

FASTING

THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING

The story is told of a young lumberjack who had become quite proud of his speed at cutting down trees. He got to the point that he felt he was ready to challenge an older lumberjack, who was also known for his ability, to a tree-cutting contest.

So they began chopping. The younger man went at it with all his vigor. He chopped down one tree after another without stopping the whole day. He thought things looked pretty good for him because he noticed that the older lumberjack took about a fifteen-minute break every hour.

But at the end of the day, the older lumberjack had chopped down one-third more trees than the younger man. Somewhat miffed and puzzled, the younger man went to the old master of forestry and asked, "How in

the world could you cut down more trees than me taking fifteen-minute breaks every hour?”

The wise older lumberjack looked at him and said, “Because when I stopped cutting, I took time to sharpen my ax.”

That’s a good parable of many Christians’ spiritual lives. A lot of us chop away all the time, and then wonder why the trees aren’t falling. We look at other people who don’t seem to be working half as hard as we are, yet they seem to be making a lot more progress spiritually. Just maybe the difference is they have taken the time out to sharpen their axes.

That’s what the spiritual discipline of fasting is all about—sharpening the “ax” of our inner person so we can achieve spiritual victory.

Most of us have heard a lot about prayer, but I wonder how much we have been taught about the importance and the purpose of fasting. Follow the subject through the Bible and you’ll discover that it’s everywhere. Fasting is not just an aside to the Christian life, but essential to the life that pleases God.

In fact, Jesus said that in His absence, fasting was to be a priority for His people. “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matthew 9:15).

Since you can’t have a face-to-face conversation with Jesus today, fasting is a way you can make a special link with Him when you need a spiritual break-

through in your life. I want to make four important points about fasting, and then look at fasting in three key areas: healing, protection, and ministry.

THE PRINCIPLE OF FASTING

Let's start with a definition. Fasting is the deliberate abstinence from some form of physical gratification, for a period of time, in order to achieve a greater spiritual goal.

Fasting usually involves setting aside food, although we can fast from any physical appetite, including sex within marriage (1 Corinthians 7:5). A lot of Christians need to fast from the hours they spend watching television or surfing the Internet. The idea is to devote the time we would ordinarily spend on these activities to prayer and waiting before the Lord. Fasting calls us to renounce the natural in order to invoke the supernatural. When you fast, you say no to yourself so you can hear yes from God in a time of need or crisis.

As I said earlier, fasting is a major principle throughout the Bible. People in Scripture often fasted in situations that demanded a spiritual breakthrough. Fasting is an appropriate response to physical or emotional needs, difficult circumstances or relationships, challenges in ministry (as we will see later), or times we need specific direction.

In Zechariah 7:5–6, the Lord said, “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves?”

Even though the fasts God referred to here would have been unnecessary if His people had repented, these verses still give us an important principle about fasting. When we eat, we eat for ourselves, with nothing more than our own satisfaction in mind. But when we fast, we should do so with God in mind, for His pleasure.

When I sit down before the “gospel bird,” my fried chicken, after church on Sunday, I don’t pick up a leg or thigh and wonder what the associate pastor at our church is doing. I know what he’s doing—the same thing I’m doing!

When I’m hungry, my stomach cries out, “Feed me.” I answer, “I am your obedient servant. Whatever you say, I will do.”

We become servants to the cry of our flesh to receive food. We eat for ourselves. But when we fast, God says, “This is for Me.” Just as food satisfies us, fasting satisfies God because we are saying to Him, “The cry of my soul for You is greater than the cry of my stomach for food or anything else.” That’s why fasting gets God’s attention like nothing else.

To understand the impact of fasting you need to understand the reason behind it. God created Adam out of the dust from the ground. The elements in our bodies are only worth a few dollars on the open market.

It wasn’t until God breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life that he became “a living being” (Genesis 2:7). Your ultimate value is not in your body, but in your soul. It’s the nonmaterial part of us that is in God’s image, not our bodies.

What do we do so often? We feed the body, even overstuff it, while starving the soul. But when we fast, we give the soul a higher priority than the body. We are asking God to feed our souls.

This is the principle of fasting. The question is, Are you willing to give up your steak and potatoes to gain spiritual riches? Are you willing to sacrifice that which gratifies the flesh in order to make an investment in that which builds up the spirit?

Some people in business will go all day without stopping to eat if they're trying to close a major deal. In other words, the value of the deal overrides the value of a meal. God is saying the same thing holds true in the spiritual life. Fasting teaches us to give up a craving of the body because we have a deeper need of the soul.

THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

Let's talk about the why of fasting. According to Isaiah 58:4, the purpose of fasting is "to make your voice heard on high." When we fast with the proper motivation, our voice is heard in heaven. That is, we come into God's presence in a powerful way.

