of the temple, Baruch read to all the people at the Lord's temple the words of Jeremiah from the scroll. **JEREMIAH 36:1-10**

Jeremiah's advice for a people who had been in sin and faced the wrath of God was to fast and "*bring their petition before the Lord, and each turn from his sin*". The people would have had no need for fasting only if they had been blameless and faithful to God or had they been quick to repent. Similarly, in the book of Jonah, an example of a period of unfaithfulness, necessitating repentance with fasting and prayer is that of the people of Nineveh.

#### **MOVED BY A FEAR OF GOD TOWARDS REPENTANCE**

On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation..."*Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.*" When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. **JONAH 3:4-10**

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It is clear from the scriptures that the people of Nineveh recognized that they had trampled the righteousness of God and needed mercy. The



first time I ever fasted was in 1987, when I first studied the bible and recognized the unrighteousness of the life I had led up to that point. What I needed then was mercy and for God to give me the faith and strength to change. My spiritual life and indeed my very soul was under siege, because I had displeased God and had led a life of sin, just as the people of Nineveh had done. If I had never made a decision to study the bible, I would never have found a need to change my life. Similarly, the people of Nineveh would have found no need to change if Jonah had not confronted them on their unrighteousness. The desire to change led them to fasting, which in turn brought humility of hearts that led to forgiveness from God.

Again, in another example, Daniel pleads to God to forgive a period of unfaithfulness. He petitioned God with prayer and fasting, while acknowledging his own sin.

#### **OPENNESS AND REPENTANCE INSPIRED BY GOD**

In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes a Mede by descent, who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom-- in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.

*So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. "Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame--the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. O LORD, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame because we have sinned against you.*

The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; we have not obeyed the LORD our God or

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kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets. All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. "Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you.

"Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. **DANIEL 9:1-8**

The underlying motivation that led men and women to fast and pray after a period of unfaithfulness is that God may show compassion and mercy, and forgive. As Daniel concludes "*We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy*". The mercy, the compassion, the grace, and the salvation of God are the object of fasting. This is where fasting is different from prayer by itself. With prayer, the Bible teaches

that a man's prayer is influenced by his personal righteousness. Fasting, however, is for the heart that is in anguish and in need of God's rescuing and therefore its effectiveness depends on the humility of the one suffering hunger and the mercy of God. As an approach to God then, fasting, as we have learned so far, is done from the heart of a person who is convinced of their sinfulness before God and a need for the grace of God. Later on as we look at the New Testament, we will further understand the nature of the things that prompts a need to fast.

### **Unless the Lord finds mercy**

It should be noted that spiritual crisis that required the intervention of God and dependence on God also caused men and women in the Bible to petition God with fasting. The great godly woman Esther fasted for three days that God might save her and her people from annihilation.

### **INSPIRED BY GOD'S POWER TO DELIVER**

Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews--young and old, women and little children--on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province xxvi

and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day. Spurred on by the king's command, the couriers went out, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa.....

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it.

In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, *with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.*

When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why. So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.....

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "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?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "*Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.*" So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions. **ESTHER 3:12-4:17**

Esther and his people prayed to God and petitioned the King, while they

abstained from eating and drinking for three days. In some of the Jewish text, it is said that Esther fainted as he made her plea before the King. Why did Esther ask Mordecai and the people to fast with her and her maids, while she risked her life? The simplest answer is that the only way she knew to depend on God was to fast and pray, relying on the grace of God to save.

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Another example of a man who petitioned God, with fasting and prayer, to show him mercy was, again, David. This man's heart had strayed so much from God that he committed adultery and murdered the husband of the man whose wife he took.

**MOVED BY A HOPE OF MERCY TO PETITION  
GOD TO SAVE**

Then David said "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die."

After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. *David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.*

On the seventh day the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, "While the child was still living, we spoke to David but he would not listen to us. How can we tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate.".....

"Is the child dead?" he asked. "Yes," they replied, "he is dead." Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshipped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.

His servants asked him, "Why are you acting this way? *While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!*" He answered, "*While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.'* But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?"

**2 SAMUEL 12:13-23**

*While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get*

*up and eat!" He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.'*

David in fasting with prayer had hoped that God would have mercy on him and relent on taking away the child that resulted from his sin.

Because of his unfaithfulness, just praying to God to spare the child's life was not enough, for it was not about the child. It was about the lack of faithfulness and the displeasure of God with him that had brought about

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such consequence. What David needed was God's mercy and grace, that is why it was necessary for him to petition God in fasting with prayer.

In *2 Chronicles*, another example is shown when Jehoshaphat was faced with a vast army bent on destroying his nation. He prayed, with fasting, to God for answers and that God save them from the impending attack.

## **A SPIRITUAL CRISIS NECESSITATING A PETITION THAT GOD SAVE**

After this, the Moabites and Ammonites with some of the Meunites came to make war on Jehoshaphat. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar" that is, En Gedi. Alarmed, *Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.*

The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him. Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD in the front of the new courtyard and said: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations.....

...God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name, saying, 'If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, *we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.*' "But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt; so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. **2 CHRONICLES 20:1-10**

As it says, the people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord. Why did they need to fast when they could just pray? Fasting, again, is about bowing down the soul to God in humility that he may have mercy on the one who fasts and deliver. Even though Jehoshaphet had an army of more than a million men<sup>1</sup>, he went to God fasting. He and Judah saw it fit to fast as they inquire of the Lord, because deliverance depended on God's mercy and the only thing that could warrant God's mercy is man's

<sup>1</sup> 2 Chronicles 17:14-19

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humility. That was the lesson that the apostle Paul also had to learn when God opposed him on the road to Damascus.

