

Isaiah 58 (3-10) – Fasting and You

You've heard the news. The diagnosis is bad. The distress is great. The disaster is widespread. Maybe you're worn out. Maybe you're sick of your sin. You're ready to give up your old way and take up a new way. Or your children have gone astray. Your relationship is at a crossroads. Your business has failed. You've lost a loved one. Your marriage is in trouble. On and on we could go. Something terrible has happened, or is happening, or is about to happen. What do you do? Well, of course, you can pray. But there is something else you can do. You can also fast.

The Bible teaches that fasting is a voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. Of course, there are other types of fasting that aren't religious. Everyone goes to sleep, and then when they wake up and eat, it is called breakfast, or when you break your natural, sleep induced fast. And the practice of intermittent fasting for your health is a popular thing to do these days. But those things are not what we are talking about today.

People fast because they are in distress. People fast because they are grieving. People fast because they are repenting from sin. They fast when they are mourning and broken. They fast because they would rather pray than eat. Or they fast because they know they need to focus on prayer instead of eating. Fasting is a response to special times of trial, sorrow, or struggle.

Some Bible characters engaged in lengthy fasts. In Exodus 34:28, we read that Moses *was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.* In Matthew 4:1-2, we read that Jesus fasted for *forty days and forty nights* before he was *tempted by the devil* in the wilderness. However, the Bible never encourages fasting for 40 days, or for specific lengths of time. Fasting is not an obligation, it's your discretion when you're in distress.

You need to understand that fasting is an effect of spiritual urgency, not the cause of spiritual urgency. For example, you fast BECAUSE you are

mourning over your sin and repenting of it. You don't fast SO THAT you will mourn over your sin and repent of it. It isn't like fasting is some spiritual power tool that will energize your prayers, and make God grant your desires, especially if your heart and your actions aren't in alignment with God's desires. But fasting done with the right motives can help you focus on God and his desires. Our text today will show you this clearly. And before we get to that, let's give some other biblical examples of fasting.

In Ezra 8:21-23, we see Ezra was leading a group to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem. It would be a dangerous journey. And so, Ezra called for the whole group to fast and pray as they asked the Lord for protection. And God answered their prayers. Later, in Ezra 10:6 we see Ezra fasting alone as he mourned over the faithlessness of the people. Ezra fasted in private, as he was in mourning over other people. Apply this to your family, and friends. And this was a partial fast. It was just one night, where he didn't eat or drink, and instead, he prayed, all night.

The book of Esther gives us a good example. The king of the Persian empire had been tricked into decreeing the death of all the Jews. So, Queen Esther, who was a Jew herself, was going to speak to the king about it, and she called for a fast. In Esther 4:16, she says – *Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.* So, the people were in great distress. And they fasted for the success of the queen's plea to the king. Esther wisely set up the audience with the king and also with the man who had tricked him into the deadly decree, the evil Haman. And the king spared the Jews, and had Haman hung on his own gallows.

In Jonah 3:4-10, we read this account. *Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself*

with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. The people of Nineveh were in distress. They fasted from their food, and prayed to God, and repented of their wickedness. And the people were spared.

Fasting is to be motivated by a serious felt need. In 2 Chronicles 20:1-4 you see that King Jehoshaphat called for a fast as the people were in danger, surrounded by enemy armies. In Daniel 9:3, you see Daniel fasting as he sought the Lord in prayer and repentance for the sins of the people which had led to their captivity. Fasting is not about taking a burden for God; it is about showing your burden to God. Fasting is appropriate during times of sorrow; it is an expression of grief. In Judges 20:17-28, you read that the Israelites had lost forty thousand men in battles they should have won, and they wept and fasted before the Lord, not only to seek his guidance, but also to express their grief for the brothers they had lost. Fasting is a sign of grief over the death of respected people or loved ones. In 2 Samuel 1:11-12, you see that David fasts in grief over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. Fasting can be an expression of repentance, for grief over sin. In 1 Samuel 7:6, the Israelites gave up their false gods and fasted. Fasting expresses grief for the sins of others you know. In 1 Samuel 20:34, Jonathan fasted in grief because of how his father Saul was treating David.

The people would fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29, 23:27-32). This custom became known as "the Fast" (Acts 27:9). But the validity of the Day of Atonement ceased when Jesus made the once-for-all sacrifice on the cross (Hebrews 10:10), and so the single prescribed occasion for fasting has ceased to exist. Still, the people did adopt other national fast days (Jeremiah 36:9). And God exhorted the people to fast in Joel 2:12 – *Yet even now, declares*

the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. In 1 Kings 19:8, you see that God made Elijah fast. Elijah had to live for 40 days on one meal. The Old Testament is full of fasting.

And you do see fasting in the New Testament as well. In Luke 2:36-37, you read that Anna fasted as an act of devotion while anticipating the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In Acts 9:9, Paul fasted after his encounter with the risen Jesus Christ that changed his life forever. In Acts 13:1-3, the leaders of the church at Antioch fasted before God called out Barnabas and Saul as missionaries. In Acts 14:21-23, as they journeyed back to Antioch, they prayed and fasted as they appointed elders in every church along the way.

