

The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting

INTRODUCTION

¹⁶ "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites *do*, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

¹⁷ "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:16-18 (NASB)

¹⁴ Then the disciples of John *came to Him, asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. Matthew 9:14-15 (NASB)

⁴ Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, ⁵ "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?' ⁶ ~'When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves? Zechariah 7:4-6 (NASB)

I. Different Contexts for Fasting.

A. To express mourning and repentance after God's judgment.

¹³ They took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days. 1 Samuel 31:13 (NASB)

¹² They mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the people of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. 2 Samuel 1:12 (NASB)

⁴ When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Nehemiah 1:4 (NASB)

B. To demonstrate grief and repentance in order to avoid God's judgment

¹ Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. ² The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. ³ While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day; and for *another* fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God. Nehemiah 9:1-3 (NASB)

C. To seek God's protection or provision.

²¹ Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. ²² For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him." ²³ So we fasted and sought our God concerning this *matter*, and He listened to our entreaty. Ezra 8:21-23 (NASB)

¹⁵ Then Esther told *them* to reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶ "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." ¹⁷ So Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him. Esther 4:15-17 (NASB)

D. To seek God's will or direction

¹ Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. Acts 13:1-3 (NASB)

²³ When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Acts 14:23 (NASB)

E. Fasting must be part of a broader righteous life

³ 'Why have we fasted and You do not see? *Why* have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?' Behold, on the day of your fast you find *your* desire, And drive hard all your workers. ⁴ "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like *you do* today to make your voice heard on high. ⁵ "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord? ⁶ "Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke? ⁷ "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ "Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Isaiah 58:3-8 (NASB)

II. Some suggestions for fasting.