### **A LESSON FROM PAUL'S LIFE**

Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. *For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying..... Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. *He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.* Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. **ACTS 9:8 -19**

For three days, Paul neither ate nor drank anything, while praying to God for help. He had been persecuting disciples of Christ till God opposed him, causing him to be blinded till he repented. He fasted because he was in need of God's mercy, and the only way was to bow down his soul to God, in humility.

Another situation that called for fasting in the Bible is shown in the book of Acts. Unlike the call of people to fasting as shown in the Old Testament during periods of unfaithfulness or spiritual crisis, the call to fasting in the book of Acts was in times of spiritual urgency. For instance;

#### **SPIRITUAL URGENCY REQUIRING DEPENDENCE ON THE HOLY SPIRIT**

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch and Saul. *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting*, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." *So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.* The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. **ACTS 13:1-4**

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Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, *with prayer and fasting*, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. **ACTS 14:23**

In both of these situations, the church was at a point where it was about to ordain the first missionaries to the heathen world. It had to rely on the mercy of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in sending out a mission work or appointing elders to be in charge of the souls of others. Such mercy and dependence on God necessitated more than prayer. The church had to humble itself with fasting and prayer before God that he might grant victory.

#### **Privacy of Fasting**

Fasting in the scriptures is not something to engage in frivolously. *It is done with devotion to prayer in times of repentance from a period of unfaithfulness, in*

*times of spiritual crisis, or in times of spiritual urgency that God may show mercy and*

*come to the aid of the one suffering hunger.* It is undoubtedly very difficult and physically very challenging as David explains in the Psalms;

For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me. I fade away like an evening shadow; I am shaken off like a locust. *My knees give way from fasting; my body is thin and gaunt.* I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads. Help me, O LORD my God; save me in accordance with your love.

#### **PSALM 109:22-26**

It is so difficult that at times the period of not eating and drinking could be seen on the strain it puts on the body. That is why Jesus advised his disciples to put on oil and wash their face that it may not be obvious that they are fasting, so they might not be tempted towards self-righteousness before men.

"When you fast, do not look somber 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.* **MATTHEW 6:16-18**

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Because fasting is difficult, there is a tendency for our sinful nature to deceive us into finding ways to make it easy on us, while thinking we are being faithful to what is written. Such are our hearts, when we deceive ourselves into thinking that each person in their own way can choose to abstain from something that is difficult for them to give up, and call it fasting. The reason why baptism (immersion) became misrepresented as sprinkling ( and also other misrepresentations of scriptures ) is because men deceived themselves into thinking they can do things their own way and consider it obedience to scripture. The examples in the scriptures are there for a reason. If you want to have the faith of the men and women of the Bible and do the great things they did, then pay close attention to what is written, because it is written in scripture for a reason. Fasting together with prayer is difficult. It is something you learn to do and not compromise on it. Remember, it is not a command of God, but rather a privilege that God extends to us in our time of need, knowing the efficacy it has for helping us humble ourselves.

How about the person who can not fast for medical reasons? According to Jewish thought, you never put the life of another in jeopardy in regard to fasting. However, if that person can not so much as forgo a meal's fast for a day, then he need to humble himself before God by virtue of the medical problem he or she has. For many by virtue of their physical predicament (that thorn in the flesh) have become humble before God because of their predicament. Understand this: a man who is destitute at heart and already stands before God humble and righteous, with no impending spiritual urgency, is in no need of fasting. However, if your state of mind and heart is such that your relationship with God needs the help and the intervention of God for its survival, then I hope you remember that it is the salvation of your soul that is at stake.

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**THROUGH THE EYES OF GOD**

**N**ow that we know what fasting is and the situations that necessitated fasting with prayer in the Bible, what I want to consider is 'how does God regard fasting?'

**Nor would I eat bread or drink water**

The mind of God is wrought in mysteries that we cannot understand safe for the Spirit of God. It is difficult enough understanding the inclinations of our own hearts and perceiving the mysteries of the human mind. How can we even attempt to explain the mind of God beyond what he has given us in his word. However, because of his love for us, God has given us, in the scriptures, his commands and examples of what pleases him. These commands and examples ascribe to our lives the blessings of the mysteries of God without fully understanding them, if we only obey

them. Why fasting, something physical, influences our hearts condition before God is certainly a mystery that can only be embraced by considering what God says about it. Understand this; fasting is for the benefit of the one who fasts and not for God. Does God delight in our suffering hunger for the sake of it ? Certainly not. However, in our fasts the chords of our hearts are somehow loosened in a way that unbinds the hands of God to intervene in our spiritual battles. And such was the case of the man of God, who God instructed to fast, as he sent him to prophesy against wickedness. This man of God was sent to warn Jeroboam of God's disfavor. He arrived while Jeroboam was about to dedicate an altar, before his heart got hardened.

By the word of the LORD a man of God came from Judah to Bethel, as Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make an offering. He cried out against the altar by the word of the LORD: "O altar, altar! This is what the LORD says: 'A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who now make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you.'" That same day the man of God gave a sign: "This is the sign the

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LORD has declared: The altar will be split apart and the ashes on it will be poured out."

When King Jeroboam heard what the man of God cried out against the altar at Bethel, he stretched out his hand from the altar and said, "Seize him!" But the hand he stretched out toward the man shriveled up, so that he could not pull it back. Also, the altar was split apart and its ashes poured out according to the sign given by the man of God by the word of the LORD. Then the king said to the man of God, "Intercede with the LORD your God and pray for me that my hand may be restored." So the man of God interceded with the LORD, and the king's hand was restored and became as it was before.

