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### **FASTING – A NEGLECTED DISCIPLINE?**

By George Curry

#### **What is Fasting?**

The Bible gives two straightforward answers to this question. Firstly, fasting is a going without food, or food and drink, for a period of time. The length of time may vary. Sometimes the period of fasting is not specified, as was the case with Daniel (chapter 9). On other occasions it is. In the days of Esther, for example, the people of God in Susa fasted for three days. David appears to have fasted for seven days until the death of the child to him and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12) whilst Jesus, the gospel writers tells us, fasted for forty days and nights. The second thing we should note about fasting is that it is a going without food for a reason. In the Bible fasting is associated with either expressions of deep sorrow or with the earnest seeking of God's face. Examples of the former are found in Judges 20 v26; 1 Samuel 7 v6; 31 v13; 2 Samuel 12 v16 and Esther 4 v3; whilst Daniel (9 v3), Jesus (Matthew 4 v2) and Paul (Acts 13 v3 and 14 v23) represent examples of the latter. It is important that we understand that fasting is never presented as an end in itself in the Bible. It is, as the examples above illustrate, always a means to an end. It is an expression of the depth of our sorrow before God, or of sincerity in seeking His face.

#### **Who should Fast?**

The answer the Bible gives to this question is, all who feel moved to do so. Fasting may, as we have seen, be appropriate in certain circumstances, but we are under no obligation to fast at any time. Even if a fast is suggested or called, for no man can be compelled to fast. Fasting, according to Scripture, is always voluntary and free. Each person has the liberty to decide for himself whether and when to fast. However, we need to bear in mind that Jesus expected his disciples to fast from time to time. This we discover in both the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6 v16ff) and from his reply to the Pharisees when questioned on this subject (Luke 5 v33ff). Jesus clearly envisaged a time when his followers would fast. So sure was he of this that he taught them not to follow the bad example of the religious people of their day. The scribes and Pharisees were somewhat mechanical and hypocritical. They had rules telling them when to fast and they made a point of being seen by all and sundry. Such unspiritual and exhibitionist behaviour Jesus condemned. His concern was not to discourage fasting but to encourage a right attitude and practice of it. It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that many godly people, in every generation, have set aside times of prayer with fasting. This is true of Paul, of Whitefield and Wesley, of the Westminster divines and Carey, and of Pastor Hsi of China.

#### **Why Fast?**

Why did the Council of Church Society meet for prayer with fasting on 25 March this year? Firstly, because of the state of the nation. Our nation is far from God. We live in a secular society that cares little for our Christian heritage or God's Law. Everyone does what is right in his own eyes. The fact that the current abortion, capital punishment, divorce and homosexuality laws are contrary to God's Word is of no concern except to a few. Blasphemy and unbelief are rife. Secondly, because of the state of the Church of England. The Bishops seem reluctant to affirm the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. Discipline is almost non-existent, heresy and homosexuality are winked at, the Articles ignored and error enshrined in the A. S. B. The Church is weak; she lacks power and is in desperate need of revival and reformation. Thirdly, because of the state of Christians. We are not the people we should be. Prayerlessness and faithlessness are the prevailing sins of our generation. We don't expect great things from God, nor do we attempt great things for him. We lack assurance and boldness. And, the experience of his love, joy and peace within is shallow. The need of the hour is a mighty revival of true evangelical theology and piety.

**Prayer with Fasting**

It was for these reasons that a time of prayer with fasting was held. We wish to see God's Church and people prosper. We wish to see the Gospel triumph, the strongholds of Satan broken down, and thousands born again of God's Spirit. We wish to see the Church revived. And, we wish to see Church Society doing all it possibly can to encourage a return to the theology of the Bible and our Anglican forefathers. It is our belief that all who share these concerns will likewise seriously consider prayer with fasting.

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