

Fasting in the Lord

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Isaiah 58:6-9

As an individual begins their walk with the Lord and seeks to draw nearer unto Him there are three important means in which they can press firmly into truth, namely, through studying the Scriptures, through prayer, and through fasting. For through study we learn of God, through prayer we commune with God, and through fasting we come to know God and rejoice in Him. These three principles are not merely good habits of behavior, but they are the keys to the Spirit of Revelation and the Spirit of Prophecy.¹ In more plain terms, these principles are the foundation to which we build our relationship with God that we might *know* Him, the only true and living God, and Jesus Christ whom He has sent.²

While most individuals understand to some degree how to study and pray, fasting is often misunderstood. According to the 1828 Webster's Dictionary, there are many definitions for the term fasting. The traditional definition of the word fast is, "to abstain from food, beyond the usual time; to omit to take the usual meals, for a time; as, to fast a day or a week; to abstain from food voluntarily, for the mortification of the body or appetites, or as a token of grief, sorrow and affliction." However, the Scriptures explain that there is more to fasting than simply going without.

The Traditional View of Fasting

According to some scholars, the traditional concept of fasting, or in other words abstaining from food, first originated with the Egyptians as a way of mourning their dead. Interestingly, the Scriptures support this idea as well, as neither the Bible, the Book of Mormon, nor the Doctrine and Covenants give an example of fasting before the children of Israel were brought out of the land of Egypt. Moreover, some of the first instances in which we read of the children of Israel fasting, describe their fast as being very similar to the Egyptians, meaning that it was a period to go without food and to mourn either the dead or the afflicted.³

¹ Read Alma 12:1-5

² John 17:3

³ Information provided by Elders Argel and Chet Reynolds

In the twentieth chapter of the book of Judges, the children of Israel rose up with their swords to fight against their brethren, the tribe of Benjamin, because of the evil that Benjamin had committed. Nevertheless, before Israel was eventually granted victory on the third day through the Lord, they first suffered many losses. On the second day alone, they lost eighteen thousand men. “Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and *wept*, and sat there before the Lord, and *fasted* that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.⁴”

Similarly, after the news came of the death of King Saul and his sons, we read that, “All the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bethshan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there. And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and *fasted seven days*.⁵” In both of the above examples, Israel fasted, or in other words, went without food and *mourned* for their dead.

However, Israel did not only fast or mourn for the dead, but also for those that were afflicted. For example, after Esther learned that Haman the Agagite had laid a plan to destroy all the Jews throughout the kingdom of Persia, she was determined to go before the king and plead for her people. Therefore, she said, “Go gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and *fast* ye for me, and neither *eat nor drink three days*, night or day; I also and my maidens will *fast* likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.⁶”

In each of these three examples, we can easily focus on the temporal aspect of the testimonies, meaning what the people abstained from, but instead we ought to focus on what these individuals abstained *for* in order to better understand the principle of fasting. For example, in the first testimony the children of Israel not only abstained from food while they mourned, but they worshiped God by presenting peace offerings to Him and sought to know His will concerning the battle before them. To which God responded by saying, “Go up; for to-morrow I will deliver them [the Benjaminites] into thine hand.⁷”

The second testimony differs from the other two in that it seems to be more closely associated with the Egyptian method of fasting. For in the first book of Samuel we read that the people fasted primarily because of the loss of King Saul and his sons as a sign of mourning. There is no indication that this effort was focused upon the Lord, or even included Him. While the third testimony does not mention God either, we know that Esther and the others went without food and water for a clear purpose, which was in hopes that the Persian king would allow Esther to enter into his court and hearken to her concerns for her people that they might be saved. While these three testimonies help form our traditional view or understanding of fasting, there is one more that we must consider, namely, the testimony of Moses.

⁴ Judges 20:26

⁵ 1 Samuel 31:12-13

⁶ Esther 4:16

⁷ Judges 20:-26-28

Following Israel's exodus from Egypt, God called Moses to come to the top of mount Sinai in order that He might give him a covenant to govern the people. In response to God's summons we read, "Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount; and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights."⁸ Deuteronomy expounds further by stating that Moses neither ate bread nor drank water while he was with God.⁹ Moses went through the same process again after he had destroyed the first two tablets because of Israel's wickedness.

