

UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF

# **FASTING**

PAUL DAVID WASHER



**"Fasting is an important biblical discipline for private and public devotion. Yet it is generally forgotten today, as if it were part of some extreme asceticism that we have outgrown. In this much-needed workbook, Paul Washer leads us through a thoughtful, thorough, and helpful study of the Holy Scriptures to show us how to practice fasting according to God's revealed will. I pray that God will use this study mightily to restore the spiritual discipline of fasting to its rightful place in many thousands of Christian lives."**

**— Dr. Joel R. Beeke, President of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary**

**"It was my pleasure and privilege to be introduced to this workbook! Unfortunately, fasting has become unpopular or simply uncomfortable to many churches, despite the wealth of spiritual benefit and blessing that can be enjoyed if it is properly understood. This book does a masterful job of providing a comprehensive study of the subject and doing so in a way that is carefully balanced to avoid the errors and excesses that sometimes accompany such practices. I thank God for leading me to this precious work for my own personal benefit, and I heartily recommend it to every child of God seeking to take his or her Christian walk seriously and soberly."**

**— Steven Lee, Founder of SermonAudio**

**"In His most famous sermon, Jesus Christ said to His disciples, 'When ye fast,' assuming their practice of that discipline. However, many in our day assume that fasting was laid in the tomb with our Savior and did not come out with Him. Paul Washer examines that erroneous thinking by the burning light of Holy Scripture; the result is the most biblical, concise, and useful handbook on the discipline of fasting I have read. The heart and soul of this book is about laying hold of holy, ardent, Spirit-transformed Christian living, aided by the discipline of fasting. Study it prayerfully, apply it carefully, and live it wholeheartedly for the glory of Christ. You cannot do so without profiting your soul."**

**— Jeff Pollard, Pastor of Mt. Zion Bible Church and Editor of *Free Grace Broadcaster***

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# UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF

# FASTING

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# UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

## Introduction

### METHOD OF STUDY

The great goal of this study is for the student to have an encounter with God through His Word. Founded upon the conviction that the Scriptures are the inspired and infallible Word of God, this study has been designed in such a way that it is literally impossible for the student to advance without an open Bible before him or her. The goal is to help the reader obey the exhortation of the Apostle Paul in II Timothy 2:15:

*"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."*

Each chapter deals with a specific aspect of the doctrine of man and his desperate plight before a holy God. The student will complete each chapter by answering the questions and following the instructions according to the Scriptures given. The student is encouraged to meditate upon each text and write his or her thoughts. The benefit gained from this study will depend upon the student's investment. If the student answers the questions thoughtlessly, merely copying the text without seeking to understand its meaning, this book will be of very little help.

Discerning the Plight of Man is primarily a biblical study and does not contain much in the way of colorful illustrations, quaint stories, or theological treatises. It was the desire of the author to provide a work that simply points the way to the Scriptures and allows the Word of God to speak for itself.

This workbook may be used by an individual, in a small group, for a Sunday school class, or in other contexts. It is highly recommended that the student complete each chapter on his or her own before meeting for discussion and questions with a group or discipleship leader.

### EXHORTATION TO THE STUDENT

The student is encouraged to study biblical doctrine and discover its exalted place in the Christian life. The true Christian cannot bear or even survive a divorce between the emotions and the intellect or between devotion to God and the doctrine of God. According to the Scriptures, neither our emotions nor our experiences provide an adequate foundation for the Christian life. Only the truths of Scripture, understood with the mind and communicated through doctrine, can provide that sure foundation upon which we should establish our beliefs and our behavior and determine the validity of our emotions and experiences. The mind is not the enemy of the heart, and doctrine is not an obstacle to devotion. The two are indispensable and should be inseparable. The Scriptures command us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind (Matthew 22:37) and to worship God both in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

The study of doctrine is both an intellectual and devotional discipline. It is a passionate search for God that should always lead the student to greater personal transformation, obedience, and heartfelt worship. Therefore, the student should be on guard against the great error of seeking only impersonal knowledge instead of the person of God. Neither mindless devotion nor mere intellectual pursuits are profitable, for in either case, God is lost.

