

The Missing Link

Have you ever wondered if today's prevalent spirituality in the Church of the West (of which we in North America are a part) resounds with the same vibrancy, earnestness and power as it had in New Testament days? Does your own relationship with the Lord have the same components in it as those of early believers? Does it abound with the same effectiveness as was manifested in the early church? Exactly what characterized the early family of believers? How did the first Christians maintain their spirituality? What made their lives so powerfully effective? I think the Scriptures hold answers to these questions, and if we study them carefully, we might well find a few critical elements of their relationship with the Lord and their spirituality that could transform our relationships to the Lord and the world in which we each live and move and have our being.

What do the Scriptures tell us about how our early brethren lived? Let's have a look.

Luke 2:36-37 *There was also (in the temple the day Jesus was dedicated to the Lord) a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. **She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.***

Matt 4:1 *Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. **2 After fasting forty days and forty nights,** he was hungry.*

Luke 5:33-35

*They said to him, "**John's disciples often fast and pray,** and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."*

Jesus answered, "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.

Matt 6:16-18 *(Jesus said,)*

***"When you fast,* do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.**

But when you fast,* put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; **and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Acts 1:14 *They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

Luke 22:19 *And **he took bread, gave thanks and broke it**, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*

Lu 24:35 *Then they began to describe what had happened on the road, and **how He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.***

Acts 2:42 *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers.*

Acts 13:2 *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting,*

Acts 14:23 *.....and with prayer and fasting.....*

Are you seeing a pattern here? There seems to be a pattern of what some call a life of fasted prayer. What? Prayer is problem enough for many of us; how in the world, why in the world would we add FASTING to it? And not just prayer and fasting, but unity, and breaking of bread together (communion). What? Why? How?

Let me put these in some kind of order as they appear in the Scriptures cited:

Prayer
Fasting
Unity (Fellowship)
Breaking of bread
Teaching

Most of us are familiar with virtually all of these practices of the early church. But the one that most of us have little or no experience in is fasting. But include it in this list, and there seems to be what might be described as a healthy spiritual atmosphere that would be very favorable for God to move in and to bring great glory to Himself. Since fasting may be that which we are least accustomed to, maybe we should devote some thought to it.

What is fasting? Fasting is consciously denying oneself something completely legitimate. In the Scriptures fasting is always associated with not eating food for a period of time, except for one occasion when Paul describes abstaining from marital intimacy for a period of time as an act of self-denial for the purpose of seeking God.

Why fast? It is quite interesting to read current Christian authors who write about fasting today. Since there is no Biblical command that reads “Thou shalt fast!”, some take the position that fasting is irrelevant to Christian spirituality today. But as you have probably garnered from the Scriptures above, fasting combined with prayer was practiced before Christ, during His ministry on earth (even by Jesus Himself), and in the recorded history of the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Beyond that, when Jesus gave instructions about how to fast, He nonchalantly said, “When you fast.....” Thus it seems evident that the Scriptures show plainly that fasting was a normal part of spirituality – and by deduction should be the same in our day and age.

But why fast? Simply put, because we are creatures of the flesh. Our flesh demands comfort in a thousand ways, and often virtually runs us. Our flesh wars against our spirit day and night. And our flesh in truth often owns us – and this is not the way things should be!

Fasting for the purpose of seeking the Lord, combined with prayer is one of the more powerful tools the Lord has given us. What basically do we say to our flesh when we fast? In effect, we put our carnal appetites under the rule of our redeemed spirits. We say to our flesh, “Be still, old man! You do not own me; Jesus Christ does!” Proper fasting with prayer puts our flesh in its place. Your spirit man will learn to rise up and control your flesh man.

How should I fast? Scriptures gives several examples. In general, there are four basic kinds of fasts.

1. Absolute fast.
no eating
no drinking
2. Regular fast.
no eating
drinking permitted
3. Partial fast
e.g., Daniel fast, omitting certain meals
4. Supernatural – Moses, Jesus, others

All of these fasts involve denying ourselves the pleasure of food. The most commonly embraced fasts are the regular fast and the partial fast. Some regularly engage in absolute fasting for a short time.

I spent much of my life as a Christian without embracing fasting. I never heard any teaching about it, and when I did, I pretty much ignored it. My flesh was really glad about that. And so was Dairy Queen! But in the last couple of years, I have come to grips with this. Grappling with the Scriptures, grappling with my own carnal nature, and a growing desire to draw closer to the Lord has convinced me that I need an overhaul in this area of my life. As I have responded to the Spirit's leading, I have been honestly surprised at the authority I have over my flesh man. Fasting with prayer can be as bland as eating dry toast; other times I have experienced victory over my flesh that has opened doors to the Lord's heart. How I long to be fully His! I want to grow more in love with Him every day. I want to take Him up on His promise in Joel 2:12 "Even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting....."

How about you? When was the last time you told your flesh to "get behind me!"? Is fasting with prayer a regular part of your personal relationship to the Lord? Why not give this some prayer and thought?

As always, I welcome responses to these notes and try to answer each letter I receive. In closing, here are some further Scriptural references to fasting.

Ezra 8:21-23; 10:6
Nehemiah 1:4
Esther 4:16
Job 33:19,20
Psalm 69:10; 102:4
Isaiah 58:6
Daniel 9:3,20-23; 10:3
Joel 2:15
Exodus 34:28
Deuteronomy 9:9,18
2 Samuel 12:16,17
Matthew 4:2; 6:16; 9:15
Acts 13:3; 14:23
1 Corinthians 7:5
2 Corinthians 11:27,28
Jonah 3:5,10