

## ***Fasting – Lost, But Not Forgotten***

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

When I was a pup, growing up in the smallish town of Shakopee, MN, there were 2 large Catholic churches and schools. Pretty much all the Catholic kids went to those schools until their 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, and then transferred to the public school for High School.

For the most part, we got along fine, but there were always certain issues that would magnify our differences. One of those would arise each year around the middle or end of February; the beginning of the church season of Lent. At this time of year, all the Protestant kids would ask the Catholic kids what they were giving up for Lent (*usually food*). After all, Protestant kids didn't face the same constraints that the Catholic kids did. And the answers would usually come back as "meat on Fridays," though no one ever knew why; except that Rome had declared it so. The local schools and restaurants would also conform to this practice by serving seafood on Fridays, or running seafood specials during that season.

Now, few of us, Protestants or Catholics, ever really understood, or cared much, about the origins of fasting. All we really knew was that there was some tie between Jesus' passion and sorrow, and our own discomfort during Lent. And when anyone ever asked about how fasting during Lent got started, the general answer was simply, "*Jesus suffered for us, this is the least we can do for Him.*"

However, the ranks of the young religiously uneducated weren't the only places lacking in answers about the spiritual discipline of fasting. Sadly, the church could do no better to answer questions as to the whys, when's, or purposes of fasting. Even the Lutheran High School I attended taught little on the annual Lenten practice. We were simply told that fasting was a healthy act of gratitude for Jesus' suffering and sacrifice during the season. And so, it soon faded into religious obscurity for me.

Until, that is, I ran headlong into the topic during a course I had in Bible School. The class dealt with *Spiritual Life and Discipleship*, and covered a number of devotional disciplines that could/should improve your personal walk with Jesus. We discussed practices like prayer, devotions, Bible Study; and yes, some of the aesthetic practices like fasting and meditation.

It was during this class that I was introduced to a little book by Arthur Wallis called *God's Chosen Fast*. It was a wonderful little text that introduced us to not only the general idea of Biblical Fasting, but also dealt with the when's, where's, why's, and how's of the discipline. That little book (*which is still available*) did more to challenge me on this topic than anything prior to it. It helped me see that I had pushed this very biblical exercise out of mind, primarily due to ignorance and personal bias. Wallis writes:

*"When our minds are conditioned by prejudice or paralyzed by traditional views, we may face a truth in Scripture*

*again and again without its ever touching us. Our spiritual inhibition concerning that truth permits us to see, but not to perceive. The truth lies dormant within, mentally apprehended but not spiritually applied. This is particularly true in relation to fasting.*

*When, however, such a truth is first ignited by the Holy Spirit there is immediate conflict in the minds of most people. The truth of the Bible has suddenly become 'alive and powerful' and there is an assault upon our traditional attitudes and prejudices. The outcome of the struggle reveals whether or not we are open to receive and obey fresh light from God, and so grow in the knowledge of the truth."*

This little book challenged me to take the Bible, all of it, seriously when it talked about the many references to fasting. It showed me that many of my biblical heroes fasted, as did many of the more obscure: Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, Jesus, Paul, and some of the women – Hannah and Anna. Wallis also explained that the practice of fasting didn't end with the Bible, but carried forward into the fledgling church and beyond (*including the Apostles and Elders, early church fathers, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Edwards, Wesley, and Finney to name a few*).

I began to understand that Fasting wasn't about legalistically proving my faith, so that I could demand something from God. But rather, I was willingly giving something up for God from a heart of gratitude and worship. Fasting isn't a way to strong-arm God into action, but instead, humbling ourselves through self-denial so that He can fill those empty places with Himself (and His Word).

Thus began my journey into fasting; one which, sadly, hasn't always been part of my spiritual walk. But I trust it will return during this 40-day experience.

### **So why fast?** (*Borrowed from Arthur Wallis and Bill Bright*)

1. Fasting was an expected Biblical discipline
2. Fasting and prayer restore an intimate relationship with Jesus
3. Fasting is a biblical way to humble yourself before God
4. Fasting is the Holy Spirit's way to do surgery, bringing brokenness, repentance, and transformation
5. The Holy Spirit uses fasting to quicken God's Word in your heart
6. Fasting transforms a prayer life – becomes richer, meaningful
7. Fasting leads to personal revival – a revival channel for others

To quote Bill Bright:

*"Fasting is the most powerful spiritual discipline of all the Christian disciplines. Through fasting and prayer, the Holy Spirit can transform your life...Fasting and prayer can also work on a much grander scale. According to Scripture, personal experience and observation, I am convinced that when God's people fast with a proper Biblical motive – seeking God's face not His hand – with a broken, repentant, and contrite spirit, God will hear from heaven and heal our lives, our churches, our communities, our nation and world. Fasting and prayer can bring about revival – a change in the direction of our nation, the nations of earth and the fulfillment of the Great Commission."*