

# Fasting for Self-Humbling



Fasting (Part 1)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again at the beginning of a new week, sharing with you Keys to Successful Living which God has placed in my hand through many years of personal experience and Christian ministry.

This week I'll be sharing with you a lost key, one that is found all through the pages of the Bible. And yet, somehow it has been set aside and misplaced by the Christian church. If I were to give you many guesses, I doubt whether you would come up with what I have in mind. So let me tell you plainly. My theme for this week is, "Fasting."

First of all, let me give you a simple definition of what I understand by fasting. Fasting is voluntarily abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. I'll say that once more. Fasting is voluntarily abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. Sometimes people fast not only from food but also from water, but that's the exception rather than the rule; generally, it was only from food. This is exemplified in the fast of Jesus described in Matthew chapter 4, His fast in the wilderness before He began His public ministry. Matthew 4:2 says this:

> "And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry."

It's clear to me that He did not abstain from water for those forty days and forty nights because anyone who's even fasted a brief while without water will know that you become thirsty much more quickly than you become hungry. So the fact that the Scripture does not say "He became thirsty," but only that "He became hungry," indicates to me that Jesus abstained from food but not from water.

To many contemporary Christians, fasting seems unfamiliar and even frightening. Yet this is strange. Fasting was regularly practiced by God's people throughout the Bible record. Also it's an accepted part of most other major world religions; for example, Hindus fast, Buddhists fast, Muslims fast, and so on.

Today I'm going to refer to a number of passages of Scripture which speak about fasting and I'm going to explain the basic spiritual purpose of fasting. Primarily, the purpose of fasting

is self-humbling. It's a scriptural means ordained by God for us to humble ourselves before God. Throughout the Bible God requires His people to humble themselves before Him. There are many, many different passages of Scripture which emphasize this. I will quote just four from the New Testament. Matthew 18:4, Jesus says:

> "Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 23:12, again the words of Jesus:

> "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

James 4:10:

> "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

1 Peter 5:6:

> "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

One important feature of all those Scriptures is that the responsibility to humble ourselves is placed upon us. We cannot transfer it to God. To pray to God, "God, make me humble," is almost unscriptural because the reply of God in Scripture always comes back, "Humble yourself."

Now God not merely requires us to humble ourselves but in the Bible He has revealed for us a specific practical way to do this, to humble ourselves. Let me begin in Psalm 35:13, the words and the testimony of David. He says:

> "I humbled my soul with fasting…"

So fasting was the way that David employed to humble his soul, to humble himself.

Now let's look at some historical examples where God's people humbled themselves in this way. First of all, we'll turn to Ezra 8:21–23. Here Ezra is about to lead a band of returning Jewish exiles from Babylon back to Jerusalem. They have before them a long, arduous journey through country infested by brigands, occupied by their enemies; they're taking with them their wives and children and also the sacred vessels of the temple; they're in desperate need of safe conduct. Ezra had two alternatives: he could appeal to the Emperor of Persia for a band of soldiers and horsemen or he could trust in God. He chose to trust in God and this is what he says:

> "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 good 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."

Really, Ezra had two alternatives there: the carnal or the spiritual. He could have resorted to the carnal and asked for that band of soldiers and horsemen; it would not have been sinful, but it would have been on a low level of faith. But he chose the spiritual, he chose to look to God and to invoke God's supernatural help and protection and he knew the way to do this. And the Israelites there with him also knew the way. It was something they already understood. They fasted and humbled their souls before God. They petitioned God and God heard them and granted them the safe journey that they asked for.

And then in 2 Chronicles 20:2–4, an incident in the history of Judah when Jehoshaphat was king.

> "Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, 'A vast army is coming against you from Edom… It is already in Hazazon Tamar.' Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him."

Then Jehoshaphat prayed a prayer invoking God's help. I'll just quote to you the last verse of that prayer which is very significant. Jehoshaphat closes his prayer by saying:

> "O our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you."

There are the key phrases: "we have no power, we do not know what to do." So they had to turn to God for supernatural help and they knew the way to turn. It was by fasting. They

renounced the natural to invoke the supernatural.

For another clear example of the practice of fasting in the Old Testament, I'm going to turn to the ordinances for the Day of Atonement, that's what the Jewish people call Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. These ordinances are found in Leviticus 16, and I'm going to read verses 29–31:

> "And this shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls, and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you..."

Now, where that translation says "you shall humble your souls," another translation says "you must deny yourselves." And alternatively, "you must fast." Then the passage continues:

> "...for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you shall be clean from all your sins before the Lord. It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute."

We know historically that for something like 3,500 years the Jewish people have always observed Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as a day of fasting. We also have the New Testament authority for this. In Acts 27:9, in the passage that describes Paul's journey to Rome by sea, it says this:

> "Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast."

The "Fast" there is the Day of Atonement, which fell always at the end of September or the beginning of October, just when winter was setting in. So we see from the authority of the New Testament that the Day of Atonement was always celebrated as "the Fast." So there's a clear example: God required His people to humble their souls before Him, the way they were expected to do it was by collective fasting. That was the appointment, the ordinance, for the Day of Atonement, the most sacred day of the Jewish calendar.

I want you to notice two facts. Fasting in this case was man's response to God's provision of forgiveness and cleansing. God provided the ceremony by which the High Priest went into the innermost sanctuary of the temple and made atonement. But that atonement was only effective for those people who accepted it through fasting. In other words, God did His part, but man had to do his. This is true in many transactions with God. God does His part, but He expects a response from us. And many times the response that God expects is for us to fast. God absolutely required this of all His people under the Old Covenant. Anyone who did not fast on the Day of Atonement was to be cut off and was no longer to be a member of God's people.

So we see that God attached tremendous importance to fasting as the appointed way for His people to humble themselves before Him and so to qualify for the blessing that He wanted to provide for them.

Well, our time is up for today. I'll be back with you again tomorrow at this time. Tomorrow I'll speak about the practice of fasting in the life of Jesus and the New Testament church.

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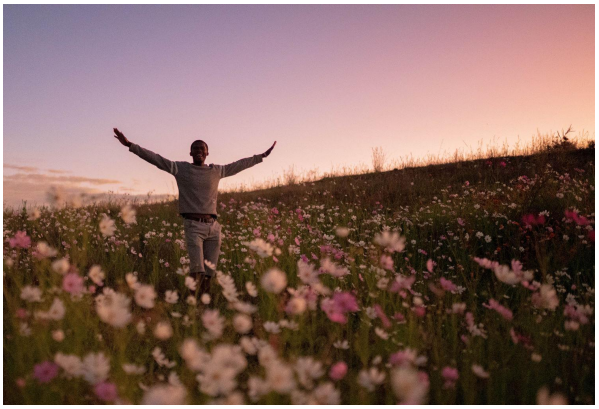
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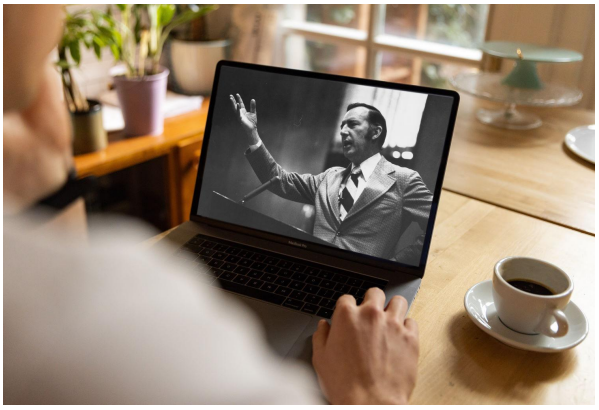
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