

# PRAYER AND FASTING

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I'm sure that by now many of us will have come across the spiritual practice of fasting. We have either heard of it or made it a practice of our own at one point or another in our lives as believers. This short article is meant to help us understand what fasting is, how to do it well, and why it is necessary and even helpful in this season we are currently experiencing. Given the fact that it seems America is at a time of national crisis and upheaval with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>, and a tumultuous political landscape with the upcoming election, it seems appropriate for the church leadership to call the believers who attend GCC to fast and pray. The nation is at another turning point as people go to the polls next week, and we all feel personally in various ways what is at stake nationally.

## FASTING AND THE BIBLE

The Bible is full of examples of fasting. The Hebrew word for the practice literally means to abstain partially or wholly from food and drink, often for the length of a day. In the Old Testament we find God's people coming together for prayer and fasting when faced with imminent disaster<sup>2</sup>, or as they confess their sin to God<sup>3</sup>. The prophets also denounce fasting when practiced as a religious exercise without any attitude of sorrow for sin or concrete acts of justice and mercy towards the oppressed.<sup>4</sup> This teaches us that it is not the outward act that matters most, but the attitude of the heart. The practice and attitude of fasting is found in the New Testament as well, as Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for having the form of godliness without its heart.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most shocking example of fasting is the parable in Luke 18:9-14, where the Pharisee fasts yet goes home unforgiven, but the tax-collector does not fast, yet goes home justified before God. Both these instances show us that fasting without obedience to God is essentially useless. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, put it this way, "Don't just fast with your mouth, but also with your eyes, and your ears, and your feet, and your hands, and all the members of your body." Time and again the people of God are told that fasting and prayer without doing concrete acts of righteousness and justice misses the point.<sup>6</sup>

## A THEOLOGY OF FASTING

What can we draw from all this? Namely that prayer and fasting are most often used in the contexts of **repentance** and **seeking guidance**. These two could be grouped under the

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<sup>1</sup> As of October 2020, the death toll stands at 227 thousand (1.17m globally), not to mention the damage restrictions and shutdowns brought on by the pandemic have done to the economy and education system.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Chron. 20:1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Neh. 9:1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Isa. 58:3-7; Joel 2:12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 6:16-18.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular James 1:27.

heading of **dependence**. When we fast, we declare our need for God's provision, not just of basic material things like food and water, but also of wisdom to know what to do, or forgiveness for corporate sin. Unfortunately, we tend to think of sin as a purely private matter between the individual and God, but the overwhelming evidence in the Bible is that individuals are woven into the whole fabric of the human society. Not only this, but our individual holiness and obedience (or lack thereof) has a bearing on the church, because we are a part of the whole, an organ of the body. If the body is out of joint, repentance (turning *ruthlessly* away from our sin and *relentlessly* towards God's grace) with prayer and fasting is the uncomfortable process that will re-set what is disjointed with God's help. A great prayer of the Bible to use as a springboard into confession is Daniel 9:3-19. You could also use the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20, the Great Commands from Deuteronomy 6, or adapt prayers of repentance from *the Valley of Vision*.<sup>7</sup> The key is not to do this mechanically, but to let the words penetrate your heart.

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

So, to that end, would you join us in a dedicated day of prayer and fasting **this Sunday, November 1<sup>st</sup>** as we cry out in repentance to the Lord for mercy, forgiveness, and renewal? This is not to display support for either candidate or party, but to humble ourselves as God's people have done for thousands of years, seeking his forgiveness for our negligence in letting sin run unchecked in our hearts, in the church, and in the nation. It is also a declaration of our dependence on God as we despair over the evil we see internally and all around us yet struggle to have the power to change. But in this act of repentance we must remember to whom we are turning in our repentance (of which fasting plays a part). We turn away from sin to the God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and sin..." (Exod. 34:6-7).

For the fast you could choose to undergo a 24hr period with nothing but water, or juice, or you could skip a significant meal during the day. Over the period of fasting, why not substitute the time you would be eating (or whatever it is you choose to abstain from) in prayer for the nation and self-examination instead? One last thing to be aware of is that everyone can participate. Not everyone may be able to fast from food because of health restrictions (pregnant women and diabetics for example), but everyone can give up something in order to focus on God (e.g. abstaining from social media or your news feed for 24 hours could also be an effective way of joining us in the fast). Prayer and fasting is one of the major ways we can express the unity we have been talking so much about these past weeks. We are one in our need for repentance and God's grace. May God look upon us with favor and have mercy on us for Jesus' sake.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://banneroftruth.org/us/devotional-series/the-valley-of-vision-devotional/> (see in particular "A disciple's renewal")