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FASTING OR STARVING?

“Is it such a fast that I have chosen? A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day of the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To...” [Is. 58: 5-6]

It is another Lenten season (Ash Wednesday- Good Friday) when it is mandatory in some Christian denominations to fast. Ordinarily, to fast means to deny the body essential nourishment, mainly food and drinks, for a period and for a specific purpose.

Medically, fasting is good for the body. The foods that we eat make deposits of toxic waste in our body which exercises alone cannot remove. By fasting, we give the body time to catch up on its waste management. That is why by the time we have fasted for a few days, our breath is fresher and our body, fitter. As a political weapon, fasting (hunger strike) has been used by freedom fighters to draw attention to their causes. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of modern India, used it to win Independence for his country in 1947.

Fasting is also practised in virtually all the major world religions. For example, it is one of the 5 Pillars of Islam. In the Bible, the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist fasted often. The disciples of Jesus were unable to heal a demon-possessed young man because his situation called for “prayer and fasting” [Matt. 17:21]. Esau might not have lost his birthright to his younger brother, Jacob, if he had been fasting on the day that Jacob tempted him with a pot of pottage [Gen. 25:29-34]!

For believers, fasting should have an entirely different meaning and significance in order to conform with what God wants. Otherwise, many of us may merely be starving ourselves and yet believe that we are fasting! In today’s lesson, we shall examine the subject so that we can understand how to use fasting as a powerful tool to communicate with God.

1. The Concept of Fasting

A woman has two daughters. One is wayward and always irritates her. The other is well behaved and always makes her proud. One day, both daughters refuse to eat her food for reasons unknown to her. In your opinion, which daughter's action will give her a greater concern? In all likelihood, it is the action of her favourite daughter. Why? The explanation lies in the state of her relationship with her children before the hunger strike. Therefore, she is likely to show more immediate concern for her favourite child's needs than for those of the less favoured child.

In our relationship with God, fasting is almost like that for "the Lord is far from the wicked but He heareth the prayer of the righteous" [Prov. 15:29]. In the days of prophet Isaiah, the people of Israel complained bitterly that their fasting had become of no effect. "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and Thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul and Thou takest no knowledge?" [Is. 58:3].

In response, God told them what was wrong with their fasting [Is. 58:4-7]:

- i. it was done to please the world [v. 4]
- ii. they took out their hunger (while fasting) on others by way of anger, strife and "with the fist of wickedness" [v.4]
- iii. they punished their bodies but did not renounce their wicked ways, such as:
 - laying heavy burdens on helpless people that they continued to oppress [v.6]
 - not showing charity and love to the hungry, the poor and the naked [v. 7].

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reinforced God's position on fasting when He said:

*"Moreover when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have received their reward. **But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine 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 seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.**" [Matt. 6:16-18]*

We see from the foregoing that fasting has two aspects: the *physical* and the *spiritual*. When you are fasting, nobody else is supposed to know and you should remain as cheerful as in your other days. I heard the story recently of a household where, each time the father of the house is snapping at everybody and short-tempered, the children will run into their bedroom, chuckling, "Daddy must be fasting again!" So, it is you that will tell others that you are fasting and it may not be in words!

The spiritual aspect has to do with your daily relationship with God. Do you show the fruits of the Holy Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, humility and temperance*? [Gal. 5:22-23]. If you don't, get right with God so that His word can be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path [Ps. 119:105]. After all, if you are fasting but not praying along with it [Lk 2:37; 2 Sam. 12:16; 2 Chron. 20:3], you are either starving or dieting!

When we fast in accordance with the principles outlined above, here is what God has promised us:

*“Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and **thine health shall spring forth speedily and thy righteousness shall go before thee, the glory of the Lord shall be thy rearward** {protection}. **Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry and He shall say, Here I am**” [Is. 58: 8-9]*

What an incentive!

