

WHY Should We Fast?

What purpose does fasting serve? This subject is as vital in our Christian lives as prayer or Bible study! Yet, many have neglected or completely omitted this phase of their Christian lives.

HUNDREDS of newly baptized members of God's Church have not grasped the primary benefits and meaning of fasting. Many who have been in God's Church for years have not come to full understanding of the purposes of fasting.

As one recently baptized member said: "Oh yes, I tried fasting *once*, and all it did for me was to make me hungry and weak!" Is this our approach to fasting? Is this all we get out of fasting? We need to understand the deep significance of fasting.

To Get Closer to God

Some brethren have the idea that fasting is a kind of penance—that God is pleased when we punish ourselves by a fast. This is *absolutely wrong*. We fast to draw closer to God—to get away from the world and the flesh.

The deep spiritual lessons and examples that fasting can teach us cannot be learned in any other way. Unless or until we experience the profound spiritual benefit of fasting, we will never know what a vital part it can play in our lives.

How to Fast

Many of us have never really learned to fast progressively. Many of us have never learned because we have never really seen the need and purpose before. Many of us have never understood fasting and why it should be a regular and diligent practice in our lives. A good way to begin is to make the positive decision to fast for *one meal*. We might decide that breakfast would be the meal to begin with. The procedure, then, would be to go to bed the previous night with the *positive realization* that the following morning we were going to have to put away the temptation and desire to eat and drink according to our regular routine. We must place ourselves in a *positive* mental attitude that we need to draw closer to God. When morning comes, we should go about our normal routine of dressing and grooming for the day—all the while realizing that it is NOT just the normal routine, but rather a time when we are giving special attention to afflicting our bodies before God. When the time comes for the usual morning meal, we should devote that time to prayer in place of satisfying our hunger and thirst. During this prayer we should ask God to help us draw closer to Him.

Christ's Example

Jesus Christ knows the kind of life to which we are called. He knows we are going to have to face trial and temptation. He knows we need to prepare and to condition ourselves. In the 6th chapter of Matthew, Jesus Christ gave us the example of how to pray. Certainly, all of us realize that prayer is a vital part of Christian living, yet, Jesus Christ placed the same emphasis on *fasting*, in this chapter, as He did on prayer.

Notice the 16th verse. Jesus Christ said: "Moreover **WHEN** you fast..." Yes, Jesus Christ did not say *if* you fast, but rather *when* you fast. Jesus Christ intends that we fast frequently and often.

He further explains *how* to fast. "...be not as the hypocrites, of a *sad countenance*: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you they have their reward." These scribes and Pharisees of Christ's day did not fast for the deep spiritual purpose that was intended. They fasted to get the pity and the approbation of men. They would let their hair hang down in stringy masses on their heads. They would not wash themselves nor groom themselves at all. They would walk about the streets in a downcast dejected manner with grimaces and pain written all over their faces. They did this in order for *others* to see them and say, "Oh, look at that poor fellow. He's been *fasting*." These hypocrites would hope that people would say to themselves, "Oh, isn't he a righteous man because he's fasting."

Christ tells us that we are not to fast in this manner. He tells us, "But thou, when thou fastest anoint thy head, and wash thy face; that thou appear *not* unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father which sees in secret, shall reward thee *openly*."

Christ's Greatest Trial

Jesus Christ was faced with a trial of enduring and overcoming greater than any of us will ever face. Jesus Christ had to meet Satan the Devil in cataclysmic combat. If Jesus Christ had failed in this temptation that was to be placed before Him, He would have disqualified Himself as the Messiah and Saviour of all mankind. Let us notice how Jesus Christ prepared Himself for this greatest of all trials.

In Matthew 4:1 we see that Jesus Christ was led up of the Spirit into the

wilderness to be *tempted* of the Devil. Jesus Christ went out *specifically* into the wilderness to be tempted of Satan the Devil. He had to overcome that temptation and trial and to prove that He was able to be the Messiah and Saviour of mankind. This was a spiritual battle far more significant and tremendous than any of us realize. Satan the Devil laid before Jesus Christ the reality of this temptation in a manner more poignant and real than any temptation that has ever been placed before us. Jesus Christ knew He was going to have to endure this temptation and trial and He therefore *prepared* Himself for it.

What was the first thing Jesus Christ began to do? What was the first thing that Jesus Christ turned to to fortify Himself and to prepare Himself for this trial?

It was **FAS'ING!**

In verse 2 we read, "And when he had *fasted* **FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS**, he was afterward *hungered*." For forty days and forty nights Jesus Christ fasted before God and afflicted His body. Jesus Christ had endured and had overcome the desire to eat and to drink for forty long days and nights. Now, the tempter came to Jesus Christ to tempt Him. The first thing that Satan tempted Jesus Christ with was the temptation to consume physical food and also to prove that He had Godly power. Satan said, "If you be the Son of God, command these stones to be made bread."

The twisted mind of Satan thought that Jesus Christ would be at His *weakest*—since He had gone without food and water for such a long period of time.

But let's consider for a moment! Jesus Christ had been fighting against this *very temptation* now for forty days and forty nights. Being tempted to change stones into bread in order that He might eat, was a temptation that Jesus Christ had already fought against for many long days and nights. It was nothing new to Him! Therefore, when Satan the Devil came to Him with this very temptation, Jesus Christ was prepared! Jesus Christ had been living by every Word of God *alone* for forty days and forty nights. Jesus Christ was at His *strongest* to endure this type of temptation. Therefore, when Satan the Devil came before Him, tempting Him to change stones into bread, He was able to say, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that pro-

ceeds out of the mouth of God."

