**FASTING FOR GOD**

By G. Feller

For over a century and a half, fasting has fallen into disuse in the Western church history. How should we as Christians in this present 21st century think about fasting? Is it a tradition or a time and culture bound ritual or a Biblical assignment? What is the difference between hungering and fasting? Is fasting to be considered a form of asceticism, self-punishment, or a form of godliness (2. Tim.3:5)?

Or is it a means given to us by God to resist the pride of the human heart and to humble ourselves before God? (Ezra 8:21, Isa.58:3). In this article we want to search for one of the lost mysteries of the first churches, particularly the spiritual power that is released by the real Biblical practice of fasting for God.

**History**

Fasting seems to be as old as the history of humanity itself. When we study the history of different ancient nations and cultures, we encounter the use and the technique of fasting everywhere. For example, the ancient religious writings of Hinduism, such as in the Vedas, have already spoken about fasting. It has an ascetic meaning here, i.e. that the body must be suppressed, so that the spirit of man can step out of the body and can unite with the Brahman, the divine cosmic primal force.

In the Dharma Sutra one finds even strict rules for these ascetic practices. The Brahmins, members of the highest priest caste, were forbidden to e.g. drink alcohol, for otherwise they would later be reincarnated as worms, insects and pest. A nice prospect! (But not really!) Also in Buddhism (around 500 BC), asceticism plays a major role in the form of food abstention. This is despite the fact that Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), according to the traditions, later started to turn away from asceticism more and more and devoted himself more to meditation. Fasting gained meaning in the sense of spiritual purification, the triumph over the body and the unconditional submission of the physical. The most extreme forms of fasting in history is to be found in Jainism, an Indian religion that rejects the authority of the Vedas. The founder Mahavira (Great Hero) even taught his monks that one could achieve the most karma (“score” of good works to earn being a god) by ending his/her life with fasting! In Shintoism, the Japanese folk religion, we also find features of Jainism, amongst others in ‘the great cleansing ritual’.

**Islam**

Also the Islam religion requires of ‘the sincere Muslim’ to fast. In the Koran, different forms and periods of fasting are described. For example, the mandatory fasting (‘saum’) during the fasting month Ramadan. This begins each year ten days earlier than the previous year. There is then only fasting from sunrise to sunset. After sunset the Muslims eat a lot of food, which often causes them to gain more weight during the fasting period than outside the fasting period! After the fasting period the end takes place with the Sugar Feast. (Sugar, the new poison. Would this not be the reason that a striking number of diabetics is found among the Muslims?) Furthermore, fasting is used as a penance because of a wrong deed. There is also the recommended fasting on the so-called ‘white days’ (the 13th, 14th and 15th of each month). Although also the Koran mentions that fasting should lead to ‘a fear of God’, people also give spiritual value to fasting without the ‘mandatory prayers’.

**Eating behavior**

Also in the modern western (non-Christian) culture, fasting has become more and more important, particularly in alternative therapies. Many times, the spiritual aspects of fasting are not so much emphasized, but especially the physical impact on our health and our excessive eating habits. Apparently in contradiction to this, there is also a lack of variation of nutrients. Also many Christians eat too fast, too much, too fatty, too sweet and too heavy. Eating is in our culture often a surrogate for attention and love. From childhood, children are comforted with a candy. This is how children’s mouths are often stuffed too ‘lovingly’ with candy and chocolate. It lays a foundation for later in life, ‘to eat away’ all problems. Obesity, wrong eating and living habits form a cause for arthrosis, cardiovascular and metabolic disorders and, according to modern western insights, also cancer.

**How to fast according to the Bible?**

In the Bible we can distinguish three forms of fasting. We shall give an example of each form.

