



September 9, 2018

“Soul-Fattening: The Discipline of Fasting”

Isaiah 58

Pastor Gary Hamrick

The topic of fasting – going without food for a limited period of time in order to draw near to God – is one of the least-practiced and least-preached among the spiritual disciplines but fasting is mentioned more times in the Bible than water baptism! The subject is referenced seventy-seven times in Scripture. Although we are not commanded to fast, we are expected to fast and will be rewarded for fasting. In this message, Pastor Gary shares five benefits of fasting.

### Historical Background

1. Pastor Gary said: “The context of Isaiah 58 is a rebuke from the Lord because the Jewish people were fasting improperly. They were fasting as a matter of a religious ritual rather than [fasting] as a matter of seeking the Lord and drawing near to him. And, to make matters worse, [they] were also sinning and rebelling against the Lord. ... [The Jewish people] at this point in their history thought that God would be more impressed by the fact that they were fasting than he would be upset with them for sinning. [How] many of you understand that God is never interested in spiritual activity if it doesn’t come from a heart of sincerity? ... What he wants from us his whole-hearted devotion, and he’s not impressed by the spiritual activity and religious rituals; he wants our hearts. Now, if out of the overflow of a heart seeking the Lord, we then are people devoted to him, and as a result we like to go to church, [tithe, fast, and pray], then okay. If the mindset is that [doing all of these things will impress God, making him overlook the sin in our life], then we are just deceiving ourselves.”
2. Fasting is mentioned 77 times in the Bible, and there are examples of partial and complete fasts, national fasts, and congregational fasts.
  - a. The Bible doesn’t dictate how long a fast should last.
    - i. There are examples of fasts lasting one day, seven days, twenty-one

days, and forty days.

- b. A partial list of those who are mentioned in the Bible as having fasted includes:
- i. Moses fasted when he received the Ten Commandments.
    1. [Exodus 34:28](#) - *“Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant - the Ten Commandments.”*
  - ii. King David fasted when his infant son was sick and dying.
    1. [2 Samuel 12:16](#) - *“David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground.”*
  - iii. King Jehoshaphat fasted for victory over the enemies of Judah.
    1. [2 Chronicles 20:3](#) - *“Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.”*
  - iv. The prophet Joel called for a fast to avert the judgment of God.
    1. [Joel 1:14](#) - *“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.”*
  - v. The king of Nineveh called for a fast in response to Jonah’s message of God’s coming judgment.
    1. [Jonah 3:5](#) - *“The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”*
  - vi. Queen Esther fasted before she approached King Xerxes concerning Haman’s plot to eradicate the Jews.
    1. [Esther 4:16](#) - *“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.”*
  - vii. The prophetess Anna fasted.
    1. [Luke 2:36-37](#) - *“There was also a prophetess, Anna... She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.”*
  - viii. Jesus fasted when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.
    1. [Matthew 4:1-2](#) - *“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.”* (Also see [Luke 4:1-13](#))
  - ix. The early Church fasted before sending Paul on his first missionary journey.
    1. [Acts 13:1-3](#) - *“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."*

- x. Paul fasted for the elders who were appointed in the churches in Antioch, Lystra, and Iconium.
  - 1. [Acts 14:23](#) – *"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."*

- 3. Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, found that between 1861 and 1954 there wasn't a single publication, book, paper, or writings of any kind on the topic of fasting.
- 4. "... I mean religious fasting. How [some have] exalted this beyond all Scripture and reason; - and others utterly disregarded it..." – *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*<sup>1</sup>
- 5. Pastor Gary said: "Why is it that this subject of fasting is so rarely practiced and even less often taught from [pulpits]? [I] think the answer is because we have a love affair with food. Let's just be honest about this. ... So, who really wants to practice fasting? ... Who really wants to teach about it?"
- 6. Biblical fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for a limited period of time for the purpose of drawing near to God.
  - a. Fasting is not a Christian dieting plan.
  - b. Fasting is not a ritual to show you are more spiritual than others.
  - c. Fasting is not intended to "punish the flesh."
  - d. Fasting is not required, but it is expected.
    - i. [Matthew 9:14-15](#) – *"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 [Jesus]*

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*mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.’ ”*

1. The way we seek the Lord is through prayer and fasting.
- e. Fasting is not required, but it will be rewarded.
  - i. **Matthew 6:16-18** - *“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 [i.e. look like you normally look], 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.”*
7. Pastor Gary said: “I think it’s important to say as a medical disclaimer. There are some people who can’t fast. Particularly people who struggle with diabetes or pregnant women; it’s not advisable for some people. So, if in doubt, you need to consult your medical doctor... You need to make sure that you are physically able to fast before you [fast].”