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## THE NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE

The New American Standard Bible is required to complete this study. This version of Scripture was chosen for the following reasons: (1) the unwavering conviction of its translators that the Bible is the infallible Word of God; and (2) its faithfulness to the original languages.

## A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

To claim to be an expert in even the most minor subjects touching the Scriptures betrays both arrogance and ignorance. This is especially true with regard to the private devotions of Bible reading, prayer, and fasting. I have yet to meet a man who lamented spending too much time in these devotions, yet I have known countless men (including myself) who lament their all-to-frequent neglect. Are we not all prone to identify with Martha who was “worried and bothered about so many things,” while neglecting the “good part” that was chosen by Mary (Luke 10:41-42)?

Having given the above disclaimer, I can now move on to my motive or reason for writing this workbook on fasting. It is threefold. First, I write because the discipline of fasting is a biblical devotion that was practiced in both the Old and New Testaments. Secondly, I write because so many believers, young and old, have questioned me through the years regarding its proper place in the Christian life and about how it ought to be practiced. Finally, I write because there is so little information available on the subject.

It is a good thing that the people of God still count Bible study and prayer as foundational disciplines of the Christian life and consider those who are faithful in these disciplines to be noble and wise. At the same time, it is lamentable that so many contemporary Christians have very wrong views of fasting—whether that is a relic of the past; that it is an impossible feat to be practiced by only the spiritually elite; or (worst of all) that it is a harmful ritual practiced by only the most severe fanatics, who believe that the destruction of the body is the only road to true holiness. I have written this workbook to expose these erroneous ideas and to help the people of God to understand the discipline of fasting and its proper place in the Christian life.

To conclude, I would like to thank my wife Charo for her timely encouragement in every endeavor and my four children (Ian, Evan, Rowan, and Bronwyn), who continue to be a great blessing. I would also like to thank HeartCry staff member Forrest Hite for his editing of the manuscript and his supervision over the graphics, layout, and design. His contributions to the overall readability of this work were invaluable. My thanks are also extended to the entire HeartCry staff. They have been a great encouragement throughout the process of this book’s writing and publication.

## A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Included at the end of this book is a brief work by Thomas Boston, a Scottish theologian greatly respected by both the author (Paul Washer) and the editor (myself, Forrest Hite). *Personal Fasting and Humiliation* is an abridged and modernized version of *A Memorial Concerning Personal and Family Fasting and Humiliation*, which itself was published in Boston’s *Whole Works* (Volume 11).

There are relatively few works that deal with the topic of fasting, so it was hard for us to find books for students to advance their study on the discipline. We decided to include Boston’s brief writing on the subject in part to help alleviate this problem—especially since it was previously difficult to access, buried within Boston’s *Whole Works*. We hope that bringing this older work back to light will prove to be a blessing for many.



Once the decision was made to include *Personal Fasting and Humiliation*, we felt it necessary to consider its readership. Paul Washer's *Understanding the Discipline of Fasting*, as with all of his workbooks in the Biblical Foundations for the Christian Faith series, was written to be as understandable as possible to the student, whatever his or her background. Boston, on the other hand, penned his treatise in the early 18th century; much of the language used then is currently rather difficult to understand.

Therefore, I undertook the process of abridgement and modernization in order to emphasize clarity, simplifying the language as much as possible without weakening the meaning. Indeed, much care was taken to minimize the changes and to be true to the author's intent. Where more significant edits were necessary to clarify the meaning, I have included footnotes of the book's original verbiage for those phrases or sentences to ensure that Boston's words are not misconstrued—and also at times to give a glimpse of the beauty of some of the older language.

