

BIBLICAL PRAYER (58)

David Livingstone, the famed African missionary, believed one had better have a real need for the fast or else it was a waste of time. In fact, he said, “Fasting and vigils without a special object in view are time run to waste” (*Ibid.*, p. 67).

Certainly if one finds himself or herself in the midst of an overwhelming trial or temptation, there would always be value of getting alone with God, even if it meant going without some food or sleep.

Reason #2 - N.T. fasting was done during times of major spiritual movements . **Acts 10:30-33**

Some Greek manuscripts contain the word “fasting” in **verse 30**. Although it would seem that the primary point that Cornelius was spending private time praying, it would certainly stand to reason that he did not take a break to eat.

Cornelius was a tremendous man of God (**Acts 10:1-2, 22**). He had specifically been praying that God would pour out His grace on Gentile people (**Acts 10:31, 34-36**).

This prayer is one of the most profound in the infant stage of the Church Age because it is actually a request for God to change the entire scope of His program and permit Gentiles to receive His sovereign blessings.

Perhaps the most amazing reality of all of this is that when Cornelius made his requests, he was not even a N.T. believer in Jesus Christ. This did not happen until the Apostle Peter unlocked the truth to him and the Spirit of God came upon him and all those in his household (**Acts 10:44-48; 11:1-18, 24**).

It is clear from this section that prayer and fasting can move God to do some dramatic things, especially when it comes to moving God in a particular place concerning the lost condition of men.

It is a known fact that men like Martin Luther, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Hudson Taylor and David Brainard were all men who at times prayed and fasted. It is also a known fact that these men made a profound impact on the lost and began movements that reformed and revived millions of people in their relationship with God (*Ibid.*, pp. 67-68).

There is no question that oftentimes prior to God doing some major things much prayer has preceded it and along with it also some fasting.

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Reason #3 - N.T. fasting was done during times of special ministry selection. **Acts 13:2-3**

The first Christian, Gentile church was the church of Antioch (**Acts 11:19-26**). The name “Christian” came from this church. When the leaders of this church were selecting men for ministry, they took their responsibility very seriously. They recognized that this selection would become the beginning of a missionary outreach to the entire Gentile world.

This was a critical time in the development of the program of God, and certain key men of the church sensed a great need to pray and fast (**Acts 13:3**). They desired to send out and support the right men and God moved and Paul and Barnabas were selected.

When critical choices must be made, uninterrupted prayer, including not stopping to eat or sleep, may move God to give His answer to the decision. Undoubtedly, many churches have missed making right choices because they refuse to follow these kinds of Biblical examples.

When one looks behind the scenes of horror stories concerning the selection of pastors, board members, missionaries and others, one may often find a neglect in this matter of focused prayer. When leaders of the church neglect to lead the congregation to a focused, dedicated prayer in view of critical ministry matters, it makes a major mistake. When it comes to these matters, the church should always ask God for His direction.

In fact, according to **Acts 14:23**, the selection of elders was bathed in prayer that included fasting. Paul and Barnabas spent time praying and fasting before they appointed elders in various churches. We may assume that Paul and Barnabas remembered this was critical to their own selection and they implemented the same thing in their selections.

Church leaders who pray and at times fast in order to seek God’s will, will discover they accomplish great things for the Glory of God. It is a tragedy when leadership teaches people to depend upon themselves and their own wisdom rather than God. It is critical that leaders be men of prayer by their own example.

For leaders to ask the people to pray and not pray themselves is pure hypocrisy. Wise are leaders who discipline themselves to spend focused time praying, even if they must go without food.

Reason #4 - N.T fasting was done during a time of need of God’s direction and power.
Acts 9:9-18

The Apostle Paul was very much interested in doing the will of God and in getting his sight back. As a new convert, he was focused on doing God’s will and he certainly recognized his need of God’s help both physically and spiritually.

It is clear that one of the first glimpses we get of Paul’s saved life is one of fasting (**Acts 9:9**) and praying (**Acts 9:11**). When we consider the impacting ministry that Paul eventually had in the aftermath of all of this, it is evident that these two elements were a critical part of it.

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Certainly, we know that prayer played a major part in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul and we also know that there were many times when he did not have any food (**II Corinthians 6:5; 11:27**).

In those times Paul never stopped praying. People who desire God's direction and power will be people of prayer and there may be times when a believer will sense the need to privately get alone with God and forfeit food or sleep in order to seek God's will.

QUESTION #13 – Is there any evidence that as the Church developed, there were times when the Church saw the need to pray and fast?

When we examine Church history, it does seem that there were times when the early Church saw and felt the need to fast; however, it became a matter of rigid legalism.