1. The first form of fasting regards the abstention from food, both solid and liquid foods, but not from water. Luke 4: 2: *“Jesus* *ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He was hungry.”* It is said that He ate nothing, not that He drank nothing. Then it is said that He was hungry, so not thirsty! In addition, Satan tempted Him with food, not with a drink, although thirst is much worse than hunger. All of this indicates a fasting that regards just the food. There is nothing to support the idea that real fasting also includes abstention from sleep. Perhaps the Lord will call on us one day to sacrifice one night sleep (2 Cor. 6:5, 11:27), abstention from sleep is not an essential part of fasting. From 1 Cor.7: 3-5, people think that they may conclude that fasting, as far as married couples are concerned, also includes abstention from sexual intercourse, but by mutual consent. Of course, this is not a law.
2. The second form of fasting is an absolute fast, i.e. abstention from both food and drink, including water. Usually, this never lasts longer than three days (longer than three days is harmful, if not fatal). After the encounter of Saul from Tarsus with the resurrected Christ, he couldn’t see for three days, and neither ate or drank (Acts 9:9). Also Ezra knew such a fasting of three days, as a way of mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles (Ezra 10:6; 9:3). Queen Esther asked of Mordechai: *“Fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day”* (Esther 4:16). In the Bible we also read about an absolute fasting, which carries more of a supernatural character, because it lasts that long. Moses spent twice for a period of forty days in the presence of God, without eating or drinking (Deu. 9:9,18, Exo. 34:28). Also Elijah’s fasting on his journey to Horeb can be considered a supernatural fasting: forty days and forty nights through the scorching wilderness without food (1 Kgs. 19:8). In general, Christians do not fast in such a way, unless Christ makes it clear to them in certain spiritual urgent situations, e.g. in cases of strong possession by evil spirits.
3. The partial fast. The emphasis here is on the *limitation* of food, in contrast to the full abstention. In Dan. 1:8, Daniel and his friends decided not to defile themselves with the royal food or wine from the king’s dish. Instead they asked permission to eat vegetables and to drink water. The result was that after some time their appearance looked healthier and better nourished than that of the other men who did eat the royal food (Dan. 1:15). Here, this was, just as with all other forms of Biblical fasting, accompanied by seeking God in this period, by an intensive prayer life. Also Elijah was trained in self-denial with simple food (cookies of wheat and oil) at the widow of Zarephath’s house (1 Kgs 17). Also Elijah’s equivalent in the New Testament, John the Baptist, was a man of much fasting, with just simple food, especially grasshoppers and wild honey.

The three forms mentioned, with regard to fasting, appear in the Bible both in personal lives and in public life, regularly and incidentally, often voluntarily, sometimes mandatory.

Fasting should not be an egoistic self-realization or a replacement of taking care of the poor. The prophet Isaiah spoke about it already: *“Is it a fast like this that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? ………. Is it not to break your bread with the hungry? And bring the homeless poor into the house. When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn”* (Isa 58: 5-8a)

**Digital fasting**

A modern form of fasting is the digital fast. Research shows that on average we look at our smartphone 88 times a day. In total, that's equivalent to two and a half hour a day! That’s two and a half hours that we don’t spend on things that are really important to us. Additionally, due to the constant interruptions of our smartphones, we barely have moments of relaxation and reflection (unless we play a game on our smartphones to relax). It’s time for us to do something about that. Because attention, relaxation and reflection contribute to a happy life. And your smartphone does not. One of the possibilities is for example not watching television, not using the internet or to stop with for example Facebook, Instagram, Word Feud or mail on your telephone. A ‘Digital Sabbath’, which implies that you’re ‘unplugged’ for 24 hours.

**Intention and motivation**

When our Savior speaks about giving, praying and fasting, He warns His audience that it is meaningless to show godliness to men (Matt. 6:1-18). In verse 16 it’s stated: “Whenever you fast”. From this it appears also that the Lord Jesus doesn’t compel fasting as a law, but He assumes that fasting is a habit in which we experience His guidance. During His walk with His disciples, nowhere does it appear that they intentionally set aside time for fasting. This is also brought up in Matt 9:14-17.

The Lord Jesus responds in verse 15b: “*But the days will come when the groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”* Of course this is not a fasting of legalism and asceticism, as it was often the practice of fasting in the old dispensation.

His disciples would fast again with other motives and with another spirit than the Pharisees did and even differently than John the Baptist did.

Jesus explained this by saying that the old wine skins of Judaism were not suitable for putting the new wine in of the Spirit.