#### Freeing Benefit

8. **Isaiah 58:6** - *“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?**”* (Emphasis added)
9. Pastor Gary said: “Sometimes there are sin strongholds in our lives that take us captive. [There are] patterns or addictions, things that hold us captive in our flesh that need to be broken. Listen, even Christians need to understand this. When a [person] gets saved, [their] spirit gets regenerated but [their] flesh is not. ... The appetites of the flesh will constantly be warring with our spirit that has been regenerated. So, within the same person is this conflict: the spirit that wants to please God and the flesh that wants to please self. Your flesh and my flesh always want to rule. ... Every Christian needs to understand that the battle is real, and the battle will be constant until the day we die, [when] we shed this body of flesh, and get a new body and are with the Lord. ... Until that day there are many strongholds that people struggle with [and sometimes the best remedy for breaking sin strongholds is a period of fasting].”

#### Healing Benefit

10. **Isaiah 58:8** - *“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.”*

11. Pastor Gary said: “It seems [that Isaiah] is speaking more about national healing. ... [The Hebrew word actually means surgical bandages.] I don’t know that the word is limited only to national healing. [Ultimately,] God is our healer, and God desires to bring healing; whether it’s national healing [or] physical healing [or] emotional healing. ... Some of you, you need to be healed of emotional things like [fear, anxieties, and worry]. ... Or maybe there is a physical ailment that the Lord desires to heal you and fasting facilitates that in some ways.”
- a. **Psalm 35:13a** - *“Yet when [my enemies] were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.”*
  - b. **Mark 9:29** - *“[Jesus] replied, ‘This kind can come out only by prayer [and fasting].’ ”*

#### Strengthening Benefit

12. Three times Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, and each time he responded each time with Scripture.
- a. **Luke 4:3-4** - *“The devil said to him, ‘If you are the son of God, tell this stone to become bread.’ Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Man does not live on bread alone.” ”*
13. Pastor Gary said: “What many fail to realize about that story is that Jesus was not at his weakest when Satan came to him; Jesus was at his strongest. Now, no doubt, physically he felt [low] energy, [he felt tired or weak] because he hadn’t eaten in forty days, but those forty days he spent fasting and praying and seeking his father strengthened him such that he was in a better place of greater resistance to the temptation that Satan brought his way.”

#### Helping Benefit

14. The perennial enemies of Israel were the Ammonites and Moabites, and when they came as a strong force against the kingdom of Judah, King Jehoshaphat called the nation to a fast.
- a. **2 Chronicles 20:15-17** - *“[Jehaziel] said: ‘Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: “Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s. Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.’ ” ”*

15. One of the groups of exiles who returned to Judah was led by Ezra.
- a. **Ezra 8:21-23** - *“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.”*
16. Pastor Gary said: “Are you in trouble and you need the Lord’s help? Fast. Is your marriage in trouble and you need the Lord’s help? Fast. Are your children in trouble and you need the Lord’s help? Fast. Our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, so seek him with prayer and fasting.”

### Discerning Benefit

17. Pastor Gary said: “Paul’s first missionary journey began because God spoke through people... but God spoke to people after they had fasted and worshiped [and] fasted and prayed. [Then] the word of the Lord came... That wisdom and that discernment and that knowledge came because they were seeking the Lord... There are many things in our lives that we need wisdom from above concerning. [We need discernment and we need help to understand]. So many people are always wanting to know, ‘What is the Lord’s will for my life and where should I go and what should I do and who should I marry...?’ We are constantly facing one decision or another, and we constantly are in need of wisdom from above. What answer, insight, or discernment do you need from God? Fast. What guidance or direction or wisdom do you need from God? Fast.”
- a. **Acts 13:1-3** - *“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.”*

### Discussion Questions

1. Read **Isaiah 58:1-9** to provide a foundation for your Bible study time.
2. Read and discuss Pastor Gary’s opening statement about the historical context of Isaiah 58, and how self-deceived we are when we think a right relationship with the Lord centers on spiritual activity and religious rituals. (See #1 above)

3. Provide an overview of the people and situations Pastor Gary shared concerning people in the Bible who have prayed and fasted. (See #2a above)
4. Allow the people in your group to share their experiences about sermons they've heard or books and articles they've read concerning fasting. (See #3 above)
5. Read and discuss the definition of biblical fasting is and what it's not. (See #6 above)
6. Read [Isaiah 58:6](#) and discuss the freeing benefit of fasting. (See #8 above)
7. Spend time talking about Pastor Gary's comments about fasting. (See #9 above)
8. Read [Isaiah 58:8](#) and discuss the healing benefit of fasting. (See #10 above)
9. Spend time talking about Pastor Gary's comments about fasting. (See #11 above)
10. Read [Luke 4:3-4](#) and discuss the strengthening benefits of fasting. (See #12 and #13 above)
11. Read [2 Chronicles 20:15-17](#) and discuss the helping benefits of fasting. (See #14 and #15 above)
12. Read and discuss Pastor Gary's comments about the discerning benefit of fasting. (See #17 above)
13. Read Pastor Gary's remarks about times when we should fast (See #16 above) and close your time in prayer as the Holy Spirit leads.

\* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New International Version (NIV 1984).