

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF FASTING

Christians who accept the invitation to fast have the unique privilege of identifying with some of the great heroes of faith throughout the ages. Fasting has a varied and interesting past.

### **Fasting in the Old Testament**

The word "fast" is derived from the Hebrew term *tsom*, which refers to the practice of self-denial. The New Testament using the Greek word *nesteia* for the fast, also refers to self-denial.

Most scholars believe that the practice of fasting began with the loss of appetite during times of great distress and duress. Hannah, who would later become the mother of Samuel, was so distressed about her barrenness that "she wept and did not eat" (1 Sam. 1:7). Also, when King Ahab failed in his attempt to purchase Naboth's vineyard, he "would eat no food" (1 Kings 21:4).

Fasting apparently began as a natural expression of grief; however, after time it became customary to reflect or prove one's grief to others by abstaining from food and/or showing sorrow. David fasted to demonstrate his grief at Abner's death (see 2 Sam. 3:35). Many references in Scripture describe fasting as "afflicting" one's soul or body (see Isa. 58:3,5, *KJV*). Fasting came to be practiced as an external means of demonstrating and later encouraging an internal feeling of remorse for sin.

Fasting was a perfectly natural human expression of human grief; therefore, it became a religious custom to placate the anger of God. People began fasting to turn away God's anger from destroying them. Eventually, fasting became a basis for making one's petition effective to God. David defended his fasting before the death of his son by Bathsheba, indicating his hope that while the child lived David's prayer might be answered. When the child died, David promptly ended his fast, denoting that he knew then that neither fasting nor praying could any longer avail (see 2 Sam. 12:15-23),

When God vented His wrath against a nation for its wickedness, fasting became a national mode of seeking divine favor and protection. Therefore, it was only natural that a group of people should associate themselves in confession, fasting, sorrow for sin and intercession to God.

### **Fasting in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, fasting was a widely practiced discipline, especially among the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus began His public ministry with an extended fast of 40 days (see Matt. 4:1,2). As we have noted, when the apostles of Jesus were criticized by both the Pharisees and John the Baptist's disciples for not fasting, Jesus defended their not fasting while He was present, but implied that they would fast after He was taken from them (see Matt. 9:14,15).

## **Page 2**

Jesus gave His disciples no specific guidelines concerning the frequency of fasting. He taught that their fasting should differ from that of the Pharisees in that they should fast to God rather than to impress others with their supposed spirituality (see Matt. 6:16-18). Fasting was later practiced in the New Testament Church, especially when ordaining elders and/or designating people for special ministry projects (see Acts 13:1-3). Fasting was apparently practiced by Paul and other Christian leaders fairly regularly (see 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 6:5).

### **Fasting in the Early Church**

Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, born in A.D. 315, asked, "Who does not know that the fast of the fourth and sixth days of the week are observed by the Christians throughout the world?" Early in the history of the Church, Christians began fasting twice weekly, choosing Wednesdays and Fridays to prevent being confused with the Pharisees, who fasted Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The practice of fasting for several days before Easter to prepare spiritually for the celebration of Christ's resurrection was also commonly practiced. Later, this fast took the form of a series of 1-day fasts each week for several weeks prior to Easter. Remnants of these Early Church fasts are seen in the Catholic traditions of shunning meats other than fish on Fridays, and the observation of Lent during the 40-day period prior to Easter. It was also customary for Christians in the post-apostolic period to fast in preparation for their baptisms.

#### **Fasting in Revival Movements**

The discipline of fasting has long been associated with reform and revivalistic movements in Christianity. The founders of the monastic movement practiced fasting as a regular discipline in their spiritual lives. Although later monasticism grew to practice fasting and other forms of asceticism in a vain attempt to achieve salvation, it is probable that the earliest monks fasted in their desire for the Church to experience revival and reform.

Each of the sixteenth-century reformers also practiced fasting, as did the leaders of the evangelical revivals in the centuries to follow. Jonathan Edwards fasted for 22 hours prior to preaching his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." During the Laymen's Prayer Revival in America in 1859, Christians fasted during their lunch hours and attended prayer meetings in churches near their places of employment. This prayer revival broke out in the large industrial cities of the northeastern United States.

Prayer was often accompanied by fasting as people sought the Lord for spiritual blessing during the worldwide awakening in 1906. Billy Graham reports fasting and praying during his voyage to England to conduct his first British crusades in the early '50s. The response in his meetings at that time has been described as one of the greatest revivals of our time. Many revival movements have advocated a return to the early Christian practice of fasting two days each week.

**Fasting for Divine Intervention**

Periodically, political leaders have declared a national day of prayer and fasting for divine intervention in crisis situations. In 1588, the victory of Sir Francis Drake over the Spanish Armada was widely recognized by the English as an act of divine intervention.

The pilgrims fasted the day before disembarking from the Mayflower in 1620, as they prepared to establish a mission colony to reach the native peoples of North America. It was common for political leaders in many New England villages to call for a fast when they faced a crisis.

Friday, February 6, 1756, was designated a day of solemn fasting and prayer in England as it faced the threat of being conquered by Napoleon.

Lincoln also called for a national day of prayer and fasting during the Civil War. On both occasions, military victories by England and the northern states of the United States were viewed as divine interventions by those who fasted and prayed for those successes.

Similar days of prayer and fasting have been proclaimed by political leaders as recently as World War II. In the midst of the Battle of Britain, George VI designated Sunday, September 8, 1940, as a day of prayer and fasting. In a radio broadcast made days after the day of prayer, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill compared Britain's state with the earlier threats of the Spanish Armada and Napoleon. In his memoirs, Churchill identified September 15 (the Sunday following the day of prayer) as "the crux of the Battle of Britain." After the war, it was learned that Hitler decided to postpone his planned invasion of Britain for two days (September 17). Similar calls for a day of prayer also accompanied the D day invasion of Europe by the allies on June 6, 1944.

In short, fasting has a long and impressive history as a discipline adopted by believers for a variety of reasons, but all of them are connected by the principle of self-denial. We may deny the self to emphasize the needs of the nation, of others who need God's blessing or of our own spiritual needs.