

Hungering for God

A Biblical Examination of Fasting

Part A- Should 21st Century Believers Fast? Is Fasting Biblical?

Lesson 2- Longing for God- continued

2Chronicles 20:1-4

1 Now it came about after this that the sons of Moab and the sons of Ammon, together with some of the Meunites, came to make war against Jehoshaphat.

2 Then some came and reported to Jehoshaphat, saying, "A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, out of Aram and behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar (that is Engedi)."

3 Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.

4 So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord.

Fasting proves the presence and fans the flames of a hunger for God. It is the *intensifier* of spiritual desire and the faithful *enemy* of the fatal bondages to the "innocent" things that we studied last time. Fasting is the exclamation point at the end of this sentence:

This is how much I long for You, O God!

Those Who Eat and Drink are the Most Hungry and Thirsty

Now at first glance- you would think that those who commune the most with God would be the least hungry. It would seem that those who turn aside from the pleasures of this life and spend time in God's Word and Presence would be those who are the most satisfied with what they have and who have no reason to fast. But we are talking about an inexhaustible Fountain; an infinite Feast; and a glorious Lord. So that is not how this works. In reality- the opposite is true. Those who feed often on the Bread of Life crave Him even more and those who drink Living Water the most- thirst for it more than ever.

When the reality of the finished Work of Jesus Christ really begins to take hold on you- you begin to linger near the River of Life. And then you miss it when you are away. When you eat the Bread of Heaven- you never get full or satisfied or finished- you only get hungrier. The more Satisfaction you experience from God- while still in this world- the greater your desire for the next world- is. CS Lewis said,

“Our best havings are wantings”¹

One Thing Leads to the Next

James was very good at showing us a spiritual Principle- that one thing leads to the next- either for good or evil.

James 1:13-16

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.

14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.

15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

Here, James teaches that death is the result of sin being birthed; and sin is “birthed” as a result of lust being enticed and conceived; and lust is enticed as a result of the person being tempted. So lust is already residing inside the individual’s unredeemed flesh. And so temptation is satan simply giving us the opportunity to “do” (sin) what we already “want to do” (lust) in the first place. So the equation is:

Indwelling lust + opportunity (temptation)= sin= death

And as terrifying as that is- the opposite is just that glorious.

2Peter 1:3-11

3 seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.

4 For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

5 Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge,

6 and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness,

7 and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love.

8 For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

9 For he who lacks these *qualities* is blind *or* short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his former sins.

¹ CS Lewis, *Letters of CS Lewis*, ed. WH Lewis (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1966), p. 289.

10 Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;

11 for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

... or as Jude said,

Jude 20&21

20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit,

21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life.

... or as the Apostle Paul wrote,

Romans 8:5-13

5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,

7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*,

8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.

11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh

—

13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

So the more deeply you walk with Christ:

... the hungrier you get for Christ... and the more homesick you get for Heaven... and the more you want all the fullness of God... and the more you want to be done with sin... and the more you want the Bridegroom to return... and the more you want the Church revived and purified with the Beauty of Jesus... and the more you seek for a Great Awakening to God's Reality in the darkest parts of the city... and the more you want to see the Light of the Gospel go to the ends of the earth... and the more you want to see false worldviews surrender to the Truth of Scripture... and the more you want to see pain

erased and tears wiped away and death destroyed... and the more you long for every wrong to be made right... and the more you look to see the Justice and the Grace and the Spirit of God to fill all the earth as the waters cover the sea.

If someone who lays claim to being saved does not desperately long for the manifestation of the Glory of God- it is certainly *not* because they have eaten too much from the Meat that never perishes and they are now full. It is only because they have gone so long without tasting and seeing that the Lord is Good that they have become satisfied with *not* eating Him. When our souls are stuffed with the “petty things” that are passing away- there is no room for feasting on the “great things” that are eternal. The American Episcopal Pastor of the 19th Century, Phillips Brooks said,

“The more we watch the lives of men, the more we see that one of the reasons why men are not occupied with great thoughts and interests is the way in which their lives are overfilled with little things”²

But God did not create us to be satisfied with “little things”. God gives saved people a normal and natural appetite for Himself. But that appetite can be genuinely enflamed or artificially appeased depending on what we feed it. It can only be genuinely enflamed when it is fed with the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ. But when we feed that appetite colorful sugary pastries from the world- that appetite is artificially appeased.

Continuity and Discontinuity

There is a First Century document that *almost* made it into the Canon of Scripture called, *The Didache* (did-i-kay). The only reason it is not in your Bible today is because whoever wrote it said in the preface that it was *not* inspired. But it *reads* and *sounds* like Scripture. And even though this document is not inspired- it is instructive as to how believers were taught in the early Church. One verse goes like this,

“Let not your fasts be with hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but you should fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.”³

Now this sounds strange. What difference does it make which days a believer fasts? And the reason I give you this quote is *not* so that you will fast on those two days each week. I want to show you that when New Testament believers who trust

² Phillips Brooks, *Fasting (a sermon for Lent)* in: *The Candle of the Lord and Other Sermons* (New York: EP Dutton and Company, 1881), p. 207

³ *The Didache*, VIII, quoted from *The Apostolic Fathers* (Loeb Classical Library), translated by Kirsopp Lake (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1970), p. 321

in Jesus fast- they are holding to a *continuity* with the past- while at the same time- operating in total *discontinuity* with the past- at the same time.

