

FASTING AS A WAY OF LIFE!

Today's Text: Isaiah Chap. 58

Extracts:

'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You take no notice?' Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul? ...Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out? ... Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' [Is. 58: 3, 6, 7,9]

*Star Jones Reynolds (43) is the co-host of ABC News popular Daytime Talk show, "The View." A few years ago, she weighed 300 pounds (136 Kgs) even though she is barely 5 feet 5 inches (1.67 metres) tall. Her obesity became life threatening in that she developed adult asthma, an irregular heartbeat, legs that ached from walking up and down stairs, back problems, and laboured breathing. She decided to do something about it. Within two and a half years, she lost 150 pounds. Today, Star Jones, a lawyer by training, is fit, happily married to a banker, and has found God.¹ She has documented her experience in a new book, **Shine: A Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Journey to Finding Love** [Collins: 2006].*

Star Jones has lost weight but has she stopped weight control? No. In her own words, she now does "portion control," that is eating just half of what is on her plate, and giving up her favourite food group: double whoppers with cheese. There is much more to dieting than giving up food and drinks. There is a stronger inner determination to stick to a punishing regime, in spite of temptations to give up.

The spiritual equivalent of dieting is fasting, when we afflict our bodies by giving up food and/or drink for a season. Just as dieters do not stop dieting after losing some weight, "fasters" should not also give up fasting after gaining spiritual muscle tone. In other words, they must watch their "spiritual weight" for the rest of their lives! In that sense, they must make fasting their way of life.

That is the point that God was making to the people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah. Let us get a better insight of the subject in today's lesson.

¹ Lynn Sherr, "Daytime Talk Diva opens up about weight, love and dreams," <http://abcnews.go.com/2020>

1. Starving, dieting or fasting?

Starving, dieting and fasting share one thing in common: they all involve taking into our bodies less food or drink than normal. The difference lies in the *purpose* of the exercise.

A person may starve because there is no food to eat. This is common where there is famine or acute poverty. Even when there is food, a person may also be starving because s(he) has no appetite. For example, Darius, the Median king in Babylon, respected Daniel and did not in his heart support throwing him into the lion's den for violating the king's written decree not to worship any other god or man for 30 days. Therefore, "the king went to his palace and spent that night fasting; and no musicians were brought before him. Also his sleep went from him" [**Dan. 6: 10-18**]. He was too sad to eat. In another example, Paul was being taken as prisoner to Rome when their ship ran into a storm. As the boat drifted aimlessly, the passengers lost "all hope" that they would be saved. In that period of uncertainty they went into a "long abstinence from food" [**Acts 27: 14-20**]. They had food but lacked the appetite.

Weight watchers take to *dieting*, that is, eating and drinking what they consider will either reduce their weight or keep them at a tolerable weight level. They combine other activities, especially physical exercise, to raise the muscle tone and overall conditioning. They are usually very determined people because a little slip can bring them back to overweight or obesity.

Fasting overcomes the limitations of physical dieting by adding a spiritual dimension. In general, people fast for the following reasons, among others:

a) *When danger is looming and you don't know what to do*

You may suddenly find your life in physical danger, such as Western diplomats in predominantly Moslem and Arab countries recently discovered during riots over cartoons of prophet Mohammed published in some European newspapers. Your marriage may be on the verge of collapse. Your job is about to be cut due to your employer's economic down turn. Foreclosure is looming on your house because you have defaulted on mortgage payment. In such circumstances, especially when you do not know what to do, the first thing to do is fast for God's attention.

When king Jehosaphat of Judah was surrounded by stronger enemy forces, he "feared and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah." He prayed, "O our God, ... we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; *nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You*" [**2 Chron. 20: 1-12**].

b) *When you are dealing with a stubborn problem*

You have tried rational logical methods with little or no success. You have prayed long and hard without any response. You have brought in prayer warriors from your church that have always been there for you in similar situations and that has not made any difference. That is a signal to *add* fasting.

While Jesus was away on a high mountain with Peter, James and John where He was transfigured, a man brought his epileptic son before the rest of the disciples for healing. The case was so bad that the young man often fell into the fire or water. The disciples tried the “usual,” but he was not cured. When Jesus came down from the mountain, He “rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was healed from that very hour.” Later, the disciples asked Jesus why they could not cure the young man. Jesus replied, “This kind does not go out *except by prayer and fasting*” [Matt. 17: 1, 14-21].

c) *When you are assuming a higher responsibility*

You are about to take up a higher responsibility in government, home, school, business or church. Obviously, there may be inner fears and doubts in your heart. You need God’s guidance and fasting can be quite efficacious in such circumstances. We saw that in the church at Antioch. The Holy Spirit had called out Barnabas and Paul to be sent on their first missionary journey. The leaders, “having *fasted and prayed*, and laid hands on them” sent them away [Acts 13: 1-3].

Take another example. Before Jesus began His earthly ministry, He went into the wilderness where He fasted for 40 days and nights. Soon after, He came to Nazareth, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day where He was invited to read the day’s scripture. He turned to the book of Isaiah from where He read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.” Then, He closed the book, looked at the congregation, and boldly proclaimed, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” [Lk 4: 1-2; 16-21].

In all the above cases, fasting, especially combined with prayers, produced the desired results. However, we also know cases where fasting availed nothing. In one case, David’s son, the product of his adulterous affair with Bathsheba, fell ill. David pleaded with God for the child’s life and “fasted and went in and lay on the ground” for seven days. On the seventh day, the child died [2 Sam. 12: 16-18]. God had determined that the child of sin would die because David’s sin, even though it had been forgiven, had “given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” [v. 10].

