

What about fasting?

Is fasting a step beyond prayer, and does it guarantee God's attention?

After many years of neglect, the practice of fasting has recently gained new status among evangelical Christians, as if something new had emerged from Scripture. There are real benefits to be gained from fasting; approached with the proper attitude and purpose, fasting provides a unique path of self-denial, a time for turning away from the demands of the flesh and for seeking God and Him only.

But there is a danger in our competitive, discovery-oriented society -- that fasting may become something of a spiritual fad. For some, the fast may be seen as a temporary means of finding new spiritual "highs."

We must pray for God's leading and discernment, for without question, fasting is Biblical and significant. Throughout the Old Testament, God's chosen leaders called for fasts at particular moments -- generally when the people had drifted from God's will and way, and when they were facing a particularly threatening situation. The call for a fast was a call from God. Jehoshaphat feared for the future of the nation, and called for the people of Judah to gather from every city, to fast and seek the Lord [2 Chronicles 20]. Because of the wickedness of the people, the prophet Joel called for a fast and a solemn assembly, lest God's judgment fall immediately [Joel 1:14]. The examples are many.

In the New Testament, there are no examples of fasts called by spiritual leaders. But Jesus affirmed the practice of individual fasting [Matthew 6:17,18]. He Himself fasted forty days in the wilderness following His baptism -- a time of instruction and preparation for the ministry of His life. He did not ask His disciples to fast while He was with them, though He acknowledged that they would do so after His death [Matthew 9:15].

In Scripture, fasting is never presented as a step of advanced prayer. It is not a means of getting God to do something He would not do in response to prayer alone. Rather, it is a discipline through which the people of God turn their faces toward Him with renewed, undistracted, intense purpose -- seeking Him, asking His forgiveness, awaiting His direction.

So it should be today. Probably the most important biblical passage on fasting is that found in Isaiah 58 (a portion of which is the heart of Elmer L. Towns' analysis of fasting in his book, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*, reviewed on this page). Here it is evident that abstaining from food is not the primary focus of a fast. Rather, the prophet reveals the people's responsibility in their relationship with God -- and His warnings concerning their heedless, reckless attitude that made it impossible for Him to hear their cries for His mercy and guidance. The real problem, He says, is the absence of a true humility that leads to the life of obedience to Him, and selfless devotion to serving others in His name. The fast of the heart, not of the stomach, is the response He desires, and without which He continues to withhold His full blessing.