When we investigate- we find that the Old Testament commanded the Jew to worship God between sundown Friday and sundown Saturday (The Sabbath). But because God raised Jesus from the dead on the first day of the week- Christians now gather together in corporate worship on the "Lord's Day" (Sunday). So there is both continuity and discontinuity between the Jew and the Christian. We worship the one, true, and living God- and we gather together on the Lord's Day- but we worship God *every day*. Likewise, Jewish custom was that the Jew fasted on Mondays and Thursdays and so New Testament believers were encouraged to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays- again to show both continuity and discontinuity.

So yes, New Testament believers in Jesus fast- but no, not exactly as the Old Testament believer did. This showed that there was both new and old in our fasting. So New Testament believers will accept the old concept of fasting- but we'll change it and make it new. Now simply changing the day is *not* what makes fasting a Christian concept in and of itself. Nevertheless, Christian fasting *is* new; it is utterly unique from Old Testament fasting.

And it is in this uniqueness that we see that the single most important word about fasting in the New Testament- found in **Luke 5:33-39**:

33 And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the *disciples* of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink."

34 And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?"

35 "But *the* days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days."

36 And He was also telling them a parable: "No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old."

37 "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined."

38 "But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins."

39 "And no one, after drinking old *wine* wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'"

Here Jesus speaks very clearly and directly about the issue of fasting- and asks these questions:

Is fasting a distinctly Christian thing to do? And if so- how?

Fasting is Uniquely Christian- but it is not Obvious

First of all- we must understand that fasting is practiced by every major religion and human philosophy in the world. So as defined like this:

The deliberate abstinence from food for religious, cultural, political, or health reasons.

... fasting is a practice found in all societies, cultures- throughout all centuries. Even non- religious people fast (some regularly) for political and health reasons. So I ask five questions:

1. Why should Bible believing Christians join in with this pagan parade of asceticism?
2. Even if it is true that believers fasted who operated under the inferior Revelation of the Old Covenant- would it then not also be true that fasting would cease since God has now given His full and completed Revelation in the New Covenant?
3. Is it reasonable to put the "new wine" of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ into the old "wineskins" of the human effort of fasting?
4. Does not the finished Work of Jesus Christ in His sinless Life; and on the Cross; and in His Resurrection along with the ongoing dwelling of the Holy Spirit mean that the dead and raised Lamb is so powerfully among us that the dominant response by the believer should be celebration rather than mortification?
5. Is there not great danger that the triumph of fasting over the flesh's appetites will simply lead to pride and self-reliance?

So it is not at all obvious that fasting is a uniquely Christian thing to do. But if it is- then we need to see how fasting relates to the "Center". And the Center is the Triumph of Christ in living sinlessly; dying as a propitiation; rising victoriously; and reigning over all the Universe for the Salvation of God's elect and the Glory of His Father. So how does fasting relate to all that?

Does Fasting Belong in the Kingdom of God?

The prevalence of fasting in the Old Testament raises the question of whether this practice belongs with New Testament believers at all. Does something done by people walking in shadows and types and symbols have validity with people living on this side of the Coming of the Messiah and the appearing of the Kingdom of God? Jesus said,

Luke 11:17-20

17 ... Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and a house *divided* against itself falls.

18 If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul.

19 "And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? So they will be your judges.

20 "But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

And when the Pharisees asked Him about the Coming of the Kingdom, Jesus replied:

Luke 17:20&21

20 ... The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed;

21 nor will they say, 'Look, here *it is!*' or, 'There *it is!*' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.

... so in *that* sense- the long awaited Kingdom of God has *already* come in the Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ.

This is the "mystery of the Kingdom" that Jesus had in mind when he said to His disciples:

Mark 4:11&12

11 ... To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,

12 so that *WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN.*"

This was a stunning New Reality in the world that was described by George Ladd, the Professor of Exegesis at Fuller Theological Seminary in the early 20th Century:

"The New Truth, now given to Man by Revelation in the Person and Mission of Jesus, is that the Kingdom which is to come *finally* in apocalyptic Power as foreseen in Daniel, has in fact, already entered the world in advance, in a hidden form- to work secretly within and among men."⁴

So I ask again: Does fasting belong in the Church- the New Kingdom people that God is assembling from all the peoples of the world? Keith Main doesn't think so. In his book, *Prayer and Fasting: A Study in the Devotional Life of the Early Church*- Main said this:

"Thus far... we have suggested that the joy and thanksgiving that marks the prayer life of the New Testament is a sign of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Fasting is no longer consistent with the joyous and thankful attitude that marks the Fellowship"⁵

Main's position is strengthened even more when we see that- absent the four

⁴ George Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 225

⁵ Keith Main, *Prayer and Fasting: A Study in the Devotional Life of the Early Church* (New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1971), p. 84

