

Classic Christian Writings:

Fasting is the abstention from food for a period of time. Various forms of fasts are possible. First of all, there is what I call the absolute fast. The absolute fast is one in which the person fasting eats no food whatsoever and drinks no water for a certain length of time. Moses underwent two absolute fasts for forty days each. During that time he neither ate food nor drank water. His were supernatural fasts spent in the immediate presence of God.

Although I know people who have had absolute fasts of up to fifteen days, I do not advise anyone to go on absolute fasts of more than ninety-six hours. It is risky and I do not think that the risk is necessary.

There is also what we call the complete or total fast. This is the withdrawal from all food and all drink except water. In a complete fast, a person drinks water and water only. No juices, tea, milk, or anything else is allowed. This is most likely what the Lord Jesus underwent for forty days, for we are told that after the fast He was hungry, but we are not told that He was thirsty. I consider this the normal fast--nothing taken in but water.

There is also what may be called the partial fast. There are many forms of this. One common type is to take one meal every twenty-four hours. The one meal should be light and not the size of three meals, which would be gluttony. Another type of partial fast is to live for some days or weeks only on fruit juice or milk. Another type of partial fast is the one described by Daniel. He said:

“In those days I, Daniel was mourning for three weeks. I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks” (Daniel 10:2,3).

Some brethren have had a partial fast during which they ate only bread and drank only water for a period of three weeks. They were blessed.

As we have said, the normal practice is to abstain completely from food, that is, a complete fast. The spiritual benefits are greater. I have never had an absolute fast of more than seventy-two hours, and so I cannot say much about absolute fasts from personal experience. I have some experience of long and short complete fasts and of a number of three-week partial fasts. Partial fasts are only recommended for people who have health problems that prevent them from undergoing complete fasts. A case for partial fasts may be made for people in job situations that make long complete fasts impossible.

A definite advantage of a partial fast of, say, three weeks is that one is strong enough to do the normal duties of life. I remember one time when I had a three-week partial fast during which I had only bread and tea. I was strong enough to work fifteen to eighteen hours a day on the book I was writing at that time.

If your experience of fasting has been limited to partial fasts, then this is the time to make progress. Stop going on partial fasts and begin to go on complete ones. Maybe you ought to start next week. You may begin with a forty-eight-hour complete fast and two weeks afterwards go on a seventy-two-hour complete fast. You will see the impact of that fasting on your spiritual life and be glad.

There was a time during which I backslid in my fasting life. I stopped complete fasts and only took to partial fasts. I gave the excuse that it was because I was too busy with other aspects of the ministry.

When I realized that I had backslidden, I repented and decided to go back to normal fasting. It was difficult. I even found a seventy-two-hour complete fast very difficult, and a couple of times I broke a fast that I intended to go on for seventy-two hours after only forty-two hours. I cried to the Lord for mercy and help. He heard my prayer and healed my backsliding. I was then able to fast normally again.

Fasting is not only abstention from food. It is concentration on the Lord, His holiness, His Kingdom, and His will. Normally, when a person is full of food, the desires of the physical body are very strong as well as the desires of the soul--that is, the will, the mind and the emotions. During fasting the desires of the body are greatly reduced and the spirit rises and soars, controlling the soul.

This means that spiritual reality is more easily discerned by a fasting person than by one who is not fasting. At the height of a long fast, which may be between the twenty-fifth and the fortieth day, the things of this world become absolutely meaningless.

For example, I found that the following were absolutely meaningless to me during such a period: my looks, my educational qualifications, my job, money, clothes, property, the presence of human beings (in fact, each one had a detestable odor), any accomplishment in the world, etc.

On the other hand, God was near and thoughts of heaven possessed me. I was anxious to walk in perfect holiness. I wanted to obey the Lord in everything. I wanted His companionship. I wanted to hear His voice. Although I did not have much strength to pray, I felt that I was in direct communion with my God and my short prayers that were uttered as short phrases throughout the day and night seemed to go right to the heart of God. As I read the Word, God seemed to speak more clearly and spiritual illumination was received readily.

Fasting brings spiritual power. When those who are unsaved fast, they release spiritual power that is of the enemy's kingdom and that goes to strengthen it. That is one reason why it is impossible for believers who are given to food and pleasure to make any headway in the winning of Muslims and Buddhists to Christ. The reason for this is obvious. Because these people fast extensively and pray extensively, they release a lot of spiritual power that insulates their spirits from penetration by the Gospel. Penetration is only possible when ministry to them is carried out by people who also have spiritual power released through fasting in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Fasting is also a form of mourning. It is mourning because the Lord Jesus is away and the believer misses him and wants him back. It is mourning because of the believer's poor spiritual condition when God has given him so much in Christ. It is mourning because of the worldly condition of the church and her impotence against the enemy. It is mourning over the multitudes that are passing into a Christless eternity.