2. Some Biblical Cases

(a) Fasting for Spiritual Purposes

Moses, Elijah and Jesus are the only recorded examples of those who fasted for 40 days and nights. Before you aspire to break their record for the *Guinness Book of World Records*, let's first find out why they did so.

Moses

God had invited Moses to come up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments [Ex. 19:1-3]. He was *in the presence of God* for “*forty days and forty nights*” receiving instructions from Him [Ex. 24:18]. Certainly, that is not the time to be food-hungry. He was *fully* in spirit [Jn 4:24]. When Moses came down, he returned with two tables of stone on which the “finger of God” had written the Ten Commandments [Ex. 31:18]. He was so incensed to find his people in idol worship (the Golden Calf) that he threw the stones at them which then broke [Ex. 32:19].

When Moses returned to the mount, God made him pay for his anger as follows:

- ❑ Moses had to cut out the two tables of stone himself and they had to be “like unto the first” which God Himself had made [Ex. 34:1]
- ❑ Moses himself had to do the writing this time! [Ex. 34:28]

Understandably, therefore, he had to spend another “forty days and forty nights: he did neither eat bread nor drink water” [Ex. 34:28]. Again, he was in God's

presence and on his return, “the skin of his face shone and they {the people} were afraid to come nigh him” [Ex. 34:30].

Elijah

Elijah had just won a major spiritual battle against 450 prophets of Baal whom he got killed [1 Kgs 18:39-40]. Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife, threatened to retaliate. So, Elijah went into hiding [1 Kgs 19:1-4]. It was there that an angel brought him coal-baked cakes and water (just enough for that day!). *On the strength of that food*, he went to “Horeb the mount of God” for forty days and nights [1 Kgs 19:5-8].

It was on this mount and in a cave that God came to Elijah “in a still small voice” [1 Kgs 19:12] to assure him that he was not alone, that there were still 7,000 believers in Israel who had not bowed their knees to Baal. God then commissioned him to anoint Hazael as king of Syria and Elisha as prophet in his own place [1 Kgs 19:15-18]. Again, we see that *it was God’s presence, not Elijah’s own strength that made it possible for him to fast for forty days and nights*.

Jesus

At His baptism by John, the Spirit of God descended on Jesus [Matt. 3:16]. So, “Jesus *being full of the Holy Ghost* returned from Jordan and *was led by the Spirit into the wilderness*” [Lk 4:1]. There, the devil tempted Him for forty days and nights and He ate nothing throughout that period [Lk 4:2; Matt. 4:2]. After that period, he became hungry and the devil continued with the temptation but Jesus defeated him decisively [Matt. 4:2; Lk 4:3-13].

Jesus was preparing for His earthly ministry. Again, we see that *the Holy Spirit was with Him throughout*. We have no other record of His fasting another time. In fact, when the Pharisees asked Him why He and His disciples did not fast as they themselves and John the Baptist’s disciples did, He replied that guests did not go without food while the bridegroom was still with them [Mk 2:18-19]. Jesus is the Bridegroom of the Church and of every believer [Eph. 5:23; Rev. 21:2,9], and He promised us when He was ascending to Heaven, “lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world” [Matt. 28:20].

(b) Fasting for Personal Reasons

David fasted for 7 days when the child born to him by Bathsheba (from their adulterous affair) fell ill [2 Sam. 12:16-18]. Even though David’s sins had been forgiven, the child still died “because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” [2 Sam. 12:14].

When Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem had collapsed, he “mourned certain days and fasted and prayed before the God of Heaven” [**Neh. 1:4**]. He confessed his and his people’s sins and prayed for favours from the king (Artaxerxes) to whom he was a cupbearer [**Neh. 1:5-11**]. Interestingly, when he made his formal request to the king, he told him about the prayer but *did not mention the fasting* [**Neh. 2:4**].

Anna the prophetess became a widow after seven years of marriage. For the next 84 years, she “departed not from the temple but *served God with fastings and prayers night and day*” [**Lk 2:36-37**]. Having not remarried, it can be assumed that she fasted by abstaining from immoral sex. This is consonant with Paul’s position that husbands and wives can with mutual consent “give yourselves to *fasting and praying* and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency” [**1 Cor. 7:5**].