*The king said to the man of God, "Come home with me and have something to eat, and I will give you a gift." But the man of God answered the king, "Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water here. For I was commanded by the word of the LORD: 'You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came.'" So he took another road and did not return by the way he had come to Bethel.*

Now there was a certain old prophet living in Bethel, whose sons came and told him all that the man of God had done there that day. They also told their father what he had said to the king. Their father asked them, "Which way did he go?" And his sons showed him which road the man of God from Judah had taken. So he said to his sons, "Saddle the donkey for me." And when they had saddled the donkey for him, he mounted it and rode after the man of God. He found him sitting under an oak tree and asked, "Are you the man of God who came from Judah?" "I am," he replied. So the prophet said to him, "*Come home with me and eat.*" *The man of God said, "I cannot turn back and go with you, nor can I eat bread or drink water with you in this place. I have been told by the word of the LORD: 'You must not eat bread or drink water there or return by the way you came.'*" The old prophet answered, "I too am a prophet, as you are. And an angel said to me by the word of the LORD: 'Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water.'" (But he was lying to him.) So the man of God returned with him and ate and drank in his house. While they were sitting at the table, the word of the LORD came to

the old prophet who had brought him back. He cried out to the man of God who had come from Judah, "This is what the LORD says: 'You have defied the word of the LORD and have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you. You came back and ate bread and drank water in the place where he told you not to eat or drink. Therefore your body will not be buried in the tomb of your fathers.'" When the man of God had finished eating and drinking, the prophet who had brought him back saddled his donkey for him. As he went on his way, a lion met him on the road and killed him,... **1 KINGS 13:1-24**

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*"Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would*

*I eat bread or drink water here. For I was commanded by the word of the LORD: 'You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came.'"* The man

of God though hungry and weary, in obedience to divine instruction refused the food and pleasures offered to him by Jeroboam, the King. Such focus of heart at a time of such spiritual intensity is a reflection of a heart of a man that hungers and thirsts for God's righteousness, and such is a heart prepared and ready for God to use. Did he have to fast in order to face Jeroboam and his sin? God, in his infinite wisdom, determined that such fasting was needed for that spiritual battle, this being a reminder of Jesus' own fasting in the desert before facing Satan.

The man of God, unfortunately, succumbed to the most deceptive sin that causes many people to stray from faithfulness to God; taking the word or the example of a person over that of God. The lesson is clear - no matter how spiritually mature or religious a person may be, if you take that person's word or example over the examples of scripture as the standard for your life, God will reject you.

### **He Who Is Humble and Contrite In Spirit**

As we will learn in this paragraph, there is a reason why one may need to fast while devoting the self to prayer, according to God. However, it ought to be noted that the fact that you fast does not mean God will automatically be pleased. The goal of fasting with prayer is our humility and the mercy of God, and therefore a time of fasting has to be accompanied by a righteousness that comes from a man who needs God. The Pharisees, for instance, took fasting so much for granted that it had no value towards godliness for them. As Jesus illustrated in the book of Luke;

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.

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*I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

### **LUKE 18:10-14**

The Pharisee's weekly fasting did not achieve for him the humility of heart or the repentant heart that fasting is supposed to help us achieve.



This man approached God in an unacceptable manner, thinking he had a life that God ought to be pleased with. He stood before God, giving himself a testimonial, for he had come to inform God how good he had been and not to pray. Would he had felt the same if he had compared his life to the reverent, submissive life of Jesus rather than that of the tax collector? If he had understood true fasting, he would have stood before God with the heart *"I do not make requests of you because I am righteous, but because of your great mercy"*. However, the tax collector in his predicament had a heart of humility in approaching God and in the end received mercy. God is not looking for fasting for the sake of fasting. What he wants is a humble and contrite heart before him as it is written in the book of Isaiah.

This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

**ISAIAH 66:2**

What does a humble and contrite heart has to do with suffering hunger? In suffering hunger, we are reminded of a lesson that God never wants us to forget. A lesson that each time we fail to take to heart, we are bound to wander from God. A lesson that the people of Israel had to learn in the desert of Sinai, after God delivered them from slavery in Egypt;

Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.

*He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD... When xxxv i*

*you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery..... He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you.*

*You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today. If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God.*

**DEUTERONOMY 8:1-20**

As God later recants in Deuteronomy 29:5 *"I did this so that you might know that I am the Lord your God"*. Fasting, that is suffering hunger while devoting ourselves to prayer has one main lesson for our hearts; *to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth*

*of the LORD.* These are not mere words to remember and know. It is a heart that reflects itself in how we live, how we make our decisions in life, our worship of God and our day-to-day faithfulness. It is a fact that a period of unfaithfulness in the life of a disciple renders the heart callous and these words become mere words. Fasting at a time of devotion to prayer in a real way compels such a callused heart to come to grips with the need to survive on every word of God. In our hunger and thirst, we are reminded of the many who hunger and thirst for God's salvation and righteousness, the many whose lives are being destroyed by sin from lack of knowledge of God, and our own frailty outside of God. Also, in times of spiritual crisis or urgency, it is imperative that the heart comes to grips with this understanding so that God may guide the one who fasts. Such was the case with Jesus when he was tested in the desert.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. *After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.* The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

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Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

**MATTHEW 4:1- 2**

*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry;* it was essential that Jesus fasted and felt the pains of hunger as he faced the devil. He was hungry, as ought to be the case in fasting, but his consciousness of hunger never stopped with himself but with all those who needed to hunger and thirst for God. The whole objective of the devil and the power of sin is to cause the disciple not to depend on God and to fall away from God. It was therefore necessary for Jesus to grab onto the main lesson that suffering of hunger reveals in a time of spiritual urgency. For Jesus, this lesson became the foundation of his reliance on God and the righteousness that defined his life.

