



Conducted by
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“Could you please tell us what the Bible teaches about the subject of Fasting, and should it be practiced in the Church in these days?”

I suppose that any discussion on the subject of Fasting should also include the further ideas of abstinence and indulgence; it seems to me that all of these overlap to some extent. We know that the idea of fasting has been prevalent down through the ages, and the reasons for practicing it have been varied, but since our question refers to the practice of it in the N.T. Church of today, then we need to examine the scriptural warrant for it, if any, in the Bible.

What is Fasting?

A short, literal definition is quite simply ‘not eating’. I think we all understand that fasting can be either voluntary or involuntary, but since we are asking should it be practiced by Christians today, I suppose we are talking about voluntary fasting.

An example of voluntary fasting is recorded in Acts 14:23 where it is said that Paul and Barnabas fasted, “And when they had ordained them Elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed”. It is worthy of note that voluntary fasting is in many recorded instances accompanied by prayer.

Examples of involuntary fasting are to be found in Paul’s second letter to Corinth. Defending the Christian witness of both himself and his co-workers he says, “But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings”. (2 Cor. 6:4,5). Later in the same letter he writes, “In weariness, in painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches” (11:27,28). Paul’s references to fasting here could possibly also include that done voluntarily, but it rather seems that in the situations which Paul catalogues that the trying circumstances which he endured would often of necessity deprive him of food.

The Historical Setting

It would seem from incidents recorded in the O.T. that fasting was associated with expressions of grief, with the objective, perhaps, of influencing God. We read in Judges 20 of how Benjamin went forth against the children of Israel and slew some 40000 of them; it is recorded that “all the people went up, and came into the house of God, and wept, and sat before the Lord, and fasted that day until even” (20:26). Could it be that they were trying to change the righteous judgment of God? We also read that when Saul was killed, “they mourned, and wept, and fasted till even, for Saul, and for Jónathon his son” (2 Sam. 1:12). Later, after Joab had killed Abner, we read that David lamented over Abner and would not eat, “And when all the people came to cause David to eat meat while it was yet day, David sware, saying, So do God to me, and more also, if I taste bread, or ought else, till the sun be down” (2 Sam. 3:35).

It also seems that the people observed feasts during the Exile. In Zechariah 7:4,5 we read, “Then came the word of the Lord of hosts unto me, saying, speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth

and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast to me, even to me? Zechariah then indicates that added to the fasts in the fifth and seventh months there were also fasts in the fourth and the tenth months (read 8:19). We know from the prophecy of Jeremiah that in the fourth month, and the ninth day of the month, in the eleventh year of Zedekiah's reign, that Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, came with his army and broke up Jerusalem (Jer. 39:1,2). We also know (see Jer. 52:4) that Nebuchadnezzar *laid siege* to Jerusalem in the tenth month, and the tenth day, in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign; two years *before* the city was finally broken.

Now it seems that in all of these Jewish Festivals of remembrance, fasting took place. They were sorrowful occasions in the nation's history, but whether the *motives* of fasting were genuine or not is another matter. It is quite evident that ascetics - and fasting has long been associated with asceticism - were seeking to influence their *fellow-men* by this form of so-called piety, and you will recall that Jesus roundly condemned this (Read Matt. 6:16-18). It is quite clear from a study of this teaching that the Lord did not *condemn* fasting, but He seemed to be stressing the need for purity of motive from those who practiced it. We also are aware that even today fasting is used as a weapon by some in order to gain public sympathy, and to try to change or modify social and political decisions.

The New Testament Examples.

It would appear that appointed fasts became more frequent in later Judaism, but there is not much scriptural evidence of fasting as a moral and spiritual discipline for Christians. Undoubtedly, we have examples of fasting among the early Christian groups (See Acts 13:2; 27:9; 2 Cor. 6:5,6. The fast referred to in Acts 27:9 is probably the fast associated with the Day of Atonement), but there is certainly no scriptural warrant for the ascetic practices which characterised religious ascetics of later times; this association of fasting with religious asceticism is very damaging to the Church, and we can understand why it was so sternly condemned by the Lord in His teaching.

Perhaps Daniel sets the pattern for what should be the N.T. idea of fasting. It is recorded that in Daniel 9:3, and Daniel gives us some idea, perhaps, as to how *we* should approach God, "And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fastings, and sackcloth and ashes". I would hasten to add, of course, that I am not advocating sackcloth and ashes, but the scripture does seem to indicate the right devotional frame of mind when approaching God, and evidently along with prayer and supplications, Daniel considered fasting also to be a help. I am persuaded that the intensity of spiritual feeling toward God can even obviate the desires of the flesh.

The incident with the disciples of John and the Pharisees serves to illustrate the purpose and character which He expected from His disciples. You will recall that the disciples of John came to Jesus and said, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?" Jesus replied, "Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast" (Matt. 9:14, 15). It seems here that Jesus is making a direct claim to Messiahship, and He is saying that because of His advent, joy, love, truth, and peace had been restored to Israel in place of mournful remembrance (Refer to Zech. 8:19). He was also aware, of course, that after His crucifixion His disciples would mourn Him, hence the reference to fasting. Jesus evidently sees His mission as Israel's wedding festival, and consequently it was no time for fasting, but again, He does not exclude its use under certain circumstances. No doubt Jesus, along with His disciples, observed the Fast associated with the Day of Atonement, but He seems not to have imposed any frequent fasts in addition.

There are references to fasting in Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29; and in 1 Cor. 7:5, but these seem not to have been included in the most authentic manuscripts.

Conclusions

It is very clear that indulgence, and certainly over-indulgence, in food induces a soporific state in people. Before I retired, when I was lecturing regularly, we always used to dread the period immediately after lunch; it was referred to as 'the graveyard period' because, due to the food people had eaten, they tended to 'nod off'. From this we draw the obvious conclusion that the gastronomically-induced lethargy is not conducive to alert thought process. Relating this idea to Christian experience, we can readily understand that abstaining from food will heighten the intensity of our spiritual perception. It is a startling paradox that many Christians who, so they say, desire a closer, more intense, walk with God do, by their gross excesses and panderings to the flesh, forbid the very thing which they are striving to obtain. Even though asceticism in any shape or form is to be deplored, it must be said that a heightened spiritual perception is much to be desired.

Therefore, even though our study leads us to the view that appointed Fasts are not commanded for the Church of the N.T., we are inclined to the view that if abstaining from food for short periods of time in certain circumstances of life can help individual Christians to sharpen their spiritual perceptions, then I believe that the N.T. evidence suggests that neither the Lord nor the Apostles forbade this.