

# **SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: FASTING**

*(Isaiah 58.1-9 and Matthew 6.16-18)*

Right from the start, I need to make it clear that this has been a tough subject for me to handle. I have read and read till I am blue in the face; there is so much on fasting that it's difficult to know what to include or exclude but I guess this is true for all subjects when it's God's word you're meant to be bringing.

So here goes: like Paul said, "when I want to do spiritual things my flesh objects but if it's soulful things like eating, watching TV or playing golf!" (my paraphrase) it's dead easy.

Fasting is like that; we eat and drink from the cradle to the grave and think nothing of it. In fact, we are obsessed with eating and take great pleasure in every aspect of it; whether cooking, different cuisines, growing our food in different ways, testing, sampling and eating in fine restaurants. We exalt the finest chefs in the world, buy their books and watch them on TV. Nothing wrong with any of that in moderation but if it is taking the place of God in any way, it's an idol and needs discipline.

Some folk have a fear of food but most of us are afraid we won't have enough food to eat. Or should I say we worry that if we go without food it will harm us. You can live without food for weeks, but no water and you will die in days.

Let me put a disclaimer in here; if you are ill or have diabetes then fasting may not be something you can do, so if in doubt check with your doctor. For most people fasting is not harmful and in fact can be beneficial to your health in getting rid of toxins that build up through eating the wrong things.

Fasting has been around a long time and it's a good thing if you can refrain from eating in front of someone who is on a fast! Especially in the animal kingdom: when I worked at Knowsley Safari Park in the 70's, I was sent to work in the lion enclosure for a day due to staff shortages. I chose to spend the day up in the tower in charge of the electronic gates. All day by myself was a relief when the others had to drive around in tractors, armed only with an air rifle.

It was a Monday and Mondays were fast days for the lions; to recreate a sense of their natural environment back in Africa and also it was good for their health or so the vet said. Boy, were they more active! Prowling around, snarling at each other, bad tempered and fighting with each other. Thankfully each other - and not with me.

Back in the day when Isaiah wrote chapter 58, it was for the people returning from exile. These were hard times; not only did they have to rebuild their economy from the ground up, it was a job to reclaim the land for farming and rebuild their city Jerusalem.

They did the same on their return in 1948. The difference to the land in Israel and the land that borders them is staggering. It is a testimony to the blessings of God and the hard work and ingenuity of the Jewish people, but I digress from back in the days of Isaiah.

Then, the people in their religious devotions, asked for God's blessings, they were in daily prayer and had an active program of fasting and praying (v3 "why have we fasted and you have not seen it?")

God's reply is the same today, yesterday and tomorrow. "I am not impressed with your religious behaviour unless you reach out to the needs of your community." (So, a little thanks here to our own endeavours; the Community Lunch, the Moses Project, Thornaby Food Bank, Sowing Seeds Ministries, PACTNE and many others that we support in one way or another). Back to God's reply; "If you do not

share your resources, your wealth, what good is your fasting and praying?"

Incidentally, at the time Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled, Jerusalem showed a huge gap between the haves and the have nots. The exiles having returned were not that well off but Isaiah tells them: do what you can, feed the hungry, clothe the poor, provide for the homeless.

Ecclesiastes 1.9; "What has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

Last Sunday in Emmanuel Church in Saltburn, I read this on an illustration of artwork.

"EVERY YEAR CONSUMERS IN RICH COUNTRIES WASTE ALMOST AS MUCH FOOD, 222 MILLION TONNES, AS THE ENTIRE NET FOOD PRODUCTION OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA. A TYPICAL FAMILY OF 4 WASTES £700 OF FOOD EACH YEAR. THE 88 MILLION TONNES OF FOOD WASTED IN EU COUNTRIES EVERY YEAR COULD FEED THE 55 MILLION PEOPLE IN FOOD POVERTY AROUND THE WORLD 9 TIMES OVER."

I can't corroborate these figures but we all know that our resources, our food is wasted on monumental scale.

Throughout the Bible, Old and New Testaments, there are stories of people who fasted to obtain favour from God or simply as acts of worship.

In the story of Esther, she followed Mordecai's example to fast and pray. Making sure all the Jews did the same, before she went before the King to plead for her people's lives. She knew going to the King without permission could mean death, but by trusting in God and following his commands, she not only saved herself but all her own people.

King David humbled himself by fasting and praying, Daniel, Ezra,

Nehemiah, all the main characters in the Old Testament did. They really went for it big style wearing sackcloth and ashes.

Anna was a prophetess who lived in the temple where she worshipped God day and night with prayer and fasting. She was quite old, a widow, she was 84! But diligence meant she was in the right place to meet her Lord and Saviour and was able to give thanks to God that she lived to see him.

In the New Testament we read that it continued; but not so much in sackcloth and ashes. I like that phrase: sackcloth and ashes! Jesus did, (I mean he fasted and prayed) he did it for 40 days but I wouldn't recommend you try that many days until you've done without a few meals/or days without substance. The most I have ever done is 3 days and that was a long time ago. I like to fast between 12 and 8 (pause) in the morning.

Jesus said "when you fast..." He didn't say "if!" So, it is a command.

In Matthew's account Jesus tells us: don't look glum, don't wear sackcloth and ashes, don't look like you're fasting in any way. Go around as you normally do. Be smart, clean, smile a lot and when you pray do it in secret too. Just pray whenever and however, it's between you and God with Jesus as your mediator. Then our Father will recognise our desires, our needs, when our spirit is in line with God's commands. He can reward us as we are not doing it for our own benefit.

That's the bit about fasting! Nobody does it for their own pleasure surely? So today, how does it feel for us, how do we respond to fasting? It's a tough call and I expect for many of us, fasting and praying together is not something we usually do. I don't see how we can fast on its own. To what purpose? Even the heathens do that to quote a saying. Well they do, don't they, people who give no thought or time to God almighty still fast if it suits their mind?

No, it must be that when we fast, we pray for those whom God shows us. Fasting is with a God given desire to please him, to make room in our lives so that we can acknowledge our dependency is not on the air that we breathe, nor the food that we eat. We depend on our father in heaven for our daily lives and he alone numbers our days on earth.

I trust that's made some sense and I would like to finish with a "today" story if I may. I can't confirm the various details together but I know in my own recollections that these matters took place.

Pre 2000, Ann and I were helping on the streets of Middlesbrough with Teen Challenge, serving soup to the homeless and the prostitutes. Helping them in any way we could and of course praying for them. Gram Seed, as many of you know, was a wreck at that time, living on the streets of Boro. In charge of Teen Challenge was Peter Conroy, father to Isaac who plays the organ with the choir. Another chap called Aidan was volunteering too, he told me quite separately that he was on a 40 day fast, drinking tomato juice before he went to South Africa with a church mission.

Gram was dying in hospital, his mother refused to let them switch off the life support machine. Peter and Aidan went into the hospital to pray for Gram. It's a long story of prayer, healing and salvation. Today Gram is alive, a husband, a father and the leader of Sowing Seeds Ministries as well as pastor of their church in Whinney Banks. All these details are true to my memory of them and because of them I believe there is power in prayer and fasting.

It aligns the Holy Spirit up with God's desire that none should perish. So, the question for us today is what are we going to do about it? In the words of Mordecai "who knows but that you are here, *for such a time as this.*

Anna the prophetess was ready, Esther made herself ready and Peter and Aidan were found to be ready. Are we ready for what might happen? That, only God knows.

Perhaps it is time to come together in fasting and prayer, acknowledging our own weaknesses, declaring that we will put our trust in the only one who knows the beginning from the end.

Amen. Let us pray.