Understand this; when the devil caused man to fall, it was man's spiritual hunger and thirst for God that was destroyed. Man's physical hunger and thirst remained untouched. The result was that we have become very physical beings, perceiving physical realities well and not being able to accept the spiritual as reality. If you and I see an emaciated person such as the pictures of hungry children on the deserts of Somalia, we know that those children are facing death, because they are starved. On the other hand, can you and I recognize a starved soul, that is staring in the face of death? God, however, can perceive it. When we are in sin and the spirit that lives in us is crying out to God in anguish, God sees an emaciated soul. A fast then will help us understand in the physical realm the spiritual realities that exist within, with the hope that it might inspire humility of the whole man to God. So if a man needed to know the depth of spiritual hunger and thirst for God needed in our lives, let that man suffer hunger as he focuses on God. At the end of that experience lays a lesson that inspires humility in our souls and brings about the compassion and grace of God. In the presence of God, if a man already

possesses the humility and righteousness inspired by this lesson, then he is in no need of fasting. Such was the case with the disciples of Jesus during his life on earth, which I will consider later under the next section.

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### **Though they fast, I will not listen**

In the mind of God though, fasting together with prayer is only as good as it causes the person suffering hunger to bow down his or her soul in humility, in a way that brings about the mercy of God. The result of such suffering in prayer is a righteousness of life that is founded on the fact that we need God for our survival. You can fast and pray all you want, but if it does not produce righteousness and lead to moral action, your fasting is in vain. As one rabbi appropriately expresses in words of admonition in the Jewish rabbinical writings<sup>1</sup> - "*Brethren, it is not said of the men of Nineveh, 'And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting', but 'God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way'. Or as expressed in some of the non-canonical writings - "A man who fasts to get rid of his sins, and goes again and does the same thing, who will listen to his prayer, and what profit is there in his*

*humbling himself?"*

This is what the LORD says about this people: "*They greatly love to wander; they do not restrain their feet. So the LORD does not accept them; he will now remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins.*"

Then the LORD said to me, "Do not pray for the well-being of this people. *Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry, though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague.*".....

**15:1** Then the LORD said to me: "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go! And if they ask you, 'Where shall we go?' tell them, 'This is what the LORD says: "'Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity.' "I will send four kinds of destroyers against them," declares the LORD, "the sword to kill and the dogs to drag away and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. I will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem. "*Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Who will mourn for you? Who will stop to ask how you are? You have rejected me,*" declares the LORD. "*You keep on backsliding. So I will lay hands on you and destroy you; I can no longer show compassion.*"

### **JEREMIAH 14:10-15:1**

<sup>1</sup> The Talmud

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To God fasting is not about suffering hunger for the sake of it, but that it may lead you to live a life of reliance on God that produces a righteous life. *Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry;* when a disciple keeps on being unfaithful and there is a constant life of unrepentant sin, fasting has no value and becomes a mere religious act. Those who fasts regularly, for instance on every Friday or however many times, and yet do not possess humility of heart and lead an ungodly life-style, are involved in a useless religious rite that brings them no closer to God. "*Should I mourn and fast in*

*the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"* the people of Bethel came to find out from God;

The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melech, together with their men, to entreat the LORD by asking the priests of the house of the LORD Almighty and the prophets, *"Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"*

Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me: "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, *'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? Are these not the words the LORD proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?'*"

And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: *'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'*" *"But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry. "*"When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen," says the LORD...."

Again the word of the LORD Almighty came to me. This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her." This is what the LORD says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy mountain." This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there."

#### **ZECHARIAH 7:1-8:5**

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Through the prophet Zechariah, the people found out the hard way what the goal of fasting was. They were in error for seventy years, thinking that their fasting was for the benefit of God instead of themselves. The fast mentioned here is in reference to fasting over the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. At the time, however, the Temple was being rebuilt and the people wanted to know if they should still continue to mourn over it. The lesson they had to learn after seventy years of regular fasting was that *fasting is not a substitute for leading a righteous life*. As the scriptures teach *"They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets"*. Their regular fasting was in vain because it did not bring about humility of heart before God. They continued to be unfaithful to the words of God and continued to be in sin. This example should cause any disciple to seriously reflect on his or her life before fasting. You can not neglect the scriptures and, in error, design your own kind of fast that circumvents the suffering of hunger in prayer. When a disciple circumvents biblical examples, abstain from something of their own choosing - something they love - and calls it fasting before God, he or she makes a mockery of what God in his wisdom has given in his word. You

cannot even understand the depths of the human heart, why do you bind the purposes of God with your own self-imposed sacrifices? Has God become human that you plead with him like you bargain with a man? "I love this or that, but I am willing to give it up for this long, so you will give me that in return" - you silently murmur in your heart. In your human wisdom, you give up what you have become indulged in, giving it up for a short while, only to return to your indulgence later. Should God be pleased? What God wants is a disciple who has humility of heart and a repentant heart that bears the fruits of a godly life. Fasting with prayer is there by design to help us get the spiritual hunger and thirst for God in times that our hearts are struggling. That is true fasting. The kind of fasting that pleases God is described by the prophet Isaiah;

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back (*Cry aloud, spare not*). Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. *Why*

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*have we fasted,* they say, *'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves (afflicted ourselves), and you have not noticed?'* "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.

Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. *You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself (afflict his soul) ? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?*

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sunscorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a wellwatered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken. **ISAIAH 58:1-14**

The disciple who fasts for the sole reason that it pleases God and merits God's gratitude is in danger of fasting in vain. *'Why have we fasted 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'* If your fasting is done thinking that you ought to have your way because you have fasted, then you have missed the whole point about fasting. Your fasting should be motivated by a need for God's grace and mercy, that he may come to your aid. The people in Isaiah devoted a day to

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fasting and yet the day of fasting was characterized by ungodliness and all kinds of sins. The fundamental problem is that these people, on the day of fasting, did as they please instead of doing what pleases the Lord. Here true repentance is lacking, because of their lack of understanding of what ought to accompany fasting that it might avail them God's mercy. Simply put, no amount of fasting or prayer or confession of sins can secure forgiveness from God unless there is a true change of heart reflected in our conduct. For a man holding a serpent in hand, even if he were to be baptized in all the waters of the world, his baptism will avail him nothing. However, let him cast away the serpent and should he be baptized in a puddle of water, it immediately brings much grace. True repentance can only emanate out of a submitted heart and its the heart that the mystery of fasting avails much. The lesson is this *"You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high"*.