I also added a few reflective questions at the end of each of the three included chapters in order to allow the student room to write his or her thoughts and to continue the workbook format. I pray and trust that *Personal Fasting and Humiliation* will prove helpful and edifying for everyone who works through *Understanding the Discipline of Fasting*.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDIES

*Sanctify the Congregation* by Richard Owen Roberts (and others)

*Personal Fasting and Humiliation* by Thomas Boston (included)

"A Desperate Case—How to Meet It" [sermon] by Charles H. Spurgeon

*Sermons 98 and 99: The Duty, the Benefits, and the Proper Method of Religious Fasting*  
by Samuel Miller

*The Doctrine of Fasting and Prayer and Humiliation for Sin* by Arthur Hildersham (for advanced students)

## ADDITIONAL NOTE

You may have noticed that this book is being sold at a strange price. Here's why: one dollar (\$) from every copy sold will go directly to fund mission work through HeartCry Missionary Society ([heartcrymissionary.com](http://heartcrymissionary.com)). The rest of the sale price is just enough to cover the cost of printing, publication, and distribution. The author is not profiting from the sale of this book, nor has he profited from the sale of any other book. Over the years, we have utilized and explored many avenues in order to publish these workbooks. Ultimately, we have reached the conclusion that doing so in-house at a low cost, even with slightly lower quality, is the most effective way of getting these useful tools into the hands of as many people across the globe as possible. We hope and pray that the Lord continues to use these books to point His people to His Word unto the edification of His Church.

## Optional Study Schedule

### UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

#### **Week One: Introduction to Fasting & Fasting Upward**

- Day 1: Chapter 1
- Day 2: Chapter 2
- Day 3: Chapter 3
- Day 4: Chapter 4
- Day 5: Chapter 5

#### **Week Two: Fasting Inward**

- Day 1: Chapter 6, Section 1  
Chapter 6, Section 2, Main Point 1
- Day 2: Chapter 6, Section 2, Main Points 2-4
- Day 3: Chapter 7
- Day 4: Chapter 8
- Day 5: Prayerful Review

#### **Week Three: Fasting Outward & The Solemn Assembly**

- Day 1: Chapter 9, Section 1  
Chapter 9, Section 2  
Chapter 9, Section 3, Main Points 1-2
- Day 2: Chapter 9, Section 3, Main Points 3-5  
Chapter 9, Section 4
- Day 3: Chapter 10  
Chapter 11, Section 1, Main Points 1-2
- Day 4: Chapter 11, Section 1, Main Points 3-7
- Day 5: Chapter 11, Section 2  
Chapter 12

#### **Week Four: Biblical Directions Concerning Fasting**

- Day 1: Chapter 13, Section 1
- Day 2: Chapter 13, Sections 2-3
- Day 3: Chapter 14
- Day 4: Appendix
- Day 5: Prayerful Review

## PERSONAL FASTING AND HUMILIATION

### **Week Five: Personal Fasting and Humiliation**

- Day 1: Chapter 1 (with Review Questions)
- Day 2: Chapter 2 (with Review Questions)
- Day 3: Chapter 3, Section 1 (with Review Questions 1-2)
- Day 4: Chapter 3, Section 2 (with Review Question 3)
- Day 5: Prayerful Review



## Chapter 1: Introduction to Fasting

### WHAT IS FASTING?

Throughout the Scriptures, fasting is associated mostly with abstaining from food for a specific period of time for the purpose of seeking God. The fundamental principle of fasting may also include abstinence from any activity, event, or temporal pleasure for the sake of drawing near to God—abstaining from companionship to spend time alone with God; abstaining from sleep to pass the night in prayer; or abstaining from a certain labor, hobby, or pastime to dedicate time to God.

### BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF FASTING

The following is a fairly comprehensive list of Scriptural references to fasting. Included are texts that relate only indirectly to fasting, such as those referring to a hunger or thirst for God. Thoughtfully and prayerfully review this list.

**Leviticus 16:29, 31:** On the Day of Atonement, the people of Israel were commanded to humble or afflict their souls. This phrase expresses self-denial and is connected most often with fasting (Psalm 35:13; Isaiah 58:3; Ezra 8:21). See also Leviticus 23:27-29 and Acts 27:9.

**Exodus 24:12-18:** Moses fasted on Mount Sinai forty days and nights while receiving the stone tablets of the Law (Deuteronomy 9:9).

**Exodus 34:27-28:** Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights to intercede for rebellious Israel and to receive a second copy of the Law (Deuteronomy 9:17-19; 10:10).

