

Fasting Practiced by Jesus



Fasting (Part 2)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again as we continue to study together the theme of "Fasting."

In my introductory talk yesterday I described fasting as 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. I began with a simple definition of fasting. It is voluntarily abstaining from food for spiritual purposes, sometimes from water also, but generally only from food. Let me repeat that definition: Fasting is voluntarily abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.

The primary purpose as revealed in the Bible is self-humbling. Fasting is a scriptural way to humble ourselves. I pointed out that all through the Bible God requires His people to humble themselves before Him and that God has also revealed for us a simple, practical way to do it; that is, by fasting.

I gave some historical examples from the Old Testament, the example of David; of Ezra and the exiles returning from Babylon; of Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah; and then the Day of Atonement, the most sacred day in the Jewish religious calendar, where every believing Jew was required to practice fasting. The essential nature of fasting, I believe, is renouncing the natural to invoke the supernatural. The most natural thing for us to do, in a sense, is to eat. When we give up eating, we're deliberately turning away from the natural and turning to God and to the supernatural. And it has a deep significance.

Today I'm going to deal with the place of fasting in the life and ministry of Jesus and of the New Testament church. First of all, I want to point out to you that the Lord Jesus Himself practiced fasting. Here's the account in Luke 4:1–2:

> "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit [capital 's,' the Holy Spirit] in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days [in other words, he fasted] and at the end of them he was hungry."

I pointed out the words indicate that probably he did drink, but he did not eat. Before Jesus entered His public ministry there were two critical experiences through which He passed. First of all, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and He was endued with the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit for His ministry but He still did not immediately go out and begin to minister. The second experience was this forty days of fasting in the desert when He abstained from food and, I would say, focused on the spiritual. And in that time, apparently, He had a direct, person to person conflict with Satan. And through His fasting He emerged victorious from that first conflict with Satan. To me, that would seem to indicate that fasting is essential in our lives if we're to be victorious over Satan. If Jesus had to practice fasting for victory, I don't see how any of us can claim to achieve victory without the same thing that Jesus did.

Now, I want you to notice the result of the fasting in the life of Jesus. It's stated in Luke 4:14:

> "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit [capital "s," the Holy Spirit], and news about him spread through the whole countryside."

There's a very significant difference in the two phrases used. When Jesus went into the desert, it says He was "full of the Holy Spirit," but when He returned from the desert after forty days of fasting it says He went "in the power of the Spirit." In other words, it's one thing to be full of the Spirit, it's another thing to be in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit was there from the time of His baptism onwards, but it was His fasting that released the power of the Holy Spirit to flow without hindrance through His life and ministry. Again, I believe this is a pattern for us.

Let me remind you of the words that Jesus Himself said later in John 14:12:

> "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do: because I go to the Father."

I want to point out to you that the works that Jesus did began with fasting. If we want to follow in the other works that He did, it seems logical to me that we'll begin where Jesus began, with fasting.

Jesus also taught His disciples to fast. In the Sermon on the Mount, right in the middle of it, in Matthew 6:17–18, this is what He says to His disciples:

> "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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."

You see, Jesus promises a reward to those who practice fasting in the right way and for the right motives. I want to point out to you one very important little word. Jesus said, "when you fast," He did not say, "if you fast." If He had said "if," He would have left open the possibility that they might not practice fasting. But when He said, "when you fast," He obviously assumed that they would practice fasting.

The theme of the 6th chapter of Matthew is three main Christian duties: giving to the poor, praying, and fasting. And in connection with all three of them, Jesus uses the same word "when," He never says "if." In Matthew 6:2, He says, "...when you give to the needy..."

In Matthew 6:5, He says, "...when you pray..."

And in Matthew 6:17, He says, "...when you fast..."

He never left open the option that they would not do those three things. He put them on the same level precisely: giving, praying and fasting. Most Christians would accept without much question that it is our obligation to give and to pray; but on that basis it's equally our obligation to fast. Jesus put those three things on precisely the same level.