The time is *now*! In the first churches these prophetic words of the Lord Jesus were fulfilled and also thereafter many godly men and women have fasted in the history of the church. Unfortunately, presently there are just few who do. Fasting has become more an exception than a rule, which is very much to the detriment of the Church of Jesus Christ. Zechariah 7:5 reads: *“When you fasted …., was it actually for Me that you fasted?”* Many believers ask themselves in the spirit of the current time: What do *I* gain, and they fast only for the physical benefits: because of the stimulation of a good health or healing (see the below-mentioned). But our motivation to fast must not be self-centered, but Christ-centered! Jesus spoke about this motivation. Something that’s good in itself, can become worthless in God’s sight when it’s been done out of wrong motives (see Isa. 58:3-6)

Fasting was, despite all exhibition of godliness, motivated by self-interest and selfishness. No wonder that God indignantly asked: *“Was it actually for Me that you fasted?”* (cf. Zech.7:5) None of this exempts us from our responsibility. We must be prepared to accept the self-discipline and self-examination, but the ultimate initiative lies with Christ. Often the regular fasting is even applicable. Of course we should never become a slave to a rule (Gal. 5:18).

When Joel cried out: *“Consecrate a fast”* (Joel 1:14), he meant: reserve that day for God. This is the first requirement, if our fasting is acceptable to Him. Then we no longer think about own benefit, but we lose ourselves in worship, love and praise when we fast for God. This is how the leaders of the church in Antioch were fasting in the service of the Lord (Acts 13:2). See also the prophetess Anna in Luke 2:37. If we serve Him with this motivation, this will bring, as a kind of heavenly bonus, a great blessing to ourselves, because God sees the hidden things and has pleasure in rewarding us openly.

**Biblical intentions to fast**

**Personal sanctification**

*“When I wept in my soul with fasting”* (Ps.69:10). Humbleness is often the main component of true holiness. Therefore, it can be meaningful, like David, to humble ourselves in fasting from time to time. For the religious Israelite, fasting meant to humble yourself, but also often mourning (Ezra 8:21, Isa. 58:3, 1 Sam. 7:6, Neh. 9:1,2).

Also as a preparation for a certain assignment, fasting and personal sanctification can be very Biblical. Examples are the forty days fast of the Lord Jesus and the separation of Barnabas and Paul for their apostolic ministry (Acts 13:3).

The first missionaries were not bid farewell with a cup of coffee and cake, but the consecration service was accompanied by fasting. Later we see that the same people appointed elders in each church with praying and fasting (Acts 14:23).

**Hearing God’s voice**

*“So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our pleading.”* (Ezra 8:23). See also Joel 2:12. Andrew Murray comments on this as follows: Fasting helps us to express our decision to put everything on the altar; it deepens and confirms our devotion, so that we surrender ourselves completely, in order to achieve that which we seek for the Kingdom of God.

**Making God change His mind**

*“Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast …**When God saw their deeds that they turned from their evil way, then God relented of the disaster which He had declared He would bring on them.”* (Jonah 3:5,10). This seemed to be a theological problem, after all, God is unchangeable, infallible, isn't He?! (Mal. 3:6). It seems that Jonah’s announcement of the coming judgment was attached to a condition, although it was not clearly revealed to Jonah himself and he also did not preach that to the people of Nineveh (Jer. 18:7,8, 1 Kgs 21:27-29, Joel 2:12-14). The largest city of the world, at that time the capital of the powerful Assyrian kingdom with approximately 200,000 people, went on a fast in repentance. And God saw it and saved this city.

**Liberating prisoners**

“*Is this not the fast that I choose: To release the bonds of wickedness, To undo the ropes of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free, And break every yoke?”* (Isa. 58:6). Fasting is not putting a yoke on someone’s shoulder (Isa.58:3, Matt.23:4), but the contrary. Making the captives free is the ministry of Jesus Christ (Lk 4:18,19). One of the commands in Mk 16:17 was: *“In My name they will cast out demons”.*

Is our compassion strong enough to fast and pray for their freedom? (The Lord Jesus points this out in Matt. 17:21).