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#### ▪ **CHERISHING THE MIND OF CHRIST**

**I**t is very important that we understand how Jesus viewed fasting, for he is God's example to us that we may walk faithfully with Him. As Jesus said *"I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him."* (John 8:29). In a similar fashion disciples ought to do what pleases God and therefore we are obligated to know how Jesus regarded fasting that we may also think like he thinks. The Bible tells of only one occasion that Jesus fasted in his entire life on earth and that was at the beginning of his ministry, after he was baptized by John;

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." *Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.*

After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you

will not strike your foot against a stone." Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. **MATTHEW 3:16-4:11**

The main reason, according to the scriptures, that Jesus was found in the desert was because the Spirit of God led him into the desert to be tempted by the devil. In English usage, the word "tempt" has a negative

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connotation and often misunderstood as to entice to sin. However, in biblical usage, it means more to *test* than to cause to sin. Therefore what we commonly know as temptation is rather testing, meant to enable us develop the spiritual strength to overcome sin. As a rabbi once said "The Holy One does not elevate a man to dignity till he has first tried and searched him; and if he stands in temptation, then he raises him to dignity". Jesus then was led to the desert to be tested. However, before the devil came to test him, Jesus fasted, not eating and drinking, for forty days as he commune with God each of those days. As the book of Luke puts it "*He ate nothing in those days*". A definite reminder of Moses not eating and drinking on two occasions for forty days ; (1) when he went up the mountain to receive the ten commandments and (2) when the people sinned to provoke God. Jesus found it necessary to prepare for the testing by the devil by devoting himself to fasting. The question to ask is why did he fast or what did the fasting achieved in him?

### **Man does not live on bread alone**

The answer to his purpose for fasting before facing the devil is found in his responses to the questioning from the devil. For Jesus, it was his very soul that was under attack, because the devil sought to sow seeds of doubt in his sonship to God, to cause him to question God, to fall away from God and to worship other things above God. Jesus' responses to these temptations reflect what true fasting had produced in him. '*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*'" - Jesus was hungry in a desert, where the watery mirages could make anyone thirst for water or the pale desert stones, like loaves of bread against the hot desert sand, could make anyone hunger for food. His hunger and thirst, however, did not focus on himself, but on his relationship with God, laying the foundations of what is going to bring salvation to many who hunger and thirst for God. '*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*'" - his second lesson for the devil revealed a heart that wholeheartedly trust God. '*Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only*'. - his final lesson for the devil is one indicative of a heart that is bowed down to God, a soul that in humility has completely submitted the will to God. How Jesus believed about fasting in his ministry is seen in what he

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Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

Jesus answered, *"How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.*

Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

**MATTHEW 9:14-17**

Jesus answered, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast." He told them this parable: "No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old.

And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'"

**LUKE 5:33-39**

taught his disciples and others in the following scriptures;

It is clear from the scriptures that John's disciples and the Pharisees fasted often, probably in reference to the many weekly fasts and traditional fasts on special days instituted according to the law. These traditional fasts - the Day of Atonement (10 Tishri, according to the Jewish calendar), the Fast of Esther (13 Adar), the Fast of the First-born to celebrate the last plague in Egypt (14 Nisan), the Fast commemorating the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem (17 Tammuz), the Fast to remember the destruction of the first and second temples (9 Av) and the Fast to remember the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (10 Tevet) - were institutionalized times of the year that the Pharisees and other religious Jews held to. When Esther's life was in danger and her people faced annihilation, she devoted herself to prayer with fasting and God intervened to deliver her people. The Fast of Esther then became an institutionalized fast for the people to remember the grace of God. This fast, like all the others, then are mere traditions that are only as good as they help the individual to remember God's grace. Later on we will learn that, for Jesus, fasting is a personal issue between the one who fasts and

God, and is not a performance for others. A person can not institutionalize the personal fast and predicament of another into a celebration and expect to gain the rewards God accorded the one who originally fasted. For instance, Esther's fast brought her God's grace at a time when she needed God, and that grace is accorded her alone, not those who celebrate her fast years after. Even though these institutionalized fasts were common, Jesus and his disciples did not participated in these traditions, all a part of the old wine that should not be mistaken with his teachings - the new wine.

As a side note, we know from Luke 5:33 that fasting means one thing - not eating and drinking - as is found in the Old Testament. This should cause anyone who engages in abstaining from something of their own choosing other than the meals that provides physical nourishment, to reconsider his or her fidelity to scriptural examples. From a parallel comparison of the two scriptural passages above, it becomes obvious that



Jesus considered fasting to be associated with mourning as found in the Old Testament. *"How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?"* As long as the physical presence of Jesus was with the disciples, they were in no need of fasting. A man who stands in the physical presence of the Christ need not fast, for the blessing of the presence of God in a man's life calls for feasting. Jesus constantly taught his disciples dependence on God for they had left everything to follow him wherever he went. He was the constant reminder that kept their hearts humble and faithful. However, in the absence of Jesus, when they are on their own, there will be a need to occasionally fast in moments of spiritual crisis or urgency, to bring about a much needed reliance on God.