(c) Fasting for National Needs

Jehosaphat, king of Judah, was threatened with massive attack from all directions of his kingdom. What did he do? “Jehosaphat feared and set himself to seek the Lord and *proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah*” [**2 Chron. 20:1-3**]. After the fast, he brought his citizens “out of all the cities of Judah” to the temple in Jerusalem to make a powerful prayer to God for deliverance [**2 Chron. 20:4**]. You know why they came to the temple in Jerusalem that Solomon built? Because God had promised that His ears and eyes would be “attent unto the prayer that is made in this place” and “Mine heart shall be there *perpetually*” [**2 Chron. 7:15-16**]. *There and then*, God answered Jehosaphat through one of the prophets that the battle was the Lord’s, not theirs. He gave them a decisive victory without their throwing a single sword. Again, the principles are clear: *first get right with God; then, your fasting and prayers will be answered.*

3. Emerging Guidelines for Effective Fasting

- (a) Fasting consists mainly of abstaining from food and drinks. However, abstinence from sex-in-marriage for a season *for spiritual purposes* is a form of fasting. One way to practise this is to abstain from marital relations *during* your food fasting.
- (b) *Invariably*, fasting is used in support of prayers and sometimes in combination with offerings [**Judges 20:26**]
- (c) *The mechanics of fasting* [i.e., how-to, duration, intensity, etc.] is not as important as the *essence*. God looks at the total picture. For example, after Ahab had killed poor Naboth and stolen his vineyard, God sent Elijah to warn him of the impending punishment. As soon as he heard that, he “rent his clothes and put sackcloth upon his flesh *and fasted* and lay in sackcloth and went softly.” But, what did God see when He spoke again to Elijah, “seest thou how Ahab *humbleth himself before Me*” [**1 Kgs 21:27-29**]. Therefore, we need not give greater credit to fasting than it deserves!

(d) *Fasting is appropriate when you are seeking God's guidance [Judg. 20:26-28] or to win victory over temptation [Matt. 4:1-11].* More specifically, it is helpful under the following circumstances, for example:

- When you receive sad news and you don't know what to do next: the sickness or death of a dear one, the doctor's report of a life-threatening health condition, etc. Samuel fasted when he heard that the Philistines had defeated the Israelites and seized the Ark of God [**1 Sam. 7:5-6**]
- When danger is knocking at the door, such as an approaching hurricane, war or famine. A whole nation or people can fast over a political or economic crisis. The people of Niniveh fasted after Jonah had warned them about God's plan to overthrow their kingdom in forty days' time [**Jon. 3:5**]. Esther and the Jews fasted when Haman tricked king Ahasuerus to sign a decree to wipe out all the Jews in the Persian Empire [**Esth. 4:16**].
- When you are assuming a higher responsibility (political/social/spiritual): Jesus fasted before He began His earthly ministry. The church at Antioch fasted and ministered to the Lord in preparation for Paul and Barnabas' missionary journeys [**Acts 13:1-3**].

4. Conclusion

If you have ever fasted, you will agree with me that it is never easy. Let's say you started by skipping your breakfast. By 10.00 a.m., your hunger pangs get sharper and more frequent. You may even have nagging headaches. Your entire mind keeps telling you to break the fast and stop the "nonsense"! The devil is at work.

Jesus has told us, quoting an Old Testament truth, "man shall not live by bread alone but *by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*" [**Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3**]. When you give up the bread (food) while fasting, the only way to cope is to increase your *normal daily* intake of the word of God. Without that, you may not have the spiritual strength to continue or complete the fast. Remember, your sword is God's word and your shield is faith, which comes from hearing God's word [**Eph. 6:16-17; Rom. 10:17**].

May the Holy Spirit guide your fasting this Lenten season.