

Spiritual Exercises for Adventists

“THEN SAID JESUS UNTO HIS DISCIPLES, IF ANY MAN WILL COME AFTER ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF, AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW ME.”

Matthew 16:24