Gospel Records- fasting is almost invisible. Main says,

“[Fasting] ceases to be an issue within the Church... Paul, following the lead of Jesus, deliberately diverted the disciples attention away from fasting and any form of food asceticism and into prayer, service, and toil on behalf of the Kingdom. Missionary work served as a corrective and counterpoise not only to apocalyptic dreaming but also to the outworn and overworked custom of fasting.... A sense of Life Eternal is ever breaking in upon us. The believer marches to the sound of music from a different world! And it is exceedingly difficult to reconcile the Risen Christ with fasting forms.”⁶

So is Main correct? Is the fact that fasting is barely mentioned throughout the New Testament Epistles a sign that it has been done away? Is it true that the joyful presence of the Kingdom of God and the glorious Ministry of the Spirit of Christ nullifies the relevance of fasting in the Christian Church? This is what makes **Luke 5:33-39** so important to us.

And that importance is increased even more when you consider that in the Apostle Paul's Letters- food is celebrated as something good and asceticism is treated as a weak weapon against fleshly indulgence and practices of eating and drinking are regarded as nonessential- except as they express love and contentment in the Lord.

The Goodness of Food

1 Timothy 4:1-5

1 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,
2 by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron,
3 men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.
4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude;
5 for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

Here the Apostle warns that in “**later times**” (later than when he wrote this), very bad people who have been deceived themselves will seek to deceive others partly by advocating that they abstain “**from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth**”.

Some, like Keith Main, say that this shows that fasting is outdated. These people teach that this Passage shows that Paul is warning us *against* the sort of asceticism that exalts fasting in such a way that the Goodness of God in giving us the gift of food is overlooked or distorted.

The Weakness of Asceticism

⁶ Ibid pp. 54, 60&61

And then when Paul pondered the value of harsh measures for the fleshly body- he cautioned the Colossians that such disciplines are of very limited benefit and can even stir up carnal pride as they subdue carnal appetites.

Colossians 2:20-23

20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,

21 "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!"

Then he asks a question:

Colossians 2:22

(which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use) — in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

... and then he gives an answer:

Colossians 2:23

These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.

This is a strong warning against any and all simplistic views of fasting that would dare to think that simply not eating will *earn* a guaranteed spiritual benefit. It has never been that simple. "**Severe treatment of the body**", Paul said, may in fact simply puff up that person's self-righteousness and the result of this would be that the person would be measurably *worse off* from fasting. CS Lewis saw this danger and said,

"Fasting asserts the human will against the human appetite- the reward being 'self-mastery'- and the danger, 'pride'. Involuntary hunger subjects appetites and wills together to the Divine Will and furnishes an occasion for both godly submission and exposing us to the danger of rebellion. But the redemptive effect of suffering lies chiefly in its tendency to reduce the 'rebel- will'. Ascetic practices which, in themselves, strengthen the will, are only useful insofar as they enable the will to put its own house (the passions) in order, as a preparation for offering the whole man to God. They are necessary as a means; but as an end, they would be abominable. For in substituting will for appetite and stopping- they would merely exchange the 'animal self' for the 'diabolical self'. It was therefore truly said that 'only God can mortify'"⁷

So what we should take away from all this is that the true Biblical mortification of our carnal nature is not simply a matter of denial and discipline- else all those who exercise either denial or discipline or both would be holy- and

⁷ CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962), p. 112

manifestly they are not. Killing our carnal urges so that we may live with abandonment to the Joy of this Radical Love in Jesus Christ is an ongoing, internal matter of us genuinely finding more contentment in Christ than we do in anything else- including food- including even life itself.

Psalm 63:3

Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips will praise You.

Neither Eating or Not Eating Are Essential

The Apostle Paul regarded both eating and not eating as a matter that is non-essential in itself- but which gains value as it expresses love and a superior satisfaction in God. That is why he told the saints at the Church in Rome,

Romans 14:3-6

3 The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.

4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

6 He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

Now while it is true that this passage does not address fasting per se- the Principle is the same. Eating and not- eating or fasting and not fasting can both be done **“for the Lord”** and those who do either can both **“give thanks to God”**. And that is why he said,

... Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

Or as Paul said in **Colossians 2:16**:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink ...

Because...

1Corinthians 8:8b

... food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

Therefore,

1Corinthians 6:12

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.

... next Lesson- the exposition of **Luke 5:33-39**

Recap

1. Why is it true that those who feast on God the most are also the most hungry for Him? _____

2. What did James teach about the Principle that one thing leads to the next? _____

3. How would that Principle apply to fasting? _____

4. What are the “little things” that Phillips Brooks warned us about? _____

5. What was the point that the Didache made about fasting? _____

6. What is the most important passage about fasting in the New Testament? _____
7. What are some of the dangers of fasting? _____

8. What are some of the objections to fasting? _____

9. What is the point of CS Lewis’ quote on page 9? _____

10. What was Paul’s argument in **Romans 14; Colossians 2:16; 1Corinthians 8:8; and 1Corinthians 6:12**? _____

Notes: