

“FASTING: ITS PURPOSES, PRACTICES AND PITFALLS”

Dr. Jerry Nelson
www.soundliving.org
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Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? While the book has a very insufficient answer, its title certainly poses an often asked question.

And the corollary to it is: Why do good things happen to bad people?

Most us don't have to live very long to realize we aren't in control of our destiny.

Oh, we act like we are: we exercise and eat certain kinds of foods to live longer.

- we work hard to make money.
- we buy insurance and retirement plans to secure our future.

There is certainly nothing wrong with any of those things but we know that the best among us get sick or have accidents and we all eventually die.

And in spite of how well we plan, or how good we are, it seems that some of the best people have nothing while some of the worst people seem to have everything.

Look with me at Psalm 73. That is an old lament: Nearly 3000 years ago the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 73:3-5, 12-14.

“For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills... that is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain I kept my heart pure and in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.’

Or as the author of Ecclesiastes wrote (5:15-16)

“Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. This too is a grievous evil; As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind?”

Much of life can seem so senseless when we step off the merry-go-round of busyness and look at it closely.

Where is it going?
What is the point of life?

Again I refer to the Psalmist who wrote:
‘When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me’ (73:16)

Most of us keep from thinking about it very often but every once in a while, this uneasiness creeps into our consciousness.

“When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me.”

But hear the Psalmist again: Verse 17

“It was oppressive to me - UNTIL I ENTERED THE SANCTUARY OF GOD...”
How did that change things?

When he entered into the presence of God it changed his perspective.

Look at v. 17b “then I understood their final destiny.”

I saw that what appeared to be final to me, when I looked at how the wicked prospered, was in fact not the end of the story.

Look at v. 21-24, where he also saw something about his own destiny.

“When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.”

Life is not pointless! It has direction!

Those who trust in You, God, know their destiny – know the final outcome.

Again, I ask how did the Psalmist get this perspective?

He “entered the sanctuary of God”—he came into the presence of God.
He spent time in God’s presence
He talked to God,
He reflected on who God is, what He has done and will do.
He spent time talking with God about God, about life, about what actually counts in life.

Look again at verse 23-24. It is not only that God shows me the final outcome of all things, but He leads me here and now through the maze of decisions and obstacles called life:

“You hold me by my right hand, you guide me with your counsel.”

The counsel of God comes as I get into His presence and seek His will.

Two weeks ago I introduced the issue of living the Christian life.

I asked, “How do we handle all of the demands of life?
How do we face the crises of living?”

The apostle Paul said that we need to exercise our spiritual muscles.
We must grow in our ability to handle life.

How does that spiritual growth come about?

Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”

Learn how He prepared to handle the demands of life.

Luke says (2:52) that Jesus grew in wisdom.

He was fully God but also fully a human who had to learn, to grow, to mature.

What did He do to grow?

How did Jesus keep His perspective in life?

How did he meet the challenges that came?

How did He withstand the pressures to give up?

Where did He find the will to keep on?

Jesus found it where the Psalmist found it:

IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS FATHER/GOD

Throughout His life, as we see from studying the last three years, Jesus had regular periods of prayer.

These were times when he got into the presence of God and communed with Him.

It was a habitual practice of Jesus to spend time in God's presence.

From it he learned the Father's will,

From it he learned the Father's love and greatness,

He kept his heart in tune with God and as He did His love and devotion to God gained in power.

As he exercised the discipline of spending time with God He grew in wisdom.

One of the key ways that Jesus prepared to meet the demands of life was to spend time with God—

And when he was about to face the first big test—temptation of Satan—of his life, that we know of, the Scripture says that he fasted—went without food - and when he faced the last big test of His life - His crucifixion, the Scripture says that He spent the night in prayer - He got into the presence of God.

In one case the Bible says He fasted, in the other it says He prayed.

In the Bible there is an almost inseparable connection between these two actions: praying and fasting

While not every prayer includes fasting, it is true that almost every time of fasting mentioned included prayer.

When the people of God got very serious about their situation, when they needed God's intervention in an unusual way, when they wanted to praise Him in a special way -

THEY FASTED AND PRAYED.

Matthew Barker, a Puritan pastor whom I quoted last week, called fasting "the devotion of the whole (person) to a solemn extraordinary attendance upon God, in a particular time, separated for that (purpose)..." (from Puritan sermons Vol 2, 1674)

Most of us don't fast for the same reason we don't pray, we don't feel the need.

Please listen to last Sunday's sermon on tape!!

Today: I want you to see some of the examples of fasting in the Bible and what they

teach us.

I have divided the fasting illustrations of the Bible into three kinds: the fasting of penitence, petition or praise that in extraordinary times when they sought forgiveness, when they sought God's help, or when they wanted to worship Him—they fasted!!

I. FIRST THERE IS THE FASTING OF PRAISE: This is coming into God's presence to praise and worship Him.

Look at Acts 13:2. It says of the disciples of Jesus after His departure to heaven that they were worshipping the Lord and fasting.

In Luke 2:37 it is recorded that Anna, a very old woman who was present when Jesus was dedicated, was a lady who spent night and day in the temple worshipping God through prayer and fasting.

I recently asked a friend of mine to describe his experience of fasting to me. Worship was the first thing that he spoke of in relationship to his fasting. He told me how that is the most important aspect of fasting for him. It is during fasting that his worship is intensified and most meaningful.

I know that it is during fasting when my own sense of the presence of the Lord is heightened.

My prayer is sweeter and more intimate.
I feel drawn closer to the Lord than at other times.
I come into His presence in a fuller and richer way.

Why is that true?

I'm not sure I can explain it.

There is no direct connection between lack of food and worship but I believe there is an indirect connection.

I suspect it is the issue of concentration.

When I have willingly given up food in order to spend time in God's presence in a special way—I am intentionally focusing all of my attention on Him.

I am still such a novice when it comes to this issue of private praise through prayer and fasting BUT I want to be able to say with the Psalmist:

"My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord.
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God" –
I long to be in His presence.

It is in His presence that my perspective on life is the clearest.
There I keep my head clear about what really counts.

Jesus fasted and prayed in Praise - He gave extraordinary attention to God the Father –
thereby He grew,
He was equipped
He was prepared to live victoriously.

As God impresses it upon your mind, you may choose to fast and pray in praise.

II. NEXT I WANT YOU TO SEE THE FASTING OF PENITENCE AND REPENTANCE:

No, I didn't say penance, I said penitence.
I'm not talking about the old Roman Catholic idea of making up for your sin by fasting. Thomas Aquinas spoke of fasting as a way to satisfy the demands of justice against our sin!!

I'm talking about the confession of our sin.

I'm talking about the sincere expression of sorrow for having disregarded and disobeyed God.

This fasting of penitence is an extraordinary attendance upon God, seeking His mercy and forgiveness.

We believe there is a God who judges sin—
A God who still disciplines His people when they disregard His will and ways.

We believe it is necessary to seek His forgiveness for our sin against Him and against each other.

Please look with me at Nehemiah 9:1-3
Also at Joel 1:14 & 2:12-17 – don't look up
Just as Nehemiah, so Joel called on the people to confess their sin and seek God's forgiveness.
He called on them to repent and turn from their ways to follow God in obedience.

Someone may say, "I understand that we must confess our sin when we sin against God, but why fast?"

These people fasted because they were serious about this.
They knew they had sinned against a holy God and they were not going to just pass it off like a 3-year-old who says with very little or no meaning, when commanded to, "I'm sorry."

These people in Joel's day were making their bodies comply with their attitudes
I'm grieved over my sin - and when grief comes we lose our appetite.

It is saying by our actions: "This is so important that I must spend time in the presence of my God -- confessing my sin and vowing to turn from it."

Just a couple of years ago many of the religious leaders of our country called upon all Christians to set aside a specific day for prayer and fasting to confess the sins of our nation just as Nehemiah had done many years ago.

In the early days of this country there were several such days called for—days when the people would meet together in churches all across the nation to corporately confess the sins of the nation.

There was a time when people of a particular church would gather together and fast and pray for a day or more confessing their sins against one another and asking for God's forgiveness.

There is still a need for such action both privately and corporately. I expect to see the day when this church will gather together in sincere confession of sin, fasting and praying for God's mercy and for His blessing.

As God impresses it upon your heart I challenge you to fast in penitence, in confession of sin.

III. FINALLY, I WANT YOU TO SEE THE FASTING OF PETITION.

This is that devotion of your whole self to a solemn extraordinary attention upon God - when we seen His intervention in a certain situation or His wisdom for guidance.

Last week we looked at 2 Chronicles 20 (Tell the story)
see especially vss. 3, 4, 12

2 Samuel 12 vs. 21-22

A pastor friend of mine told me recently of a time in the life of their church when they had to make a life-changing decision. Their denomination was forcing them to take a theological position with which they disagreed.

To go along with the denomination would have forced them into actions that they believed to be contrary to the express word of God.

To not go along with their denomination would mean separation from the denomination and separation from some even within their own number.

That pastor and several of the leaders called a fast and for many days they fasted and prayed seeking the face of God and asking for His guidance in the matter.

Why fast? Because this was an unusual situation that called for a devotion of the whole self to a solemn extraordinary attendance upon God.

In the examples in the Bible where men and women fasted to seek the will of God for a situation or for God's intervention it says in different places they, PLEADED, INQUIRED, PETITIONED, PRAYED, CRIED OUT, CALLED URGENTLY.

It is obvious they meant business.

You don't find such fasting to be routine in the Bible but the principle is that when there are those special times that you face an unusual crisis or decision then you appeal to God in an unusual way.

No, this is not to twist God's arm.
This is not making a sacrifice so that God will owe you one.

The fasting earns nothing.
The fasting simply allows you to focus your whole attention on this issue that is so important to you.

I don't think that I prove anything to an all-knowing God but I sure do prove something to myself – I mean business.

I fast and pray in petitioning God not to force my desire on Him but to seek His desire.

2 Chronicles 20 "Lord we don't know what to do."
2 Samuel 12 "I fasted because I didn't know what God would do. I waited on Him for His answer."

To prove that David wasn't attempting to coerce God, notice that after He fasts and prays, he does what?

He goes to WORSHIP
Whatever God had decided – David was ready to worship.

Job said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

As God impresses it upon your heart – pray and fast in petitions to your Father/God.

I wish to give you three warnings about fasting:

1. Matthew 6. Do not fast for show.
God is nauseated by pretentious, hypocritical actions.
Beware of spiritual pride in yourself— even if you tell no one.
2. Zechariah 7. If you aren't fasting to meet with God don't fast!
Hollow religious activities are anathema to God.
3. Isaiah 58/Jeremiah 14. If you don't intend to obey God in what you already know to do - don't fast.
And if you don't intend to respond in obedience to what you learn in a fast don't fast.

Let me make some suggestions regarding the physical aspects of fasting:

1. Learn how to walk before you run.
Begin by fasting for just two meals or just skipping one meal for the purpose of praying and getting with God.
Later you can expand that to a full 24 hours or even 3 days.

2. If you have special medical problems - please consult with your doctor before fasting. But let me quickly add that there are very few conditions which do not allow fasting.
3. When you fast drink water or even fruit juices. Doctors say that there is no reason to drink more than your body craves but don't deny yourself water unless you believe God has called you to that in a very definite way.
Remember, getting sick from fasting carries no merit. You aren't holier because you are fasting or fasting in a particularly painful way.

That is a misguided asceticism and is dangerous not only to your body but to your soul.

Monitor your inner attitude - is it pride that drives you to fast or is it a desire to be in the presence of your God?

4. Occasional dizziness may occur but is usually very temporary. Bad breath will occur but can be controlled somewhat by mints or some substitute.
5. As to any medicinal value to fasting, the reports from physicians are mixed on that and besides, that's not the point of the fasting of which we are speaking.

Many years ago Englishman, John Wesley wrote this in regards to fasting:

“First, let it be done unto the Lord, with our eye singly fixed on Him.

Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven;

To express our sorrow and shame for our many sins:

to add seriousness and earnestness to our prayers;

to avert the wrath of God;

and to obtain all the great and precious promises which He hath made to us in Jesus Christ.

Let us beware of imagining that we merit anything of God by our fasting.

We cannot be too often warned of this:

Inasmuch as a desire to earn our own righteousness, to gain our own salvation by earning it instead of receiving it by grace, is so deep y rooted in our hearts.

Fasting is only a way which God hath ordained, wherein we wait for His unmerited mercy; and wherein, without us deserving it, He has promised freely to give us his blessing.” (slightly edited) pg. 35 of Wallis

Jesus fasted and prayed, by it He grew—will you?