Many of us have thought that Satan the Devil attacked Jesus Christ at His very weakest. On the contrary, Jesus Christ was at His strongest. He had just been through a forty-day and forty-night period of severe testing and trial that had prepared Him spiritually and made Him spiritually able to resist the temptations that were coming upon Him. Finally, after enduring and overcoming the additional temptations that Satan brought upon Him, Jesus Christ was able to say, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, thou shalt worship the Eternal thy God and him only shalt thou serve (verse 10).

Further Reasons for Fasting

Many times in our lives we are faced with making important decisions—decisions that not only affect our lives but possibly the lives of others. Certainly we should seek wise counsel and multitude of counselors in making any decision (Prov. 11:14). God is our greatest Counselor. We should certainly seek Him diligently for the answer to any decision we must reach. There can be no better way to ask God for counsel and wisdom in any decision *than fasting*. If we begin to fast when there is an important decision to be made and spend the normal time we would spend in eating in crying out to God for wisdom in the matter, the answer will surely come.

God shows us the need of fasting when a decision has to be reached by the examples recorded in Acts 13:1-3; 14:23. In the church at Antioch a decision had to be made who was to be sent on an evangelistic journey into Asia Minor. Notice, "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the *Holy Spirit said*, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had *fasted and prayed*, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:2, 3). Again, in Acts 14:13, we clearly see that before elders were ordained in the churches in Asia Minor, the evangelists and ministers prayed to God with *fasting* before coming to their all-important decision.

How to Fast

Many questions may arise on how to conduct a fast and what our attitude should be upon beginning a fast. Many have elected to fast and carried through a fast without any specific realization or purpose in fasting. Many of us have felt that we need to fast but have not known what to fast for or the purpose in fasting.

We should always have a DEFINITE PURPOSE in mind when we fast.

As David gives us the example in II Samuel 14, we can fast also and beseech God to intervene and help us in a specific thing that may occur in our lives. Another purpose for fasting may be for

health purposes in cleansing our bodies of impurities and toxins.

In the ordinary routine of working it will not be possible to fast much more than a day or two at a time. Usually 24 or 48 hours of fasting will be sufficient while we are employed in our regular routine activities. During these times—since we are required to be occupied with the normal daily activities—we should utilize the normal mealtime for sincere, heart-rending prayers to God—devoted to the specific reason for fasting.

If we should feel the need for a longer and more prolonged fast from time to time, we should utilize the opportunities that vacations and certain "days off" afford us. There will certainly be several times during the year when we may employ several days in a row for fasting. Even when there is not a special period of time off or vacation, by using wisdom we will find time for extra fasting. For example, we may begin a fast on Thursday, fasting during Thursday and Friday then carrying it through Sabbath and Sunday when we do not have to work at our jobs.

How Often Should We Fast?

The question often arises, how often should I fast? Nowhere in the Bible do we have an exact statement of how often we should fast. Yet, we have several examples which will help us to understand how often we should practice fasting in our lives. As we have previously seen, the Apostle Paul fasted *often* (II Cor. 10:27). The Apostle Paul had no specific command in the Old Testament teaching him how often he should fast. However, Paul was acutely aware of the race he was running and how diligently he needed to strive in order to enter God's Kingdom. He considered it necessary to fast often—even in the face of the trials and afflictions he constantly endured—in order to maintain the spiritual strength he needed to continue serving God and finally to achieve the crown of righteousness.

The Gentile, *Cornelius*, lived such a life of service and overcoming before God that God considered it important enough to send an apostle—Peter—to preach to him the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and to baptize him and his family. It is significant that Cornelius had been praying and *fasting* before God when God finally elected to send the Apostle Peter to him (Acts 10:30).

It was when the prophet Daniel elected to set his heart to understand, and to *chasten* himself before God with fasting, that God sent the angel Gabriel to reveal to Daniel some of the most vital prophecies of the Bible. See Daniel 10:2, 3, 12. The purpose of fasting is not to punish ourselves in a form of penance, but to

draw closer to God by getting away from the world.

The prophet Elijah also sought God in prayer and fasting forty days and forty nights on Mt. Horeb and received the vital answer he sought.

Fasting has certainly played a vital part in the lives of those God has used down through history. From these examples, the principle we should apply in determining how often to fast should be based upon the needs in our lives. Our routine of fasting should certainly be frequent enough and of long enough duration to keep ourselves close to God and in the vital spiritual condition that will enable us to overcome and endure to the end.

The need for fasting is again exemplified by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 7. In showing the proper marriage relationship between husband and wife, Paul clearly shows that *fasting* and prayer is of sufficient importance in our lives to actually interrupt the normal marriage relationship from time to time. Certainly many of us have *not* placed the importance on fasting in the past that we should have.

Every one of us wants to live the vital, progressive and growing life of a sincere Christian. God has placed at our disposal this vital tool and key to overcoming—fasting. Fasting must become a very real part of our lives! Let us not fall short of the tremendous goal and reward that God has prepared for us because we have neglected to utilize this vital tool that God has given us.