

# Hungry ... for God?

by John Hewitson

Have you ever fasted as a deliberate spiritual discipline? I have. And I like John Wimber's comment about how it should rather be called a 'slow'! It's not easy, even missing just one meal, for us who are used to having all the food we ever want. (It often makes me feel more irritable than spiritual!)

Fasting is a spiritual discipline with many Biblical examples, modeled and taught by Jesus. Yet, since the Reformation, Protestant churches have largely neglected it. Popular books on prayer say virtually nothing about it.

However, fasting is making a comeback. More and more churches and groups seek God in prayer *with* fasting. Corporate fasting is often mentioned in reports of revival and community transformation. Regular congregational fasts are now common in some church communities. It's as if God has tapped his people on the shoulder and said, "Remember fasting?"

Even teens are fasting in surprising numbers. Like their parents, they are searching for more of God's presence, a closer relationship with him in their lives. Generally they seem more willing than adults to sacrifice pizza for prayer! They have energy, and they want to do some- thing radical. Perhaps they also have more faith. Parents meantime worry about nutrition or eating disorders. I have several times been quietly 'consulted' after church by parents who want me, for health reasons, to tell their kids not to fast! (I generally side with the teens!)

Our children are looking to us to model fasting. Teens I interact with today have a spiritual hunger reminiscent of those in the Jesus Movement of the sixties and seventies. Fasting makes plain sense to them; Jesus said we should, so why don't we?

## **What does the Bible say?**

Fasting was an expected discipline in both the Old and New Testament eras. Moses went on two 40-day fasts during his mountaintop experience with God (*Exodus* 24: 18; 34:28). King Jehoshaphat called the people, of Judah to fast to appeal to God to protect them from an impending invasion (*2 Chronicles* 20: 1-30). Esther asked the Jews to fast from food and water for three days (*Esther* 4: 16), culminating in their dramatic rescue. The Ninevites fasted and God chose not to destroy them as he had originally told Jonah he would (*Jonah* 3:5-10).

Paul and Barnabas were commissioned from the church at Antioch, launching their missionary work after church leaders fasted and prayed (*Acts* 13: 1-3).

The best-known account of fasting in the Bible is Jesus' 40-day fast. It followed his baptism, concluded with his temptation by Satan, and served as a prelude to his public ministry.

Jesus specifically taught about *when* you fast, not *if* you fast (*Matthew* 6: 16). We like to point to the part about prayer - '*when* you pray' in *verse* 7- to urge people to pray, yet neglect Jesus' equal emphasis on fasting and giving alms. He *expects* us to fast!

Jesus later said, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast" (*Luke* 5:34). *Those days* are now: we should be fasting for the return of the Bridegroom.

The question is not, "Should I fast?" but "When and how will I fast?"

### **What is fasting?**

Fasting is a symbolic act. It is a *spiritual* discipline more than a physical one; a *spiritual* discipline symbolized physically. It is a lot like baptism or communion -an outward physical sign is used to signify some- thing inward and spiritual. Without the inward reality, the sign is meaningless at best, idolatry at worst.

For example, *Isaiah* 58 teaches that a lifestyle of serving the poor, rather than consuming another commodity, can be called a 'fast'. Most of our life is a gorging of one artificially inflamed appetite after another (not just for food). Any denial of appetite for the sake of ministry for God is a 'fast' -and one that would please God more than a hundred skipped lunches with a view to a second helping at supper!

The meaning of fasting is simply our hunger for God and for God's righteousness expressed with abandon. This is specifically the abandonment of normal good things, as we pursue ('draw near to' -*James* 4:8) the One who pursues us. Like all symbols, its meaning is best grasped as we live through it.

### **The Biblical way to humble ourselves**

King David said, "I humble myself through fasting" (*Psalms* 35: 13). Biblically, fasting is inextricably linked to the command to, *humble ourselves*. Fasting has always been the way that God's people both individually and collectively humble themselves before him.

When Ezra was leading exiles back to Jerusalem he 'proclaimed a fast, so that we might *humble our- selves* before God' (*Ezra* 8:21-23). In *Isaiah* 58: 5 God describes fasting as 'a day for a man to *humble himself* .The command is to humble *yourself* The Bible never says ask God to humble you. We are to take the initiative. God will, in fact, humble those who attempt to exalt or promote themselves, whilst he will exalt those who humble themselves! (See 1 *Peter* 5:6 and *James* 4: 10, and Jesus' words in *Matthew* 23: 12.)

Fasting is a means of humbling ourselves before God, letting him know that we are willing to exchange physical comforts to seek him for a spiritual feast! We humble ourselves to seek his face, his presence, and thereby to understand *his* will, rather than to express our own!

Of course fasting itself does not lead to humility; it depends on one's heart, one's motives. The Pharisees made fasting and prayer a point of boasting to demonstrate their piety (*Matthew* 6:16-18) and Jesus rebuked them. Fasting is a humbling of

oneself only if done with a pure heart (i.e. right motives). Then the very thought of exalting oneself is foreign.

### **Dangers, misuses of fasting**

Fasting needs a warning label! It can be, and often is, misused. The Old Testament prophets repeatedly point this out. Fasting is misused when its goal is self-interest. It is also not meant as a tool to force an answer to our prayers.

Richard Foster writes in *Celebration of Discipline*: "At times there is such stress on the blessings and benefits of fasting that we would be tempted to believe that, with a little fast, we could have the world, including God, eating out of our hand. Fasting must always centre on God and what *he* wants."

In *A Hunger for God* John Piper says something similar, pointing out that Jesus' teaching on fasting "is calling for a radical orientation on God himself. He is pushing us to have a real, authentic, personal relationship with God".

The Old Testament prophets repeatedly corrected Israel's misuse of fasting. The best known example is *Isaiah 58*, where we see that *how we live* apart from our fasting is the real test of the authenticity of that fasting. Isaiah says if, in spite of fasting you are self-indulgent in other areas, or harsh toward your employees, or irritable and contentious, then your fasting is *not acceptable* to God!

We cannot substitute religious disciplines for righteous living! Specifically, Isaiah is concerned that the hungry be fed and the oppressed be liberated. This *feeding and freeing* is what Isaiah calls God's *chosen fast*.

The prophets saw the abuse of people God loved just as he saw it, and loved them as he did. Thus they wept with his tears and decried injustice with his voice. Fasting is meant to awaken us to the hunger of the world, not just our own hunger.

### **SOME BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF FASTING**

- ◆ Yom Kippur
- ◆ Moses – Deut 9:9, 18
- ◆ All Israel – Judges 20:26, 1 Sam 7:6
- ◆ 1 Sam 31:8-13
- ◆ 2 Sam 12:15-23
- ◆ 2 Chron 7:14
- ◆ 2 Chron 20:1-19
- ◆ Esther 4:12-17
- ◆ Ezra 8:21-23, 31, 32
- ◆ Neh 1:1-11; 9:1ff
- ◆ David – Ps 35:13, 69:9,10
- ◆ Joel 2:12, 13
- ◆ Isa 58
- ◆ Dan 9:1-17, 22,23
- ◆ Joan 3:1-10
- ◆ John the Baptist
- ◆ Anna – Luke 2:36,37
- ◆ Jesus – Matt 4:1-11
- ◆ The early church – Acts 13:1-5, 14:20-24
- ◆ Paul – 2 Cor 11:27