Not only was fasting practiced by Jesus Himself, it was practiced by the New Testament church. In Acts 13:1–4, we read these words about the church at Antioch:

> "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon, and Lucius, and Manaen, and Saul. [Five men are named: Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen and Saul.] And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus."

Notice, the leaders of the church were together, ministering to the Lord and fasting together. In the course of their fasting, they received a revelation from the Lord, from the

Holy Spirit, that two of their number were to be sent out for a special apostolic ministry. Receiving this revelation, they did not immediately send them out but it says they again "fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them."

Then it says of those two men that they were sent out by the Holy Spirit. Again we see that fasting transfers us from the natural to the supernatural. When they got into that supernatural realm through fasting, they had a supernatural revelation and they had supernatural authorization and the Holy Spirit Himself accepted responsibility for what they did. But they way to this was opened up through their collective fasting.

Then in Acts 14:23, after Paul and Barnabas had gone out on this ministry; we read what they themselves did when they established their new converts in various cities into proper churches. This is what it says in Acts 14:23:

> "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."

We see that fasting was not just a single, one-time, unusual occurrence but it was something that was practiced regularly by the apostles and taught to their new disciples. Actually, the two main events in the spread of the Gospel in the early church were the sending out of apostles and then the establishing of new converts through the appointment of elders. To me it's tremendously significant that the early church did not do either of these things without first fasting and seeking God's supernatural direction and help. So we can say, in a certain sense, that the ministry of the early church in its outgrowth and expansion revolved around collective fasting in the churches.

Finally, let's listen to the testimony of Paul about his life and ministry, remembering that Paul was one of the two men involved in that incident. In 2 Corinthians 6:4–6, Paul says this:

> "...in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in [watchings], in [fastings], in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love..."

Paul there describes various aspects of his character and conduct which marked him out and his fellow-workers as true servants of God. Amongst the things that so marked him out he says watchings [that's staying awake when you could be asleep] and fastings [abstaining from food when you could be eating]. And those two things, watchings and fastings, are in very good company. They're put side by side with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit and genuine love. In other words, they're there presented as part of the total equipment of a true servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I believe that God still views them that way today. I believe God's provision and God's standards are still the same as they were for Paul and for the early Church.

Well, our time is up for today. I'll be back with you again tomorrow at this time. Tomorrow I'll be explaining how fasting changes us in our inner personality.

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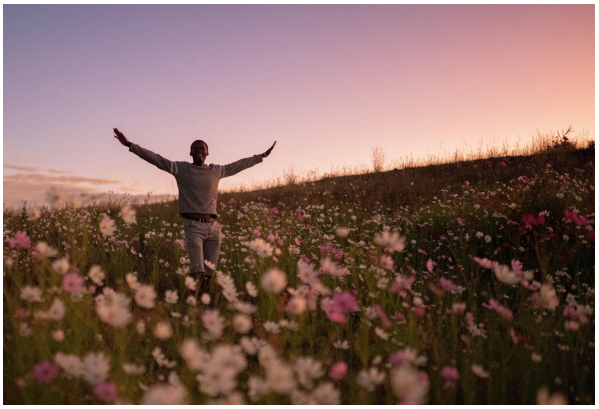
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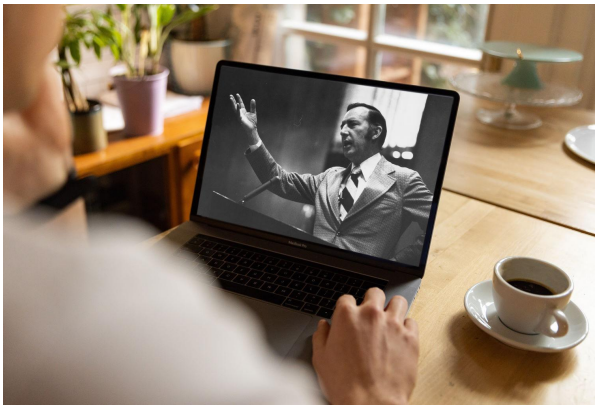
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