**Judges 20:26-28:** Israel fasted and inquired of the Lord for direction in the war against the tribe of Benjamin.

**I Samuel 1:6-11:** Hannah fasted and prayed for God to open her womb and give her a son.

**I Samuel 7:6-8:** Israel fasted in repentance at Mizpah and asked the Lord for deliverance.

**I Samuel 31:11-13:** The valiant men of Jabesh-gilead fasted in mourning for the death and desecration of King Saul and his sons.

**II Samuel 1:11-12:** David and his men fasted in mourning for the death of Saul, Jonathan, and those who had fallen by the sword in the battle against the Philistines.

**II Samuel 12:15-23:** David fasted that God might show mercy and spare the life of his child whom God had struck terminally ill as judgment.

# UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

**I Kings 21:9-13:** Jezebel and Ahab used fasting to feign piety toward God and to mask their plot to kill Naboth.

**I Kings 21:20-29:** After hearing God's judgment upon him through Elijah, King Ahab humbled himself before God through fasting.

**II Chronicles 20:1-4:** King Jehoshaphat and Judah fasted to be delivered from the threat of war from the Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites.

**Ezra 8:21-23:** Ezra and the exiles with him humbled themselves with fasting that God might give them a safe journey from the river of Ahava to Jerusalem.

**Nehemiah 1:3-11; 2:1-8:** Nehemiah fasted in mourning over the remnant in Jerusalem who were greatly distressed and under reproach, in confession of the sins of Israel, and in petition of God for mercy and for favor in the eyes of King Artaxerxes.

**Nehemiah 8:18; 9:1-3:** Israel fasted in a solemn assembly to hear the Law of God and to confess their sins and the sins of their fathers.

**Esther 4:16:** Queen Esther, her maidens, and the Jews in Susa fasted that she might find favor before the king and that the Jews might be delivered from the destruction that Haman had plotted.

**Esther 9:20-22, 30-31:** The day of Purim was established as a holiday in commemoration of the Jews' great deliverance from the decrees of Haman and all their enemies. The celebration included not only feasting and rejoicing and gift-giving, but also fasting and lamentation.

**Psalms 4:7:** God brings greater gladness to the heart than grain and new wine.

**Psalms 34:8:** David admonished God's people to taste and see for themselves that the Lord is good.

**Psalms 35:13-14:** David humbled his soul with fasting before God for the sake of others when they were sick and needy.

**Psalms 42:1-2; 63:1:** The psalmist described a passion for God as a hunger and thirst for Him.

**Psalms 69:9-10:** David wept and fasted because of his zeal for the things of God and because of the godless who reproached God's name.

**Psalms 27:4:** David's greatest desire was to behold God's beauty.

**Psalms 73:25:** Asaph desired nothing on the earth above God and His presence.

**Psalms 102:4; 107:18:** God's people were represented as being so afflicted that they were said to "forget" (102:4) or even "abhor" their food (107:18).

**Psalms 109:24:** David was physically weakened from fasting in the midst of his enemies.

**Isaiah 58:1-5:** Israel asked why God had not noticed their fasts. God rebuked them for their wickedness and hypocrisy.

# INTRODUCTION TO FASTING

**Isaiah 58:6-14:** God described the fasts performed by the righteous that are pleasing to Him.

**Jeremiah 36:9-10; 36:20-26:** All the people from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah proclaimed a fast and listened as the scroll of Jeremiah was read; however, God's warning was not heeded.

**Daniel 6:16-19:** King Darius spent the night fasting for the deliverance of Daniel, whom he had unwittingly condemned to the lions' den.

**Daniel 9:3-20:** Daniel fasted as he confessed his sin and the sin of his people.

**Daniel 9:2; 22-23:** Daniel fasted as he asked for wisdom to understand the prophecies concerning Israel's future.

**Joel 1:14-15; 2:12-17:** God commanded Israel to fast and call a solemn assembly in order to repent and plead for mercy before the coming of the day of the Lord (God's judgment).

**Jonah 3:4-10:** After the preaching of Jonah, the Ninevites called a fast, repented of their wickedness, and pleaded that the Lord would be merciful.

**Zechariah 7:1-7; 8:19:** During their exile, the Jews established four annual fasts: one each in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months.