So much of our time with God is spent on the run. We run before Him, throw out a few requests, and move on. But the nature of fasting is such that it demands concentrated effort and time to come into God's presence.

Think about the effort we make to eat when we're hungry. Most of us will make a way where there is no way when it's mealtime. We'll change our route to hit

the drive-through window at the fast-food restaurant. We'll make a sandwich out of stuff in the refrigerator that is "unsandwichable."

Why? Because we are desperate to satisfy our hunger. But when you fast, you are desperate to satisfy a need in your soul. You are desperate to make your voice heard on high.

In Isaiah 58:5, the Lord says fasting is "a day for a man to humble himself." It is a humbling experience to say no to something you crave, to bow low before God and admit there is a need in your life. Fasting demands humility, and humility means self-denial.

Something unique happens when we fast. God sharpens our spiritual focus so we can see things more clearly. Jesus fasted for forty days before facing the devil (Matthew 4:1–11). And when Satan tempted Him to make bread out of the stones, Jesus said, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (v. 4).

One purpose of fasting is to show you how well you are doing with your inner person. Some people spend all of their time making their outer person beautiful, while their inner person is downright ugly. In fact, the uglier the inner person, the more some people spend trying to camouflage it.

We are spiritual beings, and fasting helps us to acknowledge and feed our spiritual nature. It says that there is more to me than what you see.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Paul prayed that his readers would be sanctified and preserved in their "spirit

and soul and body.” Paul’s order here is purposeful. We are not made up of body, soul, and spirit, but spirit, soul, and body. We are created to live from the inside out, not from the outside in.

You say, “Why is that important?” Because if you look at yourself as a body that happens to house a soul and a spirit, you will live for your body first. But if you understand that you are spirit at the core of your being, you will live for the spirit.

Your spirit is the part of you that enables you to communicate with God. It gives you God-awareness. Your soul enables you to communicate with yourself. It gives you self-awareness. Your body enables you to communicate with your environment. It gives you other-awareness.

We need to live from our spirit out to our bodies. The reason so many people have messed-up bodies is because they have messed-up souls. And the reason they have messed-up souls is because their spirits are not under the control of the Holy Spirit. If we want to really live, the spirit or the inner person must be set free. Our spirits must be cracked open to release the Spirit’s life, and fasting helps us do this.

I liken this process to the popping of popcorn. You can’t eat unpopped popcorn because the shell is too hard. It will break your teeth.

But every kernel of popcorn has moisture in the center. When you put the corn in the microwave, the microwave heats up the moisture, which becomes steam, and the steam pushes against the shell.

All of a sudden you hear a pop, followed by many more as the shells of the popcorn kernels are cracked open to reveal the edible part of the corn. You wouldn't think that tiny shell could hold all of that stuff, because the shell is suppressing what's on the inside. But the environment of the microwave oven breaks open the shell to bring out what's inside.

When you come to God in the environment of fasting, He heats up your spirit, which inflames your soul, which then breaks through your body and results in righteous living. That's a great result, but it only happens when you come into God's presence and bow before Him in humility and allow Him to break you. To be broken means to be stripped of your self-sufficiency.

But too often, our problem is that we aren't ready for God to do that. We make all kinds of resolutions and promises, which are really just ways of saying to God, "I can do this myself." But if we could do it, we would have already done it.

Fasting puts us on the path of humility.

What God wants to hear is, "Lord, I can't do this. I've tried everything I know and I can't get rid of these cigarettes. I can't break my lust for pornography. I can't

quit these drugs. I am ruined and broken. Lord, I throw my inability and my failure at Your feet.”

God says, “Now I can do something.”

You see, when we fail to humble ourselves before God, what we wind up doing is trying to live the Christian life in our own power. We call on our flesh to help us defeat the flesh—which is a contradiction in terms. What we need is to get the flesh out of the way, to set it aside in order to focus on the spirit. Fasting is a tangible way of demonstrating to God that we are setting aside the flesh in order to deal with the spirit.

More than that, fasting is also a way of prostrating ourselves before God. In the Bible, when people were broken before the Lord they often fell on their faces. They put ashes on their heads and tore their clothes as a way of saying, “Lord, I can’t do anything. I am at the end of my rope.”

God wants us to reach that point so He can demonstrate His power and get all the glory, which He deserves. The apostle James says those who humble themselves before God will be lifted up (James 4:10). As we have said, fasting puts us on the path of humility.

What can a man and woman do to help heal their marriage if they are having problems? Paul says a married couple can agree to enter a sexual fast (1 Corinthians 7:5) if they have something urgent to pray about. They can use the time they would normally use being intimate to pray, just as a person who is fasting from food uses his mealtime to pray rather than eat.

I’m confident that most Christian couples who have