Still, for Christians, the Bible does not specifically command all believers everywhere to regularly spend time fasting. In Matthew 6:16, we see that Jesus assumes that some believers will fast, but he does not give a command or specify a particular time, place, or method. And in Matthew 6:17-18, Jesus says that fasting should not be a hypocritical religious show. Jesus' point was that a person who fasts should make themselves look normal instead of trying to attract attention to their spiritual struggle. And before Christ's struggle in Gethsemane, he feasted, rather than fasted, with his disciples.

Acts 2:42-47, which gives us a generalized picture of the regular practice of the early church, doesn't mention fasting. The Epistles say nothing about religious fasting. And in Matthew 17:21, when Jesus mentions "prayer and fasting" to cast out a certain kind of demon, his focus is on the disciple's faith, not on the practice of fasting. He was saying that sometimes you need serious prayer, the kind of prayer that is accompanied by fasting. The Bible doesn't teach a cause-and-effect relationship with fasting. Paul didn't fast when he cast out demons. But Paul did warn about ascetic and ritualistic tendencies (Colossians 2:16-23). And there is no reference to fasting in Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter, which were addressed to Jewish Christians.

Am I saying that people shouldn't fast? No, on the contrary, I would encourage you to fast, but I would also exhort you to know what it really is.

Fasting is an accompaniment to prayer, a part of a deep spiritual struggle before God. Fasting doesn't guarantee "results", and the lack of it doesn't guarantee failure. Acts 4:23-31 shows us one of the greatest prayer meetings in history, but there is no mention of fasting.

So, here we are at our text. It is clear, and I'll be brief. Isaiah 58 concerns the fast of the Day of Atonement. The people loved to celebrate it, but God says that the leaders of the people were not being holy, they were being hypocritical. Their fasting was just a show. The people thought God would help them if they would only perform the right rituals. And they were mad when he didn't. In other words, they thought that God would help them if they would help themselves. But while the Bible does teach that God wants us to act in accord with what he has given us, it does not teach that God helps those who help themselves. Rather, it teaches that God helps those who humble themselves. In the previous chapter, Isaiah 57:15, it says – *For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

Fasting can increase your focus in prayer. But fasting is not a mechanical formula for success in prayer. It is not a case of, "If I fast then God will answer". Isaiah 58:3-5 proves that. Fasting with a rightly motivated, rightly repented, godly purpose, which includes godly actions towards that purpose, this is what pleases God. Isaiah 58:6-10 proves that.

A proper fast is not about self-inflicted suffering to get God to act good for you, while you still want to act bad to others. Again, Isaiah 58:3-5. Rather, a proper fast is about forgoing food for the purpose of prayer because of grief, or towards a godly goal. These are prayers that you are actively working towards, prayers that you are putting legs to. And again, Isaiah 58:6-10.

Your hunger reminds you of your hunger for God, and/or your hunger for God to answer your prayer. I am so distraught over the situation I or someone else is in, or distressed because of what has happened or is

happening, that I need God in a special way. Lord, I will do what I can, but I can't without you. I am so desperate for God or desperate for my prayer to be answered that I am going to pray about this all day. And going without food will intensify my desire to pray. When I feel those hunger pangs, it will remind me of my purpose for this day, to pray. So, when I might feel hungry, my response is not, "Oh, I'm so hungry, I need food", it's "Oh, I'm so desperate, I need God".

You may have certain reasons that you must have food (if you are diabetic, or pregnant, etc.). Don't fast in such a way that physically harms you by ignoring your special dietary needs. But you can still limit the amount that you normally eat, and feel that lack of normalcy, thereby focusing more on the prayer instead of food as your satisfaction. You can find a way.

For example, if you take your pills with your breakfast, and again with your supper, you could fast your lunch and even the whole period in between breakfast and supper. You can fast for a part of the day where you would normally eat during that part of the day. A partial fast is still a fast, and it can still focus you in prayer. It isn't that if someone else can fast for a whole day, or if they fast for several days, then their fast is better, more sincere, or more effective. It isn't the amount of time that matters in your fasting. It is the rightly motivated, rightly repented, godly purpose, with godly actions towards that purpose, that is what matters in your fasting.

Fasting and prayer is about drawing near to God, in response to danger, distress, disaster, sin, sorrow, struggle, troubles or trials. Maybe you're grieving over the death of a loved one, fighting a major health battle, or battling a besetting sin. Maybe you're overwhelmed with a difficult family relationship, or you urgently need the Lord's guidance. If so, then fasting may be an appropriate outlet for the burden of your heart. Truly humble yourself before God, forgo your food, and come to him in prayer. Tell him how you are so full of sorrow. Tell him how you're struggling. Tell him that you need him. Tell him the bad you've done. Tell him the good you want him to do. And ask him to help you do the right thing. Amen.