

THE POWER AND PURPOSE OF FASTING

Text: Isaiah 58:1-6

What is fasting? It is the voluntary abstention from food for a specific period to focus on God and is partnered with prayer.

Why do people fast? There are various reasons, but fasting is usually implemented when the situation becomes urgent.

- **Seeking direction from God**
- **Need a clear answer from God**
- **Draw nearer to God**
- **Need deliverance from temptation or oppression**
- **Need a divine breakthrough in a difficult situation**
- **Seeking repentance and deliverance from bondage**

Fasting is not about earning God's favor or trying to manipulate Him in some fashion, but it's the way to two things the Lord has commanded in scripture – **James 4:10** Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. **Jeremiah 29:13** And ye shall seek me, and find *me*, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. Humbling ourselves and seeking Him with all our heart.

In the text we read, Israel is complaining that though they have fasted that God has not regarded it. That's why the Lord begins the chapter by telling His prophet to cry aloud and spare not, to show His people their transgressions and sins because their fasting was just an outward show. Their heart wasn't in it, and the Lord exposed it like Jesus did in his sermon on the mount - **Matthew 6:16-18** Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have 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. Notice the last part of the verse...when the fasting is done for the Father only, there is a reward!

There is a phrase that I would like to lift out of the text and expound on – “AND THAT YE BREAK EVERY YOKE” A yoke is a wooden frame meant to join two draft animals like oxen at the neck so they can pull a load or a plow. In spiritual terms, a yoke symbolizes a heavy burden of sin, oppression, or bondage. In the Old Testament, yokes represented

submission to foreign powers or the weighty burden of sin. The concept of “breaking the yoke” refers to liberation from these oppressive forces. Let’s look again at what God said a true fast is able to do - **Isaiah 58:6** /Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

- **To loose the bands of wickedness** – When God’s people stray from Him or turn to worshiping anything other than Him, it always leads to slavery. **Judges 2:11** And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim: **Judges 2:14** And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. The first time that the Bible speaks of fasting is when Israel was oppressed by the Philistines and the ark of God had been taken from them. When the ark was returned, they still were in idolatry, and the prophet Samuel called them to repentance. The people turned from their idols and fasted before God when the Philistines came up to battle them. Samuel offered a burnt offering to the LORD and cried out to Him **1 Samuel 7:10** And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel. When a Christian falls into sin, it will eventually become slavery that they can’t get free from...fasting, praying and repenting can break that yoke!
- **To undo the heavy burdens** – Sometimes life’s difficulties become more than we can bear alone. They weigh us down and hold us back! When Nehemiah was the king’s cup bearer in Shushan, he met some of his fellow countrymen that told him of Jerusalem’s terrible condition. The walls were broken down; the gates burned with fire and the remnant of Jews that lived there were being greatly oppressed. This news broke his heart **Nehemiah 1:4** And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, *The king saw his condition and asked him what was wrong.* Nehemiah told him about his burden for Jerusalem and God moved the king to send Nehemiah back with people and provisions to rebuild the walls and set up the gates of the city! Fasting and praying turned Nehemiah’s burden into the blessing of rebuilding. Are you burdened about some situation? Lost family members? Sickness? Being stuck in a hard circumstance that you feel you will never get out of? Fast and pray!

- **To let the oppressed go free** – Oppression is unjust treatment or control. It can be cruel and prolonged. Egypt oppressed Israel with 400 years of brutal slavery. In the book of Esther, a wicked man named Haaman manipulated the king to make a decree that all Jews in every province be destroyed because of his hatred for Mordecai (Esther's cousin). God had providentially placed Esther as queen so that she could seek a petition with the king to expose Haaman and reverse the order to destroy the Jews. Mordecai pleaded with her to go to the king but she was afraid because if you went into the king uncalled, it was a death sentence. **Esther 4:16-17** Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him. When she went in before the king he held out the golden scepter which meant that she had been accepted by him. She invited the king and Haaman to a banquet that gained her favor with the king, and he asked her what he could do for her. She exposed Haaman for the wicked man that he was and pleaded with the king to reverse the order to exterminate the Jews. The king gave her the desires of her heart and destroyed Haaman; and sent out a proclamation throughout the kingdom that the Jews in every place should be blessed instead of destroyed. Are you being oppressed by someone in authority over you? Prayer and fasting can break that yoke!

Why can't I just pray for the situation? Why do I need to fast? Fasting humbles the heart and aligns it with the will of God. Fasting starves the carnal nature of the flesh and decreases its appetite while increasing your spiritual appetite. Fasting heightens your spiritual awareness to what God is doing around you. Fasting makes the statement that what we need from God is more important than the food we eat, that our spiritual needs are greater than our physical ones.