Jesus response to John's disciples and the Pharisees that his disciples need not fast in his presence was a new teaching - the new wine - that they had never tasted. Every week the Pharisees fasted as part of their worship in accordance with the traditions of the law, and now some one comes along discarding those traditions as old wine?. Jesus main message to them is that new teaching requires new hearts to hold it. Before Jesus men fasted that God may show mercy and intervene on their behalf in times of spiritual crisis. However, in the physical presence of Jesus, the disciples

had the mercy of God always in their lives and that was a new teaching that went against the old wine - the traditions of the law.

### **God have mercy on me**

In Luke 18, we learn more about how Jesus regarded fasting, through the parable of the self-righteous Pharisee and the humble tax-collector;

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. *I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.*' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

### **LUKE 18:9-14**

It is clear from the above passage that the Pharisee had become engaged in a religious practice that brought him no value. He fasted twice a week and gave faithfully, and yet his heart had become conceited, entrenched in a pit full of pride. He had a false understanding of fasting and stood before God as if he deserved to be heard because he had sacrificed. Such misunderstanding is exemplified by a certain Jewish rabbi who prayed on a fast day as; *"Lord, it is revealed before Thee that when the Sanctuary was in existence, a man sinned and brought an offering of which they sacrificed only the fat and blood, and atonement was made for him. But now I observe a fast, and my fat and blood are diminished. May it be Thy will, that my fat and blood which have been diminished be accounted as though I had offered them before Thee upon the altar"*. The rabbi's prayer is a reflection of a man who tries to understand the

mysteries of fasting by reasoning with his human mind to justify what he does before God. Fasting is not a sacrifice we make unto God, but rather the affliction we subject the heart to that it may gain the humility that works the mercy of God in our lives. The Pharisee's fasting and giving did not bring humility of heart before God, because he had no understanding of true fasting. To such a heart the word of God in Zechariah asks; *'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for*

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*the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating*

*and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?'. Fasting can become of no value if it becomes a tradition that we engage in as matter of course, rather than as a matter of our hearts condition before God.*

In the Old Testament, fasting was never done for others to see, because the one who fasted was in a spiritual predicament that they would rather not have been. They often put on sackcloth in mourning to demonstrate true repentance, that God may grant mercy. However, in the days of Jesus, the traditions of the elders had strayed so much from scriptures that fasting had become very distorted. The hypocrites rendered their faces such that others would notice they had been fasting.

"When you fast, do not look somber 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.* **MATTHEW 6:16-18**

The main objection Jesus expressed here is that fasting was being done with hypocrisy and as a performance, making a mockery of what ought to be truly directed at God. Understand this, whatever a man does to please other men, that man has to believe that what he is doing makes him look good. These hypocrites, unlike the faithful men in the Old Testament, falsely believed that fasting meant spiritual maturity and closeness to God. For the Jews in Jesus' time, there was only one compulsory fast in a year - the Day of Atonement - when people confessed their sins and fasted for the expiation of the nation's sin. However, stricter Jews like the Pharisees chose to fast also on Mondays and Thursdays, intended to atone for unintentional sins during festive occasions, often lasting from dawn till dusk after which food could be taken. Mondays and Thursdays also happened to be the market days when their cities were crowded with people. On these days, the Pharisees would actually whiten their faces, don tattered garments and walk in the market places calling the attention of others to their piety. To be of any value, fasting can not be the result of a ritual presentation, but an expression of a condition of the heart

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before God. For Jesus, God is the object of our fast, humbling ourselves before him that he may work on our behalf. Therefore fasting with a motive that others may see only threatens to ruin whatever humility could

result from a fast. Your fast is for the benefit of your own heart and does not make you more spiritual than one who does not fast. In fact, anyone who has truly fasted in a time of spiritual crisis in his or her life would rather wish he or she never have to come to such a point again in life. According to the word of God, if a disciple decides to fast and pray, the disciple ought to understand that he or she comes to God at a time when his or her heart is in anguish. The disciple fasts, while devoting himself or herself to prayer, that the soul may bow down to God in humility and in righteousness of life, that God may extend his great mercy. With the words of David in conclusion, let us draw near to God, paying close attention to his words regarding fasting with prayer, that we may approach him acceptably in his great mercy.

When I weep and fast, I must endure scorn; when I put on sackcloth, people make sport of me. Those who sit at the gate mock me, and I am the song of the drunkards. But I pray to you, O LORD, in the time of your favor; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation. Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit close its mouth over me. Answer me, O LORD, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me. Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.

**PSALM 69:10-17**

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## ▪ **SHOULD I EVEN FAST?**

**B**iblical fasting is a decision to suffer hunger while you devote yourself to prayer, to bow down your soul before God that he may intervene on your behalf. The fruits of such a fast is righteousness that leads to moral action. It is neither for the benefit of God nor for the benefit of others. It is for the sake of our own hearts. Should you fast or not ?. In order to make a decision to fast, a disciple has to determine if it is necessary at that particular time in his or her life. Fasting is not a command in the scriptures and therefore obedience is not demanded by the scriptures. It is, however, one of the privileges God affords us in our time of need, for the sake of our own hearts, that we may not fall away from his favor. Knowing what is in the hearts of men<sup>1</sup>, Jesus expected that there would be the times in a disciple's life when fasting would be needed. However, outside of those times, disciples ought to bask in the joy of the relationship they share with God. If there is ever a time in your life when the state of your heart before God calls for fasting, make a decision understanding why you are approaching God in fasting with prayer, *for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind our thoughts*. Remember, the goal of fasting while you devote yourself to prayer is the mercy and grace of God. Therefore it is critical that you approach God in a manner pleasing to him, showing faithfulness to the examples his

divine wisdom has provided us in his word. There are, however, some misconceptions about fasting today, but before we look at those misconceptions, let us consider the nature of those times that may move our hearts to fast.

