

100 BIBLE LESSONS

These lessons were originally given at Manila, Philippines, in 1958 and 1959 by former missionary to China, Alban Douglas. Give these lessons to people you visit, youth groups, hospital patients, church visitors and new members. Use them in Sunday School, bus ministry, jail services, nursing homes, Christian schools, small discussion groups and many other places. God's Word will answer your questions and help solve your problems.

LESSON 74 – FASTING

INTRODUCTION

Material drawn from, Volume 2, "Studies in the Sermon on the Mount." By Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones; James Hastings, "Dictionary of the Bible"; Tillotson; Unger.

In question boxes at deeper life conferences from time to time questions like this appear: "Should we spend more time fasting?"; "Is fasting the forgotten grace in the New Testament Church?" "Do you fast? How often? Why?"

This lesson is an attempt to answer some of these basic questions.

Fasting is not found in the Pentateuch but often in the historical books.

Probably the first recorded fast is in Judges 20:26, about 1400 B.C.

Because Roman Catholics and Mohammedans fast frequently, Protestants have gone to the opposite extreme and seldom or never fast.

In passages like Leviticus 16:29-31; Leviticus 23:27-32, it speaks of "afflicting the soul", and in the light of passages like Psalm 35:13, this is interpreted as fasting.

Psalm 35:13, "I humbled my soul with fasting."

The book of Nehemiah (7:73-9:38) records a general fast.

During the captivity Israel added four fast in addition to the one for the Day of Atonement – Zechariah 7:3-5; 8:19.

1. A fast to commemorate the capture of Jerusalem – the 17th day of the 4th month.
2. A fast to commemorate the burning of the Temple – the 9th day of the 5th month.
3. A fast to commemorate the murder of Gedaliah – the 10th day of the 7th month.
4. A fast to commemorate the siege of Jerusalem – the 10th month.

In the New Testament the Pharisees kept two weekly fasts (Monday and Thursday).

The present Jewish calendar permits 22 fasts plus the Day of Atonement.

I. THE OLD TESTAMENT STANDARD OF FASTING

According to Tillotson, it included six things:

1. Strict abstinence from food (Some say lentils could be eaten).
2. Humble confession of sins to God.
3. Earnest seeking of God's face – this often included sackcloth and ashes, Daniel 9:3.
4. True intercession for themselves and others.
5. Giving alms to the poor.
6. Living as one prayed and vowed.

II. OLD TESTAMENT REASONS FOR FASTING

1. To express deep mourning – I Samuel 31:13, fasting seven days for Saul.
2. To avert Divine wrath – II Samuel 12:16-17, fasting to keep the baby alive.
3. To express repentance and sorrow for sin – Jonah 3:7, the city of Nineveh.

III. THE WRONG KIND OF FASTING

It is possible to take a perfectly good thing and abuse it; to cause it to be degenerate to a mere external form without sincere heart meaning.

In Isaiah 58:3-5; God reveals the sin of the mere form of outward fasting:

1. As a display for God to see – verse 3.
2. Merely afflicting their souls – verse 3, abstaining from food.
3. For personal pleasure – verse 3, something to boast about. Luke 18:12.
4. To exact full labor (oppress employees to get full daily output of goods. verse 3).
5. For strife or debate – verse 4.
6. To smite with a wicked fist – verse 4.
7. To make God hear their voices – verse 4; to obligate God to hear their prayers.
8. To bow the head as a bulrush – verse 5.
9. To sit and sackcloth and ashes, verse 5: an outward show of fasting.

IV. RIGHT FASTING Isaiah 58:6-9

Correct fasting would demonstrate itself in a life of practical daily holiness.

1. To loose the bands of wickedness, verse 6.
2. To undo the heavy burdens, verse 6.
3. To let the oppressed go free, verse 6.
4. To break every yoke, verse 6.
5. To give bread to the hungry, verse 7.
6. To restore the poor from thy house, verse 7.
7. To clothe the naked, verse 7.
8. To reveal yourself to your relatives, verse 7.

These eight things could be summarized in the words of James 1:27.

V. JESUS AND FASTING

He was not legalistic in regard to fasts but likely kept the main Jewish fast.

He fasted forty days and forty nights just prior to the great temptations, Matthew 4:2.

He warned against the abuse of fasting, Matthew 6:16.

He taught that His disciples would fast after His departure, Mark 2:20.

He gave some instructions regarding proper fasting, Matthew 6:17, 18.

He associated prayer with fasting, Mark 9:29.

He said that certain demons could only be cast out by prayer and fasting, Matthew

17:21.

VI. FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

The Apostle Paul fasted, II Corinthians 6:5; II Corinthians 11:27.

The Church fasted before prayer in Acts 13:3, before separating Paul and Barnabas for the ministry as missionaries in the regions beyond.

The Church fasted before appointing elders in Acts 14:23.

In Acts 10:30, Cornelius fasted for four days.

In I Corinthians 7:5, fasting seems to include not only abstinence from food, but from legitimate, normal love relations between husbands and wives by mutual consent.

VII. VALUE OF FASTING TODAY

Speaking from the medical and physical point of view it is excellent for the body; most of us eat far too much and to rest the digestive system periodically is good.

People who are overweight or obese would be well advised to fast in order to reduce.

An American doctor has written, "After you feast, you should fast."

Students who face strenuous examinations find it highly desirable to fast. In order to increase the blood in the brain area; it gives more clarity of thought.

Some who fast for extended periods say that the first three or four days are the hardest but after that the mind becomes unusually clear.

Christian seeking the will of God could profitably spend time in prayer and fasting; with the mind clearer they would be able to think more logically and evaluate the various circumstances and interacting factors.

Furthermore, fasting demonstrates to the Lord, the depth of our sincerity; that we are willing to importunately (Luke 11:8) knock and keep on knocking till light comes.

Praying Hyde of India is a classic example of prayer and fasting; he would leave his bed unslept in and the food untouched simply because unconsciously he was so engrossed in intercession that he just forgot to eat and sleep.

Matthew 6:17, 18; (the Sermon on the Mount by the Lord Jesus Himself) infers that we are to fast secretly, surreptitiously, without any telltale facial signs.

The basic meaning of fasting is abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.

Dr. Jones points out very clearly the distinction between fasting and discipline; discipline is something that we do every day, all day long, while fasting is something quite special for unusual circumstances.

Fasting is something that we do in order to reach a higher spiritual realm in prayer, meditation are finding the will of God.

CONCLUSION

Never fast with the thought of obligating God; because I fast the Lord is forced to bless me and make me a great blessing.

Just because we fast, pray our tithe, we cannot obligate God and make Him our servant.

We should never engage in fasting as a means of obtaining direct blessing; the value of fasting is indirect and not direct.

Why, then, should a Christian fast? Because he feels impelled to do so for some spiritual reason or reasons.

Fasting should never be routine or mechanical; it should be prompted by the Holy Spirit and engaged in at His command for the duration that He dictates.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was the original Old Testament fast?
2. Did Israel do right or wrong in adding four fast?
3. What was the Old Testament standard of fasting?
4. List three main reasons for fasting in the Old Testament.
5. Describe the degeneracy of fasting in Isaiah 58:3-5.
6. What eight things would result from true fasting according to Isaiah 58:6-9?
7. What was Jesus' teaching and attitude towards fasting?
8. Did the New Testament Church practice fasting?
9. What is the value of fasting today?
10. Will fasting obligate God to bless me? Explain.