

## **NEW ELIZABETH AME CHURCH**

### **WHY DO WE FAST AND PRAY?**

#### **WHAT IS FASTING?**

*Unger's Bible Dictionary* explains that the word *fast* in the Bible is from the Hebrew word *sum*, meaning "to cover" the mouth, or from the Greek word *nesteuo*, meaning "to abstain." For spiritual purposes, it means to go without eating and drinking (Esther 4:16).

The Day of Atonement; also called "the Fast" (Acts 27:9) is the only **fast day** commanded by God (Leviticus 23:27), though other national fast days are mentioned in the Bible. Also, personal fasts are clearly expected of Christ's disciples (Matthew 9:14-15).

#### **WHY DO WE FAST?**

The Bible gives examples of God's people occasionally combining fasting with their prayers so as to stir up their zeal and renew their dedication and commitment to Him. King David wrote that he "humbled himself with fasting" (Psalms 35:13). Fasting is a means of getting our minds back on the reality that we are not self-sufficient. Fasting helps us realize just how fragile we are and how much we depend on things beyond ourselves.

The Bible records that great men of faith such as Moses, Elijah, Daniel, Paul and Jesus Himself fasted so that they might draw closer to God (Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Daniel 9:3; Daniel 10:2-3; 2 Corinthians 11:27; Matthew 4:2). Jesus knew that His true disciples, once He was no longer there in the flesh with them, at times would need to fast to regain and renew their zeal to serve Him (Mark 2:18-20). James tells us, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). Constant prayer and occasional fasting help us to do this.

We are not too fast to have people feel sorry for us or to think we're pious (Matthew 6:16-18). Isaiah 58 gives both bad and good examples of fasting, contrasting wrong attitudes and actions (Isaiah 58:3-5) with the right approach of outgoing love (Isaiah 58:6-10). Daniel and Nehemiah set the example of having a repentant frame of mind (Daniel 9:3-4; Nehemiah 9:1-2).

Fasting also helps us learn the lessons of the Day of Atonement: forgiveness, reconciliation to God and the need to resist Satan and pray for the time of his removal (Revelation 20:1-3), which was portrayed in type by the Azazel goat on Atonement (Leviticus 16:20-22).

#### **FASTING AND PRAYER**

The combination of fasting and praying is not a fad or a novelty approach to spiritual discipline. Fasting and praying are not part of a human-engineered method or plan. They are not the means to manipulate a situation or to create a circumstance. Fasting and praying are Bible-based disciplines that are appropriate for all believers of all ages throughout all centuries in all parts of the world.

Many people in the church have never been taught about fasting and prayer, and many have therefore never fasted and prayed. As a result, they don't know why fasting and praying are important, what the Bible teaches about fasting, or how to fast. To many, fasting sounds like drudgery or a form of religious works. To others, fasting sounds extremely difficult. People tend to stand in awe at reports of those who have fasted for several weeks. The bottom line is people don't understand the benefits of fasting and prayer due to lack of knowledge.

## **KEY REASONS TO FAST AND PRAY**

### *1. The Scriptures Teach Us to Fast and Pray*

The Bible has a great deal to say about both fasting and praying, including commands to fast and pray. The Bible also gives us examples of people who fasted and prayed, using different types of fasts for different reasons, all of which are very positive results. Jesus fasted and prayed. Jesus' disciples fasted and prayed after the Resurrection. Many of the Old Testament heroes and heroines of the faith fasted and prayed. The followers of John the Baptist fasted and prayed. Many people in the early church fasted and prayed. What the Scriptures have taught us directly and by the examples of the saints is surely something we are to do.

### *2. Fasting and Prayer Put You into the Best Possible Position for a Breakthrough*

That breakthrough might be in the realm of the spirit. It may be in the realm of your emotions or personal habits. It may be in the realm of a very practical area of life, such as a relationship or finances. Periods of fasting and prayer produce great spiritual results, many of which fall into the realm of a breakthrough. What wasn't a reality suddenly was. What hadn't worked suddenly did. The unwanted situation or object that was there suddenly wasn't there. The relationship that was unloving suddenly was loving. The job that hadn't materialized suddenly did.

## **THE PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL FASTING**

There are two main overriding principles related to prayer and fasting in the Bible. First, biblical fasting is going without food. The noun translated "fast" or "a fasting" is *tsom* in the Hebrew and *nesteia* in the Greek language. It means the voluntary abstinence from food. The literal Hebrew translation would be "not to eat." The literal Greek means "no food."

I know people who say they go without television or movies, and they call these "fasting" times. I'm not opposed to that definition of fasting-fasting does imply that we are giving up one thing in order to replace it with something else, and in the Bible sense, specifically to replace it with prayer. But in the main, I believe fasting has to do with our abstaining from food.

Second, biblical fasting is linked with serious seasons of prayer. The more seriously we approach prayer and fasting, the more serious the results we will experience. The first and foremost purpose of a biblical or spiritual fast is to get a breakthrough on a particular matter that one lifts up to the Lord in prayer. A spiritual fast involves our hearts and the way in which we relate to and trust God. It relates to discerning and receiving strength to follow through on what God might reveal to us about circumstances in our lives or a direction we are to take.

Now there's certainly an issue of food that is associated with many seasons of prayer and fasting; control of eating is a valid reason to fast. The purpose is not the number of pounds you might lose during a fast, but rather, trusting God to help you regain mastery over food during a fast. Jesus said, "The spirit is . . . willing, but the flesh is weak" ([Matt. 26:41](#)). Fasting is a means of bringing the flesh into submission to the Lord so He can strengthen us in our mastery over our own selves. Fasting in the flesh makes us stronger to stand against the temptations of the flesh. Those temptations very often deal with food.

Abstaining from food is often God's way of showing that His desire for us is that we regain mastery over all things associated with our flesh in order to subdue our flesh and elevate our emphasis on spiritual matters. God's promise is to help us as we overcome the flesh and put all carnal temptations into subjection.

## 10 REASONS FOR FASTING

### 1. Jesus expects us to fast.

Matthew 6:16-18 “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

### 2. Humble yourself before God.

- Psalm 35:13 Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered.
- Ezra 8:21 And there by the Ahava Canal, I gave orders for all of us to fast and humble ourselves before our God. We prayed that he would give us a safe journey and protect us, our children, and our goods as we traveled.
- 2 Chronicles 7:14 if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.
- James 4:10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

### 3. Distress and grief

- Judges 20:26 Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.
- 2 Samuel 3:35 Then they all came and urged David to eat something while it was still day; but David took an oath, saying, “May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if I taste bread or anything else before the sun sets!”
- 1 Samuel 31:13 Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.

### 4. Repentance

- 1 Samuel 7:6 When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the Lord.” Now Samuel was serving as leader of Israel at Mizpah.
- Joel 2:12-13 “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.
- Nehemiah 9:1-2 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

### 5. Spiritual strength. Overcoming temptation and dedicating yourself to God.

Matthew 4:1-11: Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: “He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do

not put the Lord your God to the test. Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.”

## **6. Discipline**

- 1 Corinthians 9:27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.
- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

## **7. Strengthen prayers**

- Matthew 17:21 But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.
- Ezra 8:23 So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

## **8. Express love and worship to God.**

Luke 2:37 “And then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.”

## **9. Guidance and help making important decisions.**

- Acts 13:2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”
- Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.
- James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

## **10. Drawing closer to God and separating yourself from the world.**

- James 4:8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.
- Romans 12:1-2 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is; His good, pleasing and perfect will.