**Revelation**

*“I, Daniel, gave my attention to the Lord God, to seek Him by prayer and pleading …**While I was still speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel …. Came to me … And he instructed me and talked with me and said, “Daniel, I have come now to give you (the) insight with understanding””* (Dan. 9:2,3,21,22). One of the results of Daniel’s fast was, that God gave him knowledge and understanding of all kinds of writings and wisdom. Fasting became a discipline in the life of Daniel (Dan. 9:2 en3; 10:1-3) He was one of the greatest, with regard to receiving the revelations from God (cf. Acts 27:21-24).

**Disciplining the body**

It is said that with a man, the way to win his love is through his stomach. Biblically, that’s also with a woman (Gen.3:6). Although the temptation in paradise was mainly curiosity, it had also to do with food, through which the Fall became a fact (cf. Gen. 9:20,21; Gen. 25:28; Exo. 16:3; Num. 11:4,5; 21:5; 1 Sam. 2:29; Ps. 78:29-31; Ps. 106:15; 1 Cor. 11:20-22; 1. Cor. 10:6,7; Heb. 12:16,17;). God, however, sent the “Second Adam”. He was able to resist an attack of the same tempter. This time not in the perfect Garden of Eden, but in a desolate wilderness, tortured by an intense hunger after a long fasting period. He resisted the temptation of the devil gloriously: *“It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God”* (Matt.4:3-11). For the return of the Lord Jesus will be just like the days of Noah. Let the people not be unprepared (Matt. 24:37,38; Luke 12:45,46; 21:34). Paul says in 1 Cor.9:27: “*I strictly discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified”* (it is not about how to enter into heaven here, but about winning ‘a crown’).

He who is not able to control his appetite by the power of God, often has a lack of self-discipline, which is not a character of discipleship. Also the link between excessive eating and stimulating sexual lusts is a generally recognized fact (Deu. 32:15,16; 1 Cor. 7:5; Rom. 13:14; Tit. 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:11).

**Self-discipline**

The thought of self-discipline is not based on the Biblical fasting. Wesley put it into words like this: “The reason why the Methodists generally do not experience what they confess, is that they sleep too much, eat and drink too much, fast too little and deny themselves too little, they have too much dealing with the world, preach and listen too much and they pray and examine themselves too little”.

**Biblical fasting is not asceticism**

Colossians 2 verse 20-23 is often used by many evangelical Christians so that they don’t need to fast. Some clear points, in which fasting differs from legalism and asceticism are:

a) Asceticism is a periodical, imposed from above, abstention from the satisfaction of normal physical needs.

b) Asceticism is taking distance from all material comfort, to even self-flagellation, whereby one deliberately inflicts himself with physical pain e.g. by the means of a belt with spikes These things are known in many primitive religions, such as with the Eskimos in Alaska and the Maoris. Also Hinduism the Fakirs and the naked ascetics are known (this is all the work of Satan, a false doctrine, an imitation).

c) With asceticism people think to ransom themselves by penance. It’s a form of self-redemption.

d) With asceticism people believe that the body is bad and that they should torture it in order to redeem the soul.

Self-control is however a fruit of the Holy Spirit, that sprouts from the divine life in us by faith in Jesus Christ and is therefore a habit of a disciplined life.

Fasting is allowed and should not become a torture, for then the point of fasting is missing. With fasting, it’s about setting our own desires aside temporarily out of love for the Lord, in order to strengthen and deepen our relationship with Him, or because of intercession for someone in need. Purity of motive is very important.

**Physical reactions**

Read for orientation 1 Corinthians 6:13-20. A normally healthy and well-nourished body can stay alive without suffering disadvantageous consequences of fasting.

During a long period of fasting, the body starts to thrive on excessive fat and at the same time it functions as an internal combustion furnace, into which all unnecessary and decaying tissues are burned up. Only when this purifying process has been completed, the body starts to digest its healthy living cells and then only one starts to hunger. In some cases this happens from the 21st day, but more often only from the 40th day (cf. Matt. 4:2 - "*And after He had fasted for forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry*. ").

We distinguish three stages:

1. The first stage lasts a couple of days, in which there is still a desire for food. When this has passed, the thought of eating is indeed pleasant, but a real desire or strong temptation is no longer there.
2. The second stage is characterized by feebleness and weakness and may last 2 or 3 days. In this stage a special willpower seems to be needed for each movement.
3. In the third and easiest stage one experiences an increasing (spiritual/inner?) power, when he little or no longer cares about food. Then only (sometimes with 21 days, sometimes only after 40 days) the hunger stage mentioned, comes.