The famed Church historian Philip Schaff writes:

“After the Jewish custom, fasting was frequently joined with prayer, that the mind unencumbered by earthly matter, might devote itself with less distraction to the contemplation of divine things. **The apostles themselves sometimes employed this wholesome discipline, though without infringing the gospel freedom by legal prescriptions.** As the Pharisees were accustomed to fast twice in the week, on Monday and Thursday, the Christians appointed Wednesday and especially Friday, as days of half-fasting or abstinence from flesh, in commemoration of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. They did this with reference to the Lord's words: “When the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, then will they fast” (**Matthew 9:15**). In the second century arose also the custom of Quadragesimal fasts before Easter, which, however, differed in length in different countries; being sometimes reduced to forty hours, sometimes extended to forty days, or at least several weeks. Perhaps equally ancient are the nocturnal fasts or vigils before the high festivals, suggested by the example of the Lord and the apostles (**Luke 6:12; Acts 16:25**). But the Quatemporal fasts are of later origin, though founded likewise on a custom of the Jews after the exile. On special occasions the bishops appointed extraordinary fasts, and applied the money saved to charitable purposes; a usage which became often a blessing to the poor. Yet hierarchical arrogance and Judaistic legalism early intruded here, even to the entire destruction of the liberty of a Christian man (Comp. Matt. 9:15; Gal.4:9; 5:1).

This rigidity appeared most in the Montanists. Besides the usual fasts, they observed special Xerophagia as they were called; seasons of two weeks from eating only dry or properly uncooked food, bread, salt and water. The Catholic Church, with true feeling, refused to sanction these excesses as a general rule, but allowed ascetics to carry fasting even to extremes. A confessor in Lyons, for example, lived on bread and water alone, but forsook that austerity when reminded that he gave offence to other Christians by so despising the gifts of God.

Against the frequent over-valuation of fasting, Clement of Alexandria quotes the words of Paul: “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, therefore neither abstinence from wine and flesh, but righteousness and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, AP & A Edition, pp. 170-171).

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QUESTION #14 – What is our Grace Age perspective of fasting?

In drawing our conclusions about fasting in this Grace Age, the following Biblical observations need to be carefully made:

Observation #1 - None of the N.T. Epistles say anything about fasting.

Observation #2 - There is no place where fasting is commanded for the N.T. Grace Age believer.

Observation #3 - There is no place where we are promised any special Grace Age blessing if we do fast.

Observation #4 - In passages that speak of making sacrifices for God, fasting is not mentioned.
Hebrews 13:16

Observation #5 - In **Romans 14** and **Colossians 2:16**, Paul warns against ascetic and rigid ritualistic and legal tendencies.

Observation #6 - In the Grace Age the matter of fasting or not fasting would fall under the category of Christian liberty.

Observation #7 - In New Testament books of the Bible that were addressed to many Jewish Christians (**Hebrews, James, I Peter**) there is no mention of fasting.

Observation #8 - In the general N.T. Epistles such as **Hebrews, James, I and II Peter; I and II and III John, and Jude** there is no mention of fasting.

Observation #9 - When Jesus Christ Personally addresses the seven churches in Revelation, there is no mention of fasting (**Revelation 2-3**). In fact there is no mention of it anywhere in the book of Revelation.

Observation #10 - It is true that there were some instances of fasting recorded in the infant days of the Church in the book of Acts.

These kinds of observations led Dr. Curtis Mitchell to say, “Clearly it has a place in Christian piety, but that it had a frequent place is open to serious question” (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147:588, Dallas Theological Seminary (Oct. 90), p. 467).

BIBLICAL PRAYER (62)

Dr. Ivan French drew the following conclusions about fasting:

1. Fasting is not commanded as a necessary practice for the believer.
2. Jesus did not disapprove it in those who were practicing it, but He did correct its abuse.
3. The church in Acts practiced it on occasion - times of special need for wisdom, etc.
4. Saints since N.T. times have practiced it with profit.
 - a. The Church of the first three centuries often fasted two days per week.
 - b. During the Medieval period the monastics perverted the practice of fasting to a meritorious work and satisfaction to be rendered to God.
 - c. The list is endless of men and women mightily used of God who testify to the benefit of prayer and fasting: Martin Luther, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainard, Henry Martyn, Andrew Bonar, Hudson Taylor, etc. These testimonies cannot be ignored.

(Ivan French, *The Principles and Practice of Prayer*, pp. 80-81)

J. Oswald Sanders writes: “The conclusion would seem to be that fasting after the New Testament pattern was one of spontaneous outcome of (1) the challenge of a special test or temptation; or (2) a deep yearning after a closer walk with God; or (3) a heavy burden for the spread of the gospel of the regions beyond; or (4) spiritual travail for the upbuilding of the church; or (5) the exigencies of a stubborn situation” (*Prayer Power Unlimited*, p. 69).

My conclusion concerning fasting is this:

1. There is a place for the individual believer to spend quality time with God in prayer, even if it means to forfeit food or sleep. This is a matter between an individual and God and should not be broadcast or promoted.
2. There is a place for the corporate church to spend quality time with God in prayer, even if it means to forfeit food or sleep. This would be a matter the leaders would consider so important that they would call the church to special prayer.
3. Never should any spiritual discipline be demanded or commanded.
4. Never should any spiritual discipline become mechanical or legalistic.
5. Times when this might be implemented would be times of great decision, turmoil, warfare or a sense of a great need.

Personally speaking, I have at times forfeited both sleep and food to spend time alone with God. In my case, time restrictions and ministry responsibilities become a factor in determining the length of time. There is no question that God did seem to honor the discipline of this and there were occasions where there was a very unique sense of the presence of God.