Fasting is a heart's cry to God to act. He does act when people fast. You are invited to the ministry of fasting. You can actually begin tomorrow. Do not postpone it. Start at once and may the Lord bless you.

How to Fast

There never was a question in the mind of the Lord Jesus about the importance of fasting. He demonstrated His evaluation of the ministry of fasting by His own forty-day fast. He, however, taught very clearly how to fast. He taught saying,

“And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:16-18).

The Lord Jesus said “when you fast” and not “if your fast.” He took for granted that all who are His would fast. He addressed Himself to three important questions about fasting.

The first question was: how should a person look during a fast? In answering this question, the Lord divided those who fasted into two classes, viz., the hypocrites and His children. It is interesting to know that in all religions people fast. Fasting is therefore not automatically an evidence of genuine spirituality. There are unbelievers who fast: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. They fast for varying reasons.

The Lord had in mind a class of people, the Pharisees. When they fasted, they disfigured their faces. They made sure that their looks were different. They were not satisfied with the natural impact that fasting produced on the body. They were afraid that that might not serve their purpose.

The Lord said that those who were His were to be different. They were not to look dismal. They were to wash and anoint their faces. In other words, their external appearance was to be given special attention so that it did not draw attention to their fasting.

The same lesson is applicable today. Believers who fast must pay special attention to their physical appearance. They should be clean. They should wear clean clothes. They should bathe at least once a day. They should brush their teeth once every two hours. Fasting people have a special mouth odor. They cannot afford to burden other people with it.

The second question was: who should see the fast? Here again there were two different attitudes--that of the hypocrites and that of those who belonged to the Lord. The hypocrites fasted in order to catch the eye of man. They therefore did everything to ensure that man would not mistake the fact that they were fasting. That

is why they disfigured their faces. The aim of their fasting was that they might be seen by men.

They fasted to impress men. Their preoccupation during the fast was, Have people seen that I am fasting? Have they seen how long I have fasted? Who has actually seen that I am fasting? They possibly thought of the various people whom they wanted to impress and made sure that somehow those people knew.

Those who belong to Jesus are to fast not to catch the eye of man, but the eye of God. They are to fast so that their fasting is seen by their Father Who is in heaven! Can you see the enormous difference between fasting to be seen by man and fasting to be seen by the Lord? How foolish to fast in order to be seen by man! Yet these people fasted for that purpose and many today fast to be seen by man.

The third question was: who rewards the fasting person? The Lord Jesus taught clearly that the rewarder of the fasting person is the one whose eye the fasting person wanted to catch. The hypocrite fasted to catch the eye of man. So man is the rewarder of the fasting hypocrite. Anyone who fasts in order to be seen by man is a hypocrite! He receives his rewards from the people who see his fast and sing his praise.

Those who are Christ's fast so as to be seen by their Father, Who is in secret. He is not to be seen with human eyes. He is in secret and He sees all that goes on in secret. Those who fast for His glory labor to ensure that their fasting is seen only by Him. They want to catch His eye, and they want His reward.

The hypocrite's fast is rewarded by the congratulations and the admiration of men. The fasting of those who are truly the Lord's is rewarded by the One Who sees in secret. The hypocrite has already obtained his reward. He received it when people looked at his disfigured face and exclaimed, "What a fasting man!" The reward of the one who fasts in secret is in the future essentially, even though he may have some of it now.

The Reason For Fasting

There are many reasons why believers fast. Some fast in order to mourn the Lord Jesus' absence. Others fast to move God's hand. Others fast as a part of their seeking after God, and so forth. There is, however, a reason for fasting that has nothing to do with the current age or getting things from God now but has to do with the age to come. When the Lord comes He will reward His servants according to their works. The books shall be opened.

There shall be the book of prayer, the book of giving to the Lord, the book of self-denial, the book of fasting, the book of obedience, etc., and believers shall be rewarded according to what has been recorded in those books.

My dear brother and sister, the book of fasting shall be opened. What is recorded in that book against your name? Is there anything at all? Are there only partial fasts? Are there only a few complete fasts? Are there any absolute fasts? Are there any long fasts? Are there any fasts that satisfy the heart of God? It is possible to know now so that no one will be surprised on that day.