In the first three examples, our attention is usually set on the fact that the people abstained from temporal items, rather than on what they fasted for, and the blessing that they received. Conversely, in the testimony of Moses we tend to concentrate more on the fact that Moses spent forty days and forty nights with God, and overlook the fact that he did so without food and water. The *traditional* view of fasting appears to relate more with how we observe the first three testimonies than how we perceive the example with Moses. In other words, most people today view fasting as a period of time to abstain from food, a habit, or a material item in exchange for a blessing. Very few individuals view fasting as a time to separate themselves from all the world as did Moses in order that they might literally be with God.

The Lord called Moses to remove himself from the camp and come up to the top of the mountain in part because the people were afraid to meet their God themselves.¹⁰ Perhaps they, like we, were hesitant to offer unto the Lord a sacrifice of a broken heart and contrite spirit.¹¹ Now however, God's invitation is unto all men to separate themselves out of the world and to come unto the Father through Jesus Christ, His Son. This is the fast which God has chosen.

The Lord's Fast

In Mark, chapter two, the disciples of John came before Jesus and asked Him, "why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom [Jesus] *is with them*? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, *they cannot fast*. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be *taken away from them*, and then shall they fast in those days."¹² The fasting that Jesus spoke of in this Scripture is often associated with the traditional Jewish concept of the term "to fast," meaning to go without food or water and to mourn. However, the disciples could not fast, or mourn, in this sense because obviously Jesus was already *with them*.

Although many people generally think of fasting as abstaining from food, the word fast has another definition that is commonly overlooked. The 1828 Webster's Dictionary also defines fast as to, "literally, set, stopped, fixed, or pressed close. Hence, close; tight; as, make fast the door; take fast hold; firm; immovable; close; strong; firmly fixed; closely adhering." Wherefore, rather than abstaining *from* something, fasting in this sense means to hold close or firmly fixed to something, which is not only what

⁸ Exodus 24:18

⁹ Deuteronomy 9:9

¹⁰ Read Deuteronomy 5:5

¹¹ Read 3 Nephi 5:66-68

¹² Mark 2:16-18

Moses did, but what the Lord Jesus did as well, as we read that after His baptism, “Jesus was led up of the Spirit, into the wilderness, to be with God. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, and had communed with God, he was afterwards an hungered.¹³”

Jesus was not taken up by the Spirit into a wilderness to be with God because He went without food or water for forty days and forty nights. Rather He was taken up by the power of the Holy Ghost because He fasted, or in other words held firmly close to God, which *caused* Jesus to go without food or water during that time, just as Moses did. The Scriptures in fact encourage us to view fasting as more than just abstaining from something. They also counsel us to set our hearts upon the Lord when we do fast. Please read the following Scriptures from Colossians 2:20-22 and Zechariah 7:

2:20 Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments [principles] of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, **2:21** Which are after the doctrines and commandments of men, who teach you to ***touch not, taste not, handle not***; all those things which are to perish with the using? **2:22** Which things have indeed a ***show*** of wisdom in ***will worship***, and humility, and ***neglecting*** the body as to the satisfying the flesh, ***not*** in any honor to God.

7:2 When they had sent unto the house of God Sherezer and Regem-melech, and their men, to pray before the Lord, **7:3** And to speak unto the priests which were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, Should I ***weep*** in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so ***many years***? **7:4** Then came the word of the Lord of hosts unto me, saying, **7:5** Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye ***fasted and mourned*** in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast ***unto me***, even ***to me***?

As Paul wrote to the Colossians, fasting is not about punishing ourselves by going without something, for neglecting the body does not give “any honor to God.” Neither are we to fast arbitrarily. Fasting is not a trade or a bargain basement, that we can exchange an empty stomach for a blessing from God, or that God finds pleasure in human discomfort. Rather it is a way to humble and sanctify ourselves so that we can come unto God and loose the bands wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke as we read in the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah.

58:1 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. **58:2** Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God; they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. **58:3** Wherefore have we ***fasted, say they***, and thou seest not? wherefore have we ***afflicted our soul***, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labors.