<sup>1</sup> John 2:23-25

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### **Each heart knows its bitterness**

The scriptures teach that "*each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy*" (Proverbs 14:10) and as Paul said "*for who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him?*" (1 Corinthians 2:11). In the same way, no one can tell you when to fast and when not to, because no one knows the state of your heart before God to judge what your heart needs to gain the mercy of its maker. However, more mature, faithful disciples can offer guidance to help you take an honest stock of your relationship with God, to help you may make your own decision. For no one can share the destitution, anguish, or the struggle that may exist in your heart. Take heed though, for if you embark on frivolous fasting, you risk the error of the Pharisees, whose fasting was so taken for granted that it availed them nothing before God. The times and situations in our hearts that call for fasting is characterized by one underlying fact; that is there is a spiritual urgency (either in the life of the individual or the body of disciples) that threatens the work of God or the very salvation of the disciple, an urgency that reveals the work of the devil in its attempt to wrestle a soul from God's fold. Such times generally are also characterized by a lack of joy, what Joel described as "joy dried up among men".

### **To these we were called**

The following are examples of fasting that worked the mercy and intervention of God, and these are the examples each disciple is called to, according to the word of God. A look at these examples will help our hearts determine when to engage in this blessing of fasting, that our hearts may be where it needs to be. As we look at these examples, remember that fasting is just a means, with an end goal of the humility of heart that works God's mercy and intervention on our behalf.

#### **Moses**

Then once again I fell prostrate before the LORD for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the Lord's sight and so provoking him to anger. **Deuteronomy 9:18**

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#### **Ezra**

Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. **Ezra 10:6**

#### **Esther**

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law.

And if I perish, I perish." **Esther 3:15-16**

**David**

"Is the child dead?" he asked. "Yes," they replied, "he is dead." Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate. His servants asked him, "Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!" He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me." **2 Samuel 3:20-23**

**Paul**

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

**Acts 9:7-12**

**Jesus**

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" **Matthew 4:1-4**

Biblical fasting, in a nutshell, can be likened to that SOS call that a soldier  
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in a war makes to the home-office when he is wounded or is under severe threat by the enemy. That enemy for us is the devil and it will always seek to sow seeds of misunderstanding and unfaithfulness with respect to fasting, to cut us from God in our times of struggle. It should therefore not be surprising that there has become an abundance of misconceptions about fasting. Compromise and self-justification are two insidious ways our hearts tend to deceive us and as we consider some of the misconceptions about fasting, it will become apparent how these vices undermine our faithfulness here. However, those disciples who find the courage to insist on faithfulness to scripture with regard to fasting, will by their example protect God's honor and will enjoy the full blessing of a privilege God affords us to call on him in our moments of crisis.

There are several ways that biblical fasting have been misunderstood and I want to share with you some of them so that your heart may not be deceived in this matter. First, some have come to think that fasting would automatically gain man a hearing from God. They therefore fast without giving thought to their motives or their conduct during the period of fasting. And often falsely believe that those who fasts are more

spiritual or that because they are spiritual they fast. In the Bible when men and women fasted it was because they were in need of repentance of sins that have led them away from God or in a critical spiritual moment when they pleaded for God's help or guidance. Holy men and women would rather not come to such moments in their lives and instead strive to be blameless before God all the time.

### **Lest our hearts deceive us**

To help us get our hearts right about true biblical fasting, it is critical that we understand that fasting is not the following;

Ø It is not to lose weight or engage in weight control. Many have gone into fasting not remorseful about their own hardness of heart, but rather with duplicity of motive, thinking of the self and how they might lose few pounds. Your fast and petitioning will be to yourself if you do not banish from your heart such manner of thinking.

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Ù It is not choosing to abstain from something that is difficult for you to give up. Something that in your own judgment decide is fit to abstain from. Whatever is difficult for you to give, you have already indulged yourself in and what you are in need of is repentance and crucifying the desires of the sinful nature that it may not control you. For the righteous men and women of the Bible, fasting was not about choosing something each person thought in their own eyes to abstain from. It is about suffering hunger to weaken the physical forces within us in humility to God, that our spiritual soul may be strengthened by the help and guidance of God. You who choose to abstain from television and call it fasting, why do you go about your day well fed, eating and drinking? Is that what you call fasting at a time when your soul is in anguish? You who choose to abstain from chocolate, why go sit down to choice meal? Is your abstention from the chocolate what you call humbling yourself with fasting before God? In his infinite wisdom, the Lord God has set before us examples in scripture, why not learn, even if to abstain from a days meal and devote yourself to prayer. Maybe God may restore a thirst and hunger for righteousness within you.

Ú It is not to secure your heart's wishes, that have nothing to do with the protection of your soul, from God. The righteous men and women in the scriptures fasted because they were humbling themselves at a time of mourning over unfaithfulness to God or at a time of spiritual crisis or urgency, that God may show mercy or intervene on their behalf. Fasting in the scriptures is never a means for securing what you want from God, such that you could say 'why have I fasted and God not given me what I ask?' This misunderstanding of biblical fasting comes from the misconception that fasting is a means of strengthening our prayers. Well, why not fast always then each time you pray to ensure strong prayers? Whether your prayer is effective or not, whether your prayer is heard or not is on account of your personal righteousness and faithfulness before God (*James 5:16, Proverbs 15:29, 1 Peter 3:12, Isaiah 38:1-6*). The purpose of

fasting in the scriptures is never to strengthen prayer, but rather to help the person fasting to approach God in humility of heart, bowing down the soul before God. Now, if your heart has become callused with sin and

there is lack of faithfulness, then a sincere fast will help you approach God in a manner acceptable to him, that he may forgive and intervene, *for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose* (Philippians 2:13).