There will be no reward for any fast by any believer that was carried out to draw attention to himself. God does not record such fasts, since the fasting person has already received his reward from the one whose attention he drew to his fasting. This should make believers think.

There will be no reward for any fast by any believer that was carried out to draw both the attention of God and the attention of man. That is a mixture, a mess, and God cannot be involved in mixtures. Those who fast to be seen both by man and by God have lost out as far as Judgment Day is concerned.

There will be rewards only for those who fasts were meant to catch the eye of God alone.

What does this all mean? I think that the first thing that it means is that any reward that may be received now, like power for service, divine visitation, etc., is only a foretaste of what will be in the future. The central issue will be the reward by the One Who sees in secret. Those who may not receive any visible reward for their fasting in time need not be discouraged. The Lord is keeping their reward for Judgment Day.

I know of a brother who fasted for three weeks in order to receive spiritual power to perform signs and wonders. Many months after the fast, there was no obvious manifestation of the power to perform miracles in his life and he was disappointed. He felt that his fast had been in vain and the Lord had disappointed him. There are two things that he ought to have noted.

First of all, there is no direct promise in the Bible that says that any believer can receive the power to perform signs and wonders through fasting for twenty-one days. The Lord is not under obligation to satisfy the desires of human hearts. He is under obligation to His will and His Word and no more.

Second, it is most likely that the Lord really valued this brother's fast, accepted it, and recorded it against his name in the book of fasting and that he will receive a reward for it on Judgment Day. So fasting believers should continue to fast whether or not they see any results of their fasting now. That requires faith and the people of God are called to walk by faith and not by sight.

Can you think of the amount of faith that it must have taken for Anna to keep on fasting for about sixty years so that the Messiah might come? Yes, she pressed on and in the fullness of time He came. She could have given up, but she did not. May you too not give up. We encourage you to keep on fasting and trust that the Lord Who is in secret is seeing you and will reward you.

To Tell Or Not To Tell

The Lord taught about the secrecy of fasting. He taught that the fast was to be carried out in such a way that it caught only the eye of God. It is important to realize that God does not look only at the heart. He looks at the motives. It is possible that a person carried out a fast about which he does not tell people but his motives for the fast are not pure.

If, for example, he says to himself, "I am fasting. I will keep it to myself so that when God gives me supernatural power, everyone will be amazed," then he has gone wrong altogether. He has received his reward.

Another person may let people know about his fast not because he wants to be seen by them but for one or more of the following reasons:

1. He feels that he is weak and cannot complete the fast without the prayers of the brethren. He therefore announces his fast to them so as to solicit their prayers.
2. He may be a leader who is setting an example in fasting for those he is leading so that they may do likewise. He therefore tells them not because he wants them to "see" him but because he desires their growth in this area.
3. He may have a major battle before him and wants people who will fast with him for the overthrow of the enemy. He must therefore tell them about his fast and solicit their cooperation.
4. He may want to demonstrate to young believers that God does honor fasting, that fasting is not something that has outlived its usefulness, and that they should commit themselves to a life of fasting. In doing this he might have to share how it has worked in his own life. He can therefore talk about his experience in fasting without seeking to draw attention to himself or to his record in fasting.
5. There are some practical things that a person who is to carry out long fasts must know. No one is qualified to help people along these lines without personal experience. There is no substitute for someone who can say, "These are the problems that you will encounter on the way. I know them because I faced them. However, do not give up. The Lord stood with me, and He will stand with you." A person can do this without seeking to draw attention to himself.

We know about the forty-day fast of the Lord Jesus because He told the disciples about it. Yet He did not become a hypocrite because of that. Moses told the children of Israel about his forty-day fasts, yet he did not become a hypocrite because of that. Paul talked about his frequent fasts, yet he did not become a hypocrite because of that.

It is obvious, then, that the Lord is looking at the heart and the motive. Different people may talk about the same thing, but their motives are different. We should not become the judges of the motives of people for doing or saying things. We must leave that to the Lord. The Apostle Paul wrote:

"Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God, for it is written, 'As I live says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,

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and every tongue shall give praise to God.Â’ So each of us shall give account of himself to GodÂ” (Romans 14:10-12).

Paul also wrote, Â“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from GodÂ” (2 Corinthians 4:3-5).

It is your responsibility to decide whether or not to tell anyone about your fast. You know your heart and you know your reason for telling or not telling anyone. Make sure that the reason meets the approval of the Lord, and you shall be blessed.