**Matthew 4:1-3:** Jesus fasted for forty days and nights in the wilderness prior to being tested by the tempter.

**Matthew 6:16:** Jesus assumed that fasting would be practiced by His disciples and warned against improper motives (e.g. hypocrisy) when fasting.

**Matthew 6:17-18:** Jesus taught about the proper motives for fasting and the promise of reward.

**Matthew 9:14-15:** Jesus taught that His disciples would fast after His ascension.

**Matthew 9:16-17:** Jesus distinguished between the old order of fasting, which was practiced by the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist, and the new order of fasting, which would be practiced by His disciples.

**Mark 9:29:** Jesus mentioned fasting along with prayer as a means of strengthening the believer's faith for spiritual warfare. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

**Luke 2:36-38:** The prophetess Anna served God day and night in the temple with fasting and prayer. Her prayers were possibly related to her waiting for the coming Messiah.

**Luke 18:11-12:** The Pharisees fasted twice a week (see also Matthew 9:14).

**Luke 18:9-14:** Jesus condemned self-righteous boasting in fasting.

**Acts 10:30:** Cornelius was praying and fasting when the angel appeared to him and directed him to send for Peter. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

# UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

**Acts 13:1-3:** The Christians in Antioch practiced fasting. The missionary movement began during such fasting.

**Acts 13:1-3:** Fasting was practiced in relation to the ordination of missionaries.

**Acts 14:23:** Christians at Antioch fasted as part of the ordination of missionaries and elders.

**Romans 14:6:** Paul wrote that the believer is free to follow his conscience in the matters of observing days and eating, yet he is obligated to do all unto God and for His glory.

**I Corinthians 7:5:** Paul mentioned fasting and prayer as proper reasons for abstinence within the marital relationship. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

**I Corinthians 9:24-27:** The victorious Christian life requires self-control, including disciplining the body to make it subservient to the will of God.

**II Corinthians 6:4-5:** Fasting was one of the ways in which the Apostle Paul commended himself as a genuine servant of God. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

**II Corinthians 11:27:** The Apostle Paul fasted often in the midst of his ministry. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

**Colossians 2:23:** Paul declared ascetic practices and severe treatment of the body to be of no value against fleshly indulgence.

**I Timothy 4:1-5:** It is heretical to advocate abstaining from foods that God has created to be gratefully shared by those who believe and know the truth.

## VARIATIONS IN TRANSLATION

In the above survey of biblical texts regarding fasting, we mentioned five texts that would require further discussion because of variations in translations. Before advancing further in this study, we will consider each one in detail.

### MARK 9:29

Some translations (KJV/NKJV) include fasting along with prayer, while others (NASB/ESV) omit it and mention only prayer. The earliest Greek manuscripts (Alexandrian, Western, and Caesarean) do not include the additional phrase "and fasting." However, it is found in virtually all other remaining manuscripts and versions. Those conservative scholars who omit fasting believe it is a scribal insertion influenced by the early and medieval Church's growing emphasis on fasting. Nevertheless, even if the phrase "and fasting" is a later insertion, it is not contrary to sound doctrine or practice. Remember that the disciples' inability to cast out the demon was only indirectly related to their lack of prayer (and/or fasting). The primary reason for their failure was their lack of spiritual authority due to their lack of faith (Matthew 10:1; Mark 9:18-19; Matthew 17:19-20). Like prayer, biblical fasting can be a means of strengthening the believer's faith and is represented throughout the Old Testament as a means of asking God for deliverance.



## ACTS 10:30

The KJV and NKJV describe Cornelius praying and fasting, while the NASB and ESV say that he only prayed. Again, this difference of translation is based on variants in Greek manuscripts. Some scholars argue that the reference to fasting was deleted from the account in verse 30 because it is not mentioned in the first account in verses 1-4. Others hold that the reference to fasting was a later scribal addition due to the early and medieval Church's emphasis on fasting. Regardless, even if the phrase "and fasting" is a later insertion, it is not contrary to sound doctrine or practice.