⌘ Fasting and not paying attention to your personal righteousness or not devoting yourself to prayer is vain. Repentance, humility and dependence on God is what fasting works in our hearts. The product, however, is a personal righteousness and good works inspired by the mercy and the grace of God. If you devote yourself to fasting and prayer, and yet remain unrepentant in your life, your fasting will be to yourself. You can not claim to fast and yet wield with pride towards others. You can not claim to fast and yet not be forgiving towards others. You can not claim to fast and yet remain selfish, not helping others to become disciples that they may taste the mercy of God. Fasting that does not lead to personal righteousness, love for others and a concern with the work of God is in vain and that is the whole lesson of Isaiah 58 and Zechariah 7.

### **A heart submitted to God**

Effectiveness of fasting does not depend on the length of time a person fasts. The person who fasts for twenty days is no more spiritual than one who fasts for half a day. Neither is the length of time indicative of how spiritual a person is or is not. How long a person fasts is what God inspires in the heart by way of when God grants that person a brokenness of heart or a realization of a need for God and the necessity of his sovereign intervention. However long you fast is determined by what is needed for your heart to become submitted to God and prepared to respond to his intervention. People generally tend to be indecisive about how long to fast and often lean towards longer lengths of time, erroneously thinking the longer the fast, the better. This thinking often stems from the misunderstanding where fasting is thought to be indicative of the level of spirituality. The state of heart that called for fasting is one that godly women and men in the Bible would rather not wish upon themselves. With that said, make a decision to fast understanding that it is not the length of time that works the mercy of

God. It is rather the state of your heart and the readiness of your heart for God's intervention that matter. If you set aside the first meal of the day to devote yourself to prayer and that brings true repentance or a heart submitted to God, then that is worth more than a whole week of fasting that never brings a true change of heart.

In the Bible, fasting done by the great men and women of God always meant one thing; *"a conscious decision to desist from eating and drinking, while devoted to prayer, to weaken the physical forces within them, humbling themselves*

*before God in a period of unfaithfulness, spiritual crisis or urgency, that God may intervene on their behalf.”* In Aramaic thought, when someone is said to have *eaten and drank*, that meant the person is fed. *Eating and drinking* then means a complete meal. What Moses did then was to forgo complete meals for forty days and forty nights in order to commune with God and then a second time when the people provoked God to anger. For the men and women of God, in their critical moments when they fasted, going without a meal so they might bow down their soul in humility to God as they petitioned him, was the least they could do. Theirs are the examples the word of God calls us to. Do not be deceived by halfhearted efforts at fasting that have no basis in the word of God.

Understanding one thing; we all love to feed our stomachs, we love food and we detest the unpleasantness of physical hunger. As a result the devil is more than willing to cause us to settle for less than what God, in his infinite wisdom, has shown us in scripture. The fact is biblical examples of fasting was neither a drink-only issue nor anything short of setting aside meals. When we wake up in the morning, we make our decisions what we want to have for our morning meal (breakfast), our afternoon meal (lunch) and at times our evening meal (supper). When you fast, you decide to set aside the meals and devote yourself to prayer, that he may come to your aid. You could set aside all of your day’s meal or all of your morning meals to devote yourself to prayer, but never let your heart engage in the self-justification that compromises your fidelity to scripture. For in true fasting that honors God’s word is a mystery that avails us God’s attention in our suffering hunger.

Fasting is pleasing to God when one fasts sincerely with a desire to have a  
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humble and contrite heart, one that approaches God with the words *“I do not make requests of you because I am righteous, but because of your great mercy”*. It

should not be a matter of fixed mechanical rule, but should have a reference to a state of mind and heart that needs to fall prostrate before its maker, for your fasting will be in vain if you approach God in vain conceit.

Before you decide to fast, search deep into your heart, ask yourself why you need to fast, so that you may approach God as a man or a woman in need of God’s help and guidance. And not a righteous fool who thinks he has been righteous and fasts only to move God. An acceptable fast that honors God and the examples in his word will undoubtedly bring lessons to your heart that will leave an impression of God’s mercy, that you will never forget. Let us remember the words of Paul; *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the*

*encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

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#### **LIST OF RELEVANT SCRIPTURES**

1) EXODUS 34:27-28



- 2) DEUTERONOMY 9:18-21
- 3) 1 SAMUEL 1:6-11
- 4) 1 SAMUEL 7:4-6
- 5) 2 SAMUEL 1:10-13
- 6) 2 SAMUEL 12:13-23
- 7) 1 KINGS 13:6 -10
- 8) 1 KINGS 21:1
- 9) 1 CHRONICLES 10:12-13
- 10) 2 CHRONICLES 20:1-10
- 11) EZRA 8:18
- 12) EZRA 10:6
- 13) NEHEMIAH 1:4
- 14) NEHEMIAH 8:17-9:3
- 15) ESTHER 3:12- 4:17
- 16) PSALM 35:10 -17
- 17) PSALM 69:8-17
- 18) PSALM 109:22-26
- 19) ISAIAH 58:1
- 20) JERIMIAH 14:7-15:6
- 21) JEREMIAH 36:1-10
- 22) DANIEL 9:1-8
- 23) JOEL 2:11-17
- 24) JOEL 1:12-18
- 25) JONAH 3:4-10
- 26) ZECHARIAH 7:1
- 27) MATTHEW 4:1-2
- 28) MATTHEW 6:16-18
- 29) MARK 2:18-20
- 30) LUKE 2:36-38
- 31) LUKE 5:33-35
- 32) LUKE 18:10-14
- 33) ACTS 9:8 -19
- 34) ACTS 13:1-4
- 35) ACTS 14:23
- 36) ACTS 23:11- 14

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