A Short History of Fasting

In the Old Testament, fasting appears to be a prerequisite for revival. In Joel, chapter 2, prior to the prophecy of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh, the people of God are challenged to "declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly" (Joel 2:15). Then God promised, "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Joel 2:28). Is it possible that greater revival, an increase in the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit on all people, is delayed in our day, at least in part, as a result of our lack of fasting, our self-indulgence rather than our self-denial? How often do we really say "no" to ourselves, to our own appetites and cravings, for the sake of seeking the face of God through fasting and prayer?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the disciples how they were to pray and fast; His assumption was that they would do both.

5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full…16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face." Matthew 6: 5, 16-17

When His disciples were criticized for their lack of dietary restraint compared to John the Baptist's disciples, Jesus assured the critics that when He, the bridegroom, was taken from them, then they would fast.

35 "But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast." Luke 5: 35

Benefits of Fasting

In fasting, we humble ourselves, and we know from the book of James that God gives grace and favor to the humble (James 4:10). Jesus' example reminds us of the power over temptation connected with fasting (Luke 4). Throughout the book of Acts, the early Church gathered corporately for periods of prayer and fasting in order to gain clarity and guidance regarding the will of God. This He made known to His people when they were together seeking Him in prayer and denying themselves of food as they sought Him. Imagine if we as Salvation Army leaders began to make major decisions only as we met together in fasting and prayer, rather than at meetings planned around meals!

Pioneers of Prayer and Fasting

Queen Esther called her people, the Jews, to join her in a corporate fast for their deliverance as a people. Anna served in the Temple in Jerusalem around the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, with prayer and fasting. She lived a fasting lifestyle (Luke 2:37), as did John the Baptist. It was during a period of fasting and prayer that God spoke to the Gentile Cornelius, the Roman centurion, about contacting Peter, which then led to a major shift in understanding regarding the

Gospel and the Spirit offered also to the Gentiles (Acts 10:30-31). The Apostle Paul fasted for safety and deliverance during a fierce storm (Acts 27) and Daniel fasted as a gesture of repentance on behalf of the sin of the people (Daniel 9). Jesus began His public ministry immediately following a 40-day fast.

The early church fathers, Polycarp and Tertulian, fasted, as did Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and John Wesley. Wesley was so committed to fasting that he would not approve a candidate for ministry if he did not fast twice a week! How would that policy change our Candidates' Councils and us?

Whenever he became aware that his spiritual power or anointing was weakening, Charles Finney would immediately commence a three-day fast. Following the fast, the presence of God would radiate so powerfully through Finney that people would fall under overwhelming conviction upon his entrance into a room, a building, or even the city limits.

Jonathan Edwards and Charles Haddon Spurgeon would fast and pray in order that they would be able to preach well!

Types of Fasts

Elmer Towns outlines various types of biblical fasts and their purposes, in his book, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough.* These include the Samuel fast, in which people join together to seek God's guidance for them corporately (1 Samuel 7) as well as the Ezra fast, a corporate fast for protection (Ezra 8:22). The Elijah fast is an individual fast to cry out for God's help in time of trouble and discouragement. The Disciples' fast is for spiritual power to exercise authority over the demonic (Matthew 17:21) and the Saint Paul fast is an individual fast for increased light – for an opening of the eyes of the heart (Acts 9: 17-19). God's covenant people agreed together to fast for deliverance from danger and evil in the Esther fast (Esther 4:16) and the Daniel fast is one in which the individual fasts for physical health and strength.

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For more on fasting…

Mike Bickle, *The Rewards of Fasting*
Mahesh Chavda, *The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting*
Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*
Elmer L. Towns, *Fasting For Spiritual Breakthrough*
Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*.