In another example, king Ahab of Israel, the husband of Jezebel, had murdered an innocent man, Naboth, and seized his vineyard for the king's garden [1 Kgs 21: 1-16]. God sent the prophet Elijah to tell the king that dogs would leak his own blood on the very spot where Naboth had died [v. 19]. When the king heard that, he "fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning." God sent Elijah back, saying, "see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? I will not bring the calamity in his days" [vv. 27-29]. However, the king backslid and got injured in a battle which God had not sanctioned. They brought him to Samaria, his capital, with his blood pouring on the ground in his garden. He died there "and the dogs licked up his blood" in accordance with "the word of the Lord which He had spoken" [1 Kgs 22: 29-38].

We learn from those examples that *fasting is nothing unless it is backed by good standing with God*, for "bodily exercise profits little" unless it is combined with godliness that "is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" [1 Tim. 4: 8]. *The efficacy of fasting lies not in the exercise but in the "faster's" relationship with God*, for "the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" [Rom. 15: 17]. That is the import of Isaiah Chapter 58.

2. Why your fasting may be unacceptable to God!

The people of Israel complained that their fasting was of no avail, saying, "why have we fasted, ... and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?" [Is. 58: 3]. Some of you are right now asking God the same question. There are some people who can boast of beating the fasting record of 40 days and nights attained by Moses and Jesus!

In response, God sent the prophet Isaiah to tell His people of their transgression. There was nothing wrong in their approaching God or seeking Him daily and being delighted to know His ways [vv. 1-2]. Their problem was going about fasting the wrong way, the manifestations of which were as follows:

a) *They fasted for public show!*

They fasted to make their voices "heard on high; ... to bow down (their heads) like a bulrush, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes" [vv. 4, 5]. That is not fasting in God's sight.

Jesus amplified this point during the Sermon on the Mount when He said, "When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, *they have received their reward*" [Matt. 6: 16].

b) *They took out their hunger on innocent others!*

The people fasted “for strife and debate, and to strike with the fists of wickedness” [Is. 58: 4]. Was it your spouse or children or colleagues and subordinates or congregation that asked you to go and fast? Why then are you taking your hunger or thirst out on innocent others? Why has your productivity on your job dropped just because you are fasting, whereas you will be paid in full for that day? Why do you snap so easily and for no just cause when you are fasting?

c) *They punished the body without renouncing sin*

The people of Israel fasted (in sackcloth and ashes) and yet they continued to lay heavy burdens on helpless people that they oppressed [v. 6]. They did not share their bread with the hungry, nor bring the poor homeless into their homes, nor clothe the naked [v.7]. How could they claim to be fasting when they were only punishing the body without renouncing their sins? God is asking you the same question right now!

In view of such a wrong approach to fasting, people lose the benefits of fasting, such as answered prayer [v. 8], *continual* protection [v. 11], and full restoration [v. 12].

3. Fasting God’s way: the G-P-F Principle!

God made us in His image and likeness. Consequently, we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of God’s mouth. During fasting, we reduce our intake of bread. What do you think will sustain the body-spirit balance during that time? It is the amount of the word of God in you. Therefore, your intake of God’s word should go up during fasting so as to compensate for the bread loss. See what happened to Moses who was “*with the Lord forty days and forty nights (and) he neither ate bread nor drank water.*” Yet “when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses (when he came down from Mount Sinai), behold, *the skin of his face shone*, and they were afraid to come near him” [Ex. 34: 28, 30]. How about that! Moses fed on the word of God and his physical body responded accordingly!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus introduced us to the G-P-F [Give-Pray-Fast] Principle. Here are the key points:

- When you give, “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that *your Father, who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly*” [Matt. 6: 1-4];

- When you pray, “go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and *your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly*” [vv. 5-6]; and
- When you fast, “anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and *your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly*” [vv. 16-18].

The three *interrelated* components share common features: you are to practise them (‘when’ not ‘if’) in secret so as to receive God’s reward openly. “God sees in secret” means that He looks at your heart, not your outward show [1 Sam. 16: 7]. If we are told not to be tired of doing good [Gal. 6: 9], and to pray without ceasing [1 Thes. 5: 17], it follows that we are to also fast *continually*, by presenting our “bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God” [Rom. 12: 1]. So, if *anyone* desires to come after Jesus, s(he) must “deny himself (herself) and take up his (her) cross *daily*” and follow Him [Lk 9: 23].

4. Conclusion

When the disciples of John and of the Pharisees asked Jesus why He and His disciples did not fast as they themselves did, Jesus replied that you do not fast until the bridegroom is taken away [Mk 2: 18-20]. Jesus is the bridegroom of the church [Eph. 5: 23; Rev. 21: 2, 9]. He lives within you [2 Cor. 13: 5] until the end of the age [Matt. 28: 20], *provided you remain in Spirit* [1 Cor. 12: 3]. You remain in Spirit when you surrender your body as a living sacrifice.

Therefore, when you voraciously eat the word of God and are guided by it and totally surrender to God’s Word that came in flesh as Jesus the Christ, then your body is a living sacrifice. Each new day, when you *fast with your self-discipline, moderation and holy living*, you are practising sacrificial giving. You have made fasting a way of life.

That is what God is talking about!