58:4 Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness; ***ye shall not fast as ye do this day***, to make your voice to be heard on high. **58:5** Is it such a fast that ***I have***

¹³ Matthew 4:1-2

chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? **58:6** Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to **loose** the *bands* of wickedness, to **undo** the heavy *burdens*, and to let the *oppressed go free*, and that ye **break** every *yoke*? **58:7** Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

58:8 **Then** shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy rearward. **58:9** **Then** shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, **Here I am**. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; **58:10** And if thou **draw out thy soul** to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the **noonday**; **58:11** And **the Lord shall guide thee continually**, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

58:12 And they that shall be of thee **shall build the old waste places**; thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, **The repairer of the breach**, The restorer of paths to dwell in. **58:13** If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honor him, not doing **thine own ways**, nor finding **thine own pleasure**, nor speaking **thine own words**; **58:14** **Then** shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

The fast which the Lord has chosen is not one of affliction, nor one to be seen of men or to take pride in our accomplishment, but one of love, sacrifice, and service. In so doing, we shall receive power to loose, undo, let go, and break every band, burden, oppression, and yoke. Again, we do not fast **from** something, but we fast **to** something, which begs the question, “What am I fasting for and is fasting only for a set period of time?” The traditional concept of fasting teaches that we should fast primarily when we are seeking divine counsel and direction from the Lord on a certain topic or issue.

While this is true, as there are specific instances in which we especially need God’s direction, such as when the Israelites wanted to know if they should continue their battle against the Benjaminites, or when King Jehoshaphat sought the Lord in the face of an invading army. Fasting is more than holding firmly affixed to God for just a short amount of time. It is something that we must do continually just as we are called to pray continually. For we should always be in the spirit of prayer, and then there are times when we literally pray. The same is true of fasting. We should always be in the spirit of fasting, which is holding firmly affixed to God, and then there are periods where we literally fast, which is time that we set aside to separate ourselves from all things, including food, that we might meet God. Take for example the account of Alma the Younger and his fellow servants when they went out to share the Gospel with the Zoramites from Alma 16:112-120:

16:112 O Lord, wilt thou comfort my soul, and give unto me success, and also my fellow laborers who are with me; yea, Ammon, and Aaron, and Omner, and also Amulek, and Zeezrom, and also my two sons; yea, even all these wilt thou comfort, O Lord? Yea, wilt thou ***comfort their souls in Christ?*** **16:113** Wilt thou grant unto them that they may have strength, that they may bear their afflictions which shall come upon them, because of the iniquities of this people? **16:114** O Lord, wilt thou grant unto us that we may have success in bringing them again unto thee, in Christ? **16:115** Behold, O Lord, their souls are precious, and many of them are our near brethren, therefore, give unto us, O Lord, power and wisdom, that we may bring these, our brethren, again unto thee.

16:116 Now it came to pass, that when Alma had said these words, that he clapped his hands upon all them who were with him. **16:117** And behold, as he clapped his hands upon them, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. **16:118** And after that, they did separate themselves one from another; ***taking no thought for themselves*** what they should eat, or what they should drink, or what they should put on. **16:119** And the Lord provided for them that they ***should hunger not, neither should they thirst;*** yea, and he also gave them ***strength,*** that they should suffer no manner of afflictions, save it were swallowed up in the joy of Christ. **16:120** Now this was according to the prayer of Alma; and this because he prayed in faith.

Alma and his brethren did not abstain from food in exchange for a blessing, but rather instead they took no thought of what they should eat or drink because their sole focus was bringing souls to Jesus Christ and into His Kingdom. For they, just as Jesus demonstrated in His life, death, and resurrection, were willing to do the Father's will instead of their own. Thus they separated themselves from their families and their everyday lives so that they might share the Gospel of Christ. In other words, they lived for God and not for themselves. This is the type of fasting which God requires of all the citizens of His Kingdom. For Alma and the others had already displayed the spirit of fasting by the way they had lived their lives up unto this point, and because of this, they were able to literally fast in the service of their God. Please read the following testimony from Elder Andrew King:

When I first started returning to God and to the Church, the concept of fasting always puzzled me. My thinking was that if fasting was supposed to help me draw closer with God why would I cut out food or water? Especially considering that it wasn't food and water that necessarily kept me from God, but instead it was my sins that did so. For example, I always thought that fasting from worldly things, such as television, games, books, etc. would be a better way to draw closer to the God of all righteousness.