## I CORINTHIANS 7:5

Some translations (KJV/NKJV) refer to spouses devoting themselves to prayer and fasting, while others (NASB/ESV) refer only to prayer. This difference of opinion is once more based on variants in Greek manuscripts. The earliest manuscripts do not mention fasting. Therefore, many conservative scholars hold that this reference found in later manuscripts was also a scribal addition. Again, even if the phrase "and fasting" is a later insertion, it is not contrary to sound doctrine or practice. In fact, it is not improbable that fasting might have accompanied prayer in such cases.

## II CORINTHIANS 6:5 AND II CORINTHIANS 11:27

The KJV mentions "watching and fasting," while the NASB and ESV describe "sleeplessness and hunger." The reason for the differences is not due to variants in different manuscripts, but to differing opinions regarding the translation from Greek to English. In II Corinthians 6:5, "sleeplessness" is translated from the Greek word **agrupnía**, which can denote sleeplessness or watching. The word "hunger" is translated from the Greek word **nēsteía**, which can refer to a religious fast or a forced fast due to want, poverty, or difficult circumstances. In II Corinthians 11:27, "sleeplessness" is again translated from the Greek word **agrupnía**, but "hunger" is translated from the Greek word **limós**, which most often denotes famine, hunger, or starvation. The Apostle Paul possibly had both ideas in mind. He probably followed the example of Jesus by spending nights in prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12). There were times when he was forced to go without food due to poverty or circumstance (Philippians 4:12; I Corinthians 4:11) as well as times when he voluntarily fasted to seek the Lord.

## Chapter 2: The Christian and Fasting

### FASTING FOR TODAY

Some sincere Christians argue that fasting is an Old Testament practice that is not prescribed for the New Testament Christian. While it is true that the New Testament lacks any specific command regarding fasting, there is evidence in both the Old and New Testaments that supports the view that fasting is both permitted and encouraged for New Testament believers. Below, we will consider this evidence.

1. In Matthew 6:2-18, Jesus mentions three pillars or expressions of Jewish piety or devotion. Identify them in the spaces below.
  - a. When you G\_\_\_\_\_ to the poor (v.2).
  - b. When you P\_\_\_\_\_ (v.5).
  - c. When you F\_\_\_\_\_ (v.16).

**NOTES:** Notice that Jesus does not say "if" you give or pray or fast but "when" you do these acts of piety. In these texts, the Lord Jesus shows that He expected His disciples to practice fasting until His return. Also note that Jesus is not commanding fasting or establishing fasting as a spiritual devotion that must be practiced by all saints at all times. Throughout the New Testament, frequent prayer (Luke 18:1; I Thessalonians 5:17) and giving (Ephesians 4:28; Hebrews 13:16; I John 3:17) are commanded for all believers. This is not the case with fasting.

2. The book of Acts reflects the history of the first-century Church. How do the following texts from Acts demonstrate that fasting was practiced by the early Church and is a valid practice for Christians today?

- a. Acts 13:1-2

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# THE CHRISTIAN AND FASTING

## b. Acts 14:19-23

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**NOTES:** It would be irresponsible to suggest that the only reason for these occurrences of fasting is that the believers of the early Church had not come to understand their new life in Christ and were still bound by old traditions. In each case, the Apostle Paul and other leaders of the church were both present and participating in the fast.

3. Again, the New Testament does not command fasting. There are, however, positive examples of fasting throughout the Old Testament. Should these examples be regarded as authoritative directives for the believer today? What do the following texts from the New Testament teach us regarding the matter?

## a. Romans 15:4

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## b. I Corinthians 10:11

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# UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

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**NOTES:** The teaching and historical accounts of the Old Testament were written for the instruction of the New Testament Church. Therefore, the Old Testament's teaching on fasting, as well as its positive and negative examples of fasting, provide a sure foundation for the practice today. Many of the most devoted saints in the Old Testament practiced fasting. This is a great testimony to the benefit and enduring importance of the practice. Those who participate in fasting are in the choice company of great saints in Scripture and in Church history.

