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FASTING AND PRAYER



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FASTING AND PRAYING

FOREWORD

by John Bradshaw

My earliest recollection of fasting goes all the way back to my early childhood. During a certain time of the year, people who attended the church I went to were encouraged to fast, to deny themselves something they regularly ate—particularly if it was something they enjoyed. I recall one Lent when I saved in a large glass jar every piece of candy I bought or was given during that 40-day period. It was a candy-less six or so weeks. Yet I was glad to have “fasted” for my faith in God. And even more glad when Lent was over!

However, it seemed the spiritual benefit of this fasting was some type of merit that was obtained as a result of my six weeks of

self-denial. The message was clearly one of righteousness by works. “Deny yourself, and God will bless you for your self-denial,” a picture of fasting the Bible doesn’t actually endorse.

Scripture typically associates the practice of fasting with prayer. When the disciples were unable to cast a demon out of a troubled child, Jesus told them that “this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21). Anna, the prophetess present at the dedication of Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem, “served God with fasting and prayers night and day” (Luke 2:37). And Cornelius, the Gentile believer, told Paul he was visited by an angel as he was fasting and praying (Acts 10:30). Fasting merely for the sake of fasting or to gain merit with God isn’t promoted in the Bible. It is when fasting is connected to prayer that spiritual blessings accrue.

The prophet Daniel prayed and fasted before God, and in answer to his prayers he received a profoundly important message from God regarding the coming of the Messiah and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem

(Daniel 9:3-27). During a time of repentance Israel fasted and confessed their sins (Nehemiah 9:1, 2), and when it appeared the Jewish people were to be destroyed owing to the plottings of the diabolical Haman, they fasted before God (Esther 4:3).

Connected with the spiritual act of prayer, fasting is seen in Scripture to enhance a connection with God and facilitate the outpouring of God's blessings. Fasting is a means to an end, and is not an end in itself. Nowhere does God's word suggest a spiritual advantage based alone on denying oneself of nutrition.

God desires our lives to be an act of worship, and our minds to be connected to His so that His will can be wrought out in the life of the believer. Fasting, therefore, is not employed in an attempt by the disciple to impose his or her will on the Master. Rather, fasting is employed that a surrendered believer might best know the will of God, and be prepared to receive the blessings he wishes to bestow.

The prophet Isaiah wrote about a group of people who practiced fasting for all the wrong reasons. In fact, they are depicted as saying to

God that they have fasted but He seems not to have noticed. “Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge” (Isaiah 58:3). But, very obviously, while the practice of fasting may have been present, the true spirit of fasting was markedly absent. Their stomachs may have been involved in fasting, but their hearts were not. God went so far as to tell these individuals that they “fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness” (verse 4).

And then God spoke openly about fasting, and suggested to Israel that they had been missing the point of the exercise.

“Is it such a fast that I have 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?” (verse 5). While there was certainly a place for sackcloth and ashes at times in the history of Israel, God was clear in his communication with Israel that fasting was never to be a matter of simply going through the motions.