A few years ago, there was a particular moment in my life where I was feeling rather strong in the Spirit and so I made the decision that I would cut out all the worldly things from my life for at least a week. However, I didn't even make it a day. I didn't even make it an hour. As soon as I made up my mind that I would fast from the world, I realized just how attached I was to those things. No sooner had the words escaped my lips than I literally experienced a physical pain at the very thought of not doing those things, and this pain was to such an extent that I felt like I had to quit my fast right then and there. It took years of growing in the Lord before I was able to

*eliminate those things from my heart and from my life, and I can firmly testify that it wasn't accomplished by simply not eating, but by growing in my service for God and for His people. In essence, I let go of my worldly desires in order that I might win Jesus Christ.*¹⁴

Fasting entails more than skipping a meal or removing worldly items from our life for a short period of time. How many times has the reader heard someone use the phrase, "I am fasting from lunch," "I am fasting from movies," "I am fasting from meat," etc.? How many people say, "I am fasting to God, and for this reason I will separate myself from everything, including movies, television, books, sports, even food, etc., in order that I might be alone with God?" This might be for an evening, a day, a week, or even thirty minutes. The length of time that we spend fasting does not matter nearly as much as the quality of time that we spend with God. Thus, the question becomes how are we to spend those precious moments?

Rejoicing and Prayer

Fasting is much like prayer in that everyone seems to have their own unique style or method, meaning that what works for one might not necessarily work for another. However, the scriptures are filled with testimonies where individuals, as well as peoples, combined fasting with prayer when they sought for the Lord. Jesus told the disciples that there are certain obstacles which can only be overcome through much fasting and prayer,¹⁵ while the priesthood themselves would pray and fast in the early church sometimes before ordaining a man to the ministry as well as when they blessed the saints.¹⁶ Husbands and wives were also counseled to spend time in prayer and fasting in the New Testament.¹⁷

The book of Mormon is also filled with examples. In Omni, Amaleki exhorted the people to endure to the end by continuing in fasting and prayer that they might be saved.¹⁸ Following Alma the Younger's (Alma II) experience with an angel of God which had rendered him unconscious, his father, also named Alma, called the priesthood together in order to fast and pray for his son. This experience ultimately saved Alma II's life, both temporally and spiritually.¹⁹ Years later, during Alma II's ministry, he testified mightily to the people of Zarahemla concerning Jesus Christ and His Gospel, saying that the truth was made known unto him by the Holy Spirit of God. "Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days, that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by His Holy Spirit; and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me."²⁰

Alma II also commanded the Church "that they should gather themselves together *oft*, and join in fasting and mighty prayer, in behalf of the welfare of the souls of those who *knew not* God."²¹ The sons of Mosiah followed this same pattern before they went to preach the Gospel among the Lamanites. For

¹⁴ Read Philippians 3:7-8

¹⁵ Read Matthew 17:15-21

¹⁶ Read Acts 13:1-3 and Acts 14:21-23

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:1-5

¹⁸ Omni 1:47

¹⁹ Mosiah 11:183-185

²⁰ Alma 3:79-80

²¹ Alma 4:6

we read that “they fasted much, and prayed much, that the Lord would grant unto them a portion of His Spirit to go with them, and abide with them, that they might be an instrument in the hands of God, to bring, if it were possible, their brethren, the Lamanites, to the knowledge of the truth.²²” In response to their fasting, the Lord visited the sons of Mosiah and promised them through the Spirit that although they would suffer many afflictions, He would grant them the desires of their heart in bringing many Lamanites to God. And in Helaman we read that the church waxed stronger in their humility and firmer in their faith through fasting and prayer in the face of great persecutions.²³

These testimonies demonstrate the power of God which is available to each and every soul who will earnestly spend time with their Lord in fasting and prayer. For the Lord God has promised that if we will fast and pray we will have the strength to cast out devils, overcome obstacles, bless the saints, strengthen our marriages, endure to the end, heal the afflicted, obtain a knowledge of the truth and help others to obtain the truth as well, receive the Spirit for the purpose of sharing the Gospel, and bear great persecutions and tribulations that we might glorify God in the name of Jesus Christ. All of these blessings, and many more, are reserved for those individuals who, with sincerity of heart and meekness of spirit, will seek the face of God. Not for what they might receive, but for what they might be able to give. Both for God and their fellow man.