## FASTING TRANSFORMED

In Matthew 9:14-17 (also in Luke 5:33-39), the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked Him why His disciples did not fast. Many have used this question and Jesus' response to advance the teaching that the coming of Jesus has made fasting not only unnecessary but also inappropriate. However, a careful reading of the text will reveal that Jesus does not negate fasting; instead, He transforms it and fills it with new life and hope. Read Matthew 9:14-17 until you are familiar with its contents, and then complete the following exercises.

1. According to the first half of verse 15, what reason does Jesus give as to why His disciples were not fasting at that particular time?

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**NOTES:** We must remember the context of Jesus' reply. His intention was not to negate the practice of fasting, but to answer why His disciples did not fast. Jesus' answer was clear and profound: at that time, the mourning and longing associated with fasting would have been inappropriate because the Bridegroom (Christ Himself) was with them. Christ incarnate was an occasion for joy and celebration.

# THE CHRISTIAN AND FASTING

2. According to the second half of verse 15, when would it be appropriate for Christ's disciples to fast? Explain your answer.

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**NOTES:** It would be entirely appropriate for Christ's disciples to fast: (1) when the Bridegroom was violently taken away from them and crucified, and (2) throughout the entire age of the Church—a time that would be marked by suffering, need, and spiritual warfare; a time in which Christ's disciples would need to draw upon His provision through prayer and fasting; a time in which they would long for the fullness of Christ's presence and watch for His return.

3. Jesus affirms the continuation of fasting among His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16-18), and He does not negate its usefulness here in Matthew 9. However, in verses 16-17, He does use two picturesque illustrations to communicate that there would be important differences between the kind of fasting associated with the Pharisees and John's disciples and that of the Church. What illustrations does Jesus use?

- a. *U\_\_\_\_\_ C\_\_\_\_\_ on old garments.* A new, unshrunk cloth cannot be used to patch an old shrunken garment: when the new cloth shrinks, it will tear the old garment, leaving it in even worse condition.
- b. *N\_\_\_\_\_ W\_\_\_\_\_ into old wineskins.* New wine cannot be stored in old, dried wineskins: the old and brittle wineskins will break open when the new wine ferments and expands, and all will be lost.

**NOTES:** Jesus likens the fasting of both the Pharisees and John's disciples to an old garment and an old wineskin. In the case of the Pharisees, fasting had become an empty tradition, an external ritual, and a scheduled discipline (see Luke 18:11-12). In the case of John's disciples, fasting was marked by mourning, affliction, and a longing for deliverance through the Messiah. In light of these two facts, it is obvious how Christian

# UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

fasting should differ not only from the empty customs of the Pharisees but also from the fasting of the sincere disciples of John. Unlike the Pharisees, the fasting that Jesus prescribed was born out of a heartfelt passion and longing for God. This fasting went far beyond the Pharisaical notion of a traditional ritual to be observed on certain days, a mandatory practice, or a religious exercise. Unlike John's disciples, Christ's disciples would not fast as those who were awaiting redemption, but as those who had already experienced it! There would still be suffering, mourning, and longing throughout the long ages of the Church; but Christ's disciples and their fasting would be infused with the reality of Christ's presence, the assurance of His salvation, and the great expectation that "everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:8). Christ's coming has changed absolutely everything! His finished work on Calvary, the hope and power of His resurrection, and His sending of the Spirit have made all things new, even fasting. Our new life in Christ is the fulfillment of the promise of Old Testament prophecy—foreshadowed in Old Testament rituals and longed for by Old Testament saints. Although we still await the restoration of all things at the second coming of Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven has come and infused our lives with joy, fulfillment, and great expectation. We do not fast in response to a prescribed or legalistic ritual; we fast in response to a heartfelt passion for God. We do not fast because we are barren; we fast because we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good—this fullness has made us desire Him even more! We do not fast because the kingdom has not come; we fast because it **has** come and because we long for its extension into every corner of our lives and every corner of the earth.

4. Based on the texts that we have studied and the truths that we have considered, write a brief explanation regarding the validity of fasting in the Church and the distinctive characteristics of Christian fasting.

- a. *Is fasting a valid spiritual discipline for the Christian today? Write your thoughts.*

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## THE CHRISTIAN AND FASTING

- b. *What are some of the important distinctives of Christian fasting? How does Christian fasting contrast with that of the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist?*

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