Of course it is important to drink well during the whole period. At the beginning, the fasting and the drinking work as an important stimulus on the organic functioning.

During the first two days, the body reverts to its carbohydrate reserves. Under the influence of the vegetative nervous system, the body now slowly adjusts to the reduced energy supply and switches to "the economy burner’. That’s also the reason why at the beginning the kilos disappear quite faster. Stored fat and protein now deliver the required calories. The body makes itself felt (or fed?) from the inside. With the breakdown of the supplies, acids are released that are secreted via the kidneys, colons and the skin. Then the feeling of hunger disappears. Especially the liver and the kidneys are heavily burdened during a fast (what’s the cause of it? Because of the extra acids??) They change certain resources, purify them and make the organ systems continue to work, despite the decreased supply of energy.

Sometimes enemas (colon cleansings) are recommended, because the intestinal movement has stopped. Prefer not to use laxatives. The ‘detoxification’ of the body is the focus during the intermittent fast, because the old storages form the cause of many diseases, such as the metabolic diseases, liver diseases and sometimes even cancer. When the fat tissue is broken down, toxins are released, which end up in the blood circle and at first overflow the body.

With regard to chronical and unstable patients, it is strongly recommended that they fast under the supervision of a physician/pastor (or e.g. in a clinic). Due to the increase of metabolic products in the blood, the biological acid-base balance has shifted somewhat. This may include some headache. Because the body temperature also goes down, someone who is fasting is often cold.

At the same time, due to the fast the metabolism decreases. Additionally, the glands with internal secretion start to work more slowly. Fasting also has a cleansing and rejuvenating effect on the connective tissue, in which harmful substances have been discharged. Therefore fasting has a much more drastic effect on the body than a hot bath or a massage treatment. It produces a strong stimulus on the vegetative nervous system and the hormonal system. Finally, the resistance and detoxification system of the body is activated, and it comes to the psychic transition of the third stage, in which someone feels also physically better, and has more energy and impetus.

**Those who should *not* fast:**

1. Children (without medical support)
2. Chronical patients and unstable people without support of a physician or pastor.
3. People with an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism) e.g. Basedow disease.
4. People with tuberculosis, cancer, leukemia in particular, whether under the control of a physician or pastor.
5. People with diabetes.
6. In case of doubt, consult your physician!

Note: Periodic fasting has the danger that, because of the strong feeling of hunger, people suddenly can get many eating binges, which is counterproductive to the health.

**The ending of the fast**

*“They gave him bread and he ate, and they provided him water to drink. They also gave him a slice of fig cake and two cakes of raisins, and he ate; then his spirit revived. For he had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and three nights.”* (1 Sam. 30:11,12).
As mentioned earlier, there are different options regarding the duration of fasting. Also the quantity of physical labor has a role in this. It varies from some days to about 40 days. After a longer period of fasting, of course a calm build-up of the eating pattern should take place again. At the beginning, it’s best to start again with eating (citrus) fruits and vegetable juices. Sometimes in the days of building-up, you can feel full and bloated. After a fast you often gain 1.5 kg and it is normal that the first stool only comes after 3 or 4 days.

After a longer fast of more than 20 days, one should normally be back on the normal eating pattern within a week. If you have agreed together with God on a certain length of fasting, don’t let yourself be tempted to stop earlier, whether by encouragement, difficulties or discouragement.

The Bible mentions a tragic incident of a prophet who was given an important assignment by God and had to fast. But the enemy enticed him, so that he broke the fasting prematurely, with all the fatal consequences of it **(1Kgs 13)**

It’s quite possible that you, after a period of fasting, have a greater boldness with praying than before. It’s often a fruit from the time that you have spent with Christ.

For both your soul and body it can be the dawning of a ‘spring time’. You can just like the Lord, return from the wilderness of fasting, “in the power of the Spirit” with the expectation that the works of God and the merciful gifts of Christ will be revealed in you, like in Him.

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