The Lord Jesus Christ promised the Church in the latter days a crown of blessings, even that of Zion and eternal life, if they would keep the following commandment from Section fifty-nine. Though some individuals have narrowly focused on the third verse, which seemingly likens fasting with rejoicing, it is important to read the surrounding verses as well. For they give further enlightenment and understanding to how we are to fast unto the Lord. Please read the God’s definition of fasting from DC 59:2-4:

2a Wherefore I give unto them a commandment, saying thus: ***Thou shalt*** love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy might, mind, and strength; and in the name of Jesus Christ thou shalt serve him. **2b *Thou shalt*** love thy neighbor as thyself. **2c *Thou shalt*** not steal; neither commit adultery, nor kill, nor do anything like unto it. **2d *Thou shalt*** thank the Lord thy God in all things. **2e *Thou shalt*** offer a sacrifice unto the Lord thy God ***in righteousness***; even that of a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

59:2f And that thou mayest more fully keep thyself unspotted from the world, ***thou shalt*** go to the house of prayer and offer up thy sacraments upon my holy day; for verily this is a day appointed unto thee to rest from thy labors, and to pay thy devotions unto the Most High; **59:2g** nevertheless thy vows shall be offered up in righteousness ***on all days***, and ***at all times***; **59:2h** but remember that on this, the Lord's day, ***thou shalt*** offer thine oblations, and thy sacraments, unto the Most High, confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord.

²² Alma 12:14-15

²³ Helaman 2:29-31

59:3a And on this day thou shalt do none other thing, only let thy food be prepared with singleness of heart, that thy fasting may be perfect; or in other words, that thy joy may be full.

59:3b Verily this is fasting and prayer; or, in other words, rejoicing and prayer.

59:4a And inasmuch as ye do these things, with thanksgiving, with cheerful hearts, and countenances; not with much laughter, for this is sin, but with a glad heart and a cheerful countenance; **59:4b** verily I say, that inasmuch as ye do this the fullness of the earth is yours: the beasts of the fields, and the fowls of the air, and that which climbeth upon the trees, and walketh upon the earth; **59:4c** yea, and the herb, and the good things which come of the earth, whether for food or for raiment, or for houses or for barns, or for orchards, or for gardens, or for vineyards; **59:4d** yea, all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye, and to gladden the heart; yea, for food and for raiment, for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body, and to enliven the soul.

For this is fasting and prayer, or in other words rejoicing and prayer *if* you love God with all your heart, might, mind, and strength; love your neighbor as yourself; offer a sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit; offer your sacraments in righteousness on all days and at all times; and especially offer thy sacraments unto the Most High on the Lord's day by resting from all your labors except for preparing your food with singleness of heart. If we do all these things, which is fasting and prayer, God has promised that the fullness of the earth and His Kingdom are yours.

Conclusion

God also explained to the prophet Zechariah that fasting was rejoicing in Him, saying, "The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace.²⁴" After all that God has done for the souls of men, it is our reasonable service to give the best that we have to the Master, and thereby to each other. In so doing, perhaps we will finally recognize that through fasting, or in other words, holding firmly affixed to the Lord, not only are we as individuals drawing closer to God that we might know Him, but we as a people are also drawing closer to each other so that our hearts might be knit together in unity and in love. On that day, the Lord might verily say of His people, as He did with David [read Acts 13:22], 'I have found a people through my Son to be after mine own heart, which shall fulfill all my will.' In conclusion please read the following from 4 Nephi 1:13-14 and 17-19

1:13 And they did not walk any more after the performances and ordinances of the Law of Moses, but they did walk after the commandments which they had received from their Lord and their God, continuing in fasting and prayer, and in meeting together oft, both to pray and to hear the word of the Lord. **1:14** And it came to pass that there was no contention among all the people, in all the land, but there were mighty miracles wrought among the disciples of Jesus. **1:17** And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people. **1:18** And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; **1:19** And

²⁴ Zechariah 8:19

surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God: