

about, but we are desperate to seek God's face. God honours that sort of passionate prayer.

2. It reminds us to pray. The presence of hunger pangs reminds us that we are in a season of prayer. Every time the stomach grumbles should be a call to pray.

3. Fasting might sometimes be incidental. If we are so engrossed in calling out to God that we don't notice that we are hungry, then we might be fasting without knowing it! We have all been caught up in activities sometimes that we haven't noticed that we've gone past a meal time. Prayer can be like that sometimes when we are caught up in our intercession before God that food just doesn't matter.

What are the potential problems?

When we think about fasting our first thought is we might not cope without a regular intake of food. For most people who are in good health, fasting will have no harmful effect on their body. The fact is that most of us eat well in excess of what is necessary, so our bodies can readily cope with a break from food. If you have some sort of health problem you should seek medical advice first.

Jesus did warn about the potential spiritual effects of fasting from some sort of religious pride (Mat. 6:16-18). Fasting doesn't make you holy, it's just a part of our walk with God.

Conclusion

Fasting is a potentially powerful weapon in intercessory prayer. We don't need to be legalistic about fasting, but in some situations God may call us to fast as a part of praying.

Let's be open to this opportunity that God has given us.

NEW LIFE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP WHAT WE BELIEVE #1

The Power of Fasting

Introduction

Whenever people start to get serious about prayer, the subject of fasting inevitably comes up. Should we or shouldn't we fast? Is God interested in whether we fast or not? How does it all work?

In this article, we will try to find out what the Bible teaches about fasting and how we should apply that teaching in the context of the 21st Century.

What do we mean by fasting?

At its most basic meaning fasting simply means to give up food for a specified period of time for a spiritual reason.

Fasting is not the same as dieting. Dieting means that we have a physical goal in mind- we are concerned with our body. When we fast we are concerned with our spirit, with our relationship with God.

Fasting means that we deprive our bodies for a while in order to concentrate on a spiritual goal.

A fast can vary from total abstinence from food and even drink to simply abstinence from particular types of food. The total fasting is exemplified by Jesus who was in the wilderness for 40 days and nights and didn't eat anything in that time. A partial fast is typified by Daniel who decided to eat only vegetables and water for a ten day period. Many Christians observe a partial fast during Lent, the 40 day period leading up to Easter.

Fasting In The Bible

All through the Bible there are examples of people fasting at particular times.

Generally there seem to be three motivations for fasting.

1. Repentance. In the Old Testament, repentance was often accompanied by fasting. It seems that people wanted to show God that they were “fair dinkum” or sincere in their repentance. Fasting had the idea of humbling yourself before the righteous God.

In 1 Samuel 7, Samuel tells the Israelites that they must get rid of their idols and repent before the Lord. as a sign of their repentance they fast.

Even the wicked King Ahab, husband of the even more wicked Jezebel, fasted in repentance (1 Kings 21:27-29). God seems to have accepted his fasting as a genuine sign of repentance.

When reluctant prophet Jonah preaches a message of judgment in Nineveh, the people there (who were pagans) turn to the Lord and show their repentance by fasting (Jonah 3). This was an extreme fast with nobody, not even the animals permitted to eat or drink.

2. Mourning. One outward sign of genuine grief was to abstained from food for a period. People also wore sackcloth and rubbed ashes over themselves.

When King Saul died, his followers fasted for 7 days (1 Samuel 31). When the Persian king issued a decree ordering the killing of all Israelite people, they immediately fasted in a grief reaction (Esther 4).

3. Intercession. At times of great trouble, when people engaged in a time of concerted intercessory prayer they would often fast as well.

The most famous example of this kind of fasting is that of Jesus who fasted for forty days in the wilderness to prepare for the commencement of his ministry. But there are many other examples of fasting in the Bible also.

David fasted and prayed without ceasing when his son became ill (2 Sam. 12:16-25). Interestingly, he refused to continue fasting after the child died. David was clearly convinced of the power of fasting to increase the effectiveness of his prayers.

Daniel engaged in a period of fasting when he discovered that God had said that Jerusalem would lie in ruins for 70 years. As a result of his fervent prayer the angel Gabriel comes to deliver God’s answer (Daniel 9). Some years later, he engages in a partial fast over three weeks seeking the meaning of a terrible vision he had had (Daniel 10:1-4). Again an angel appears to him with the answer to his prayer.

In Acts 13 and 14 the leaders of the church fast while praying to seek God’s direction for the church.

How does fasting work?

It is difficult for us to see any obvious connection between lack of food and effective prayer, yet the Bible indicates that fasting is effective.

On one occasion, Jesus disciples attempt to cast a demon out of a boy who has various life- threatening convulsions. They are unsuccessful but Jesus removes it easily. Later they ask Jesus, “Why couldn’t we do it?” Jesus replies “This kind only comes out with prayer and fasting.” (Mark 9:29)¹ In other words there is a power released that is not there when we don’t fast.

The experience of people through the ages has confirmed this. Daniel’s experience was certainly that fasting releases spiritual power. Many Christian leaders down the centuries have commended the practice of fasting during periods of intercessory prayer.

Apart from any hidden, innate power that fasting might carry there are at least three ways in which fasting is effective.

1. It shows God that we are serious. Fasting means that we are not being casual about our prayer, this is not something we don’t care

¹ Many modern versions omit the reference to fasting, because some early Greek manuscripts also omit it. But it does occur in many of the early versions, suggesting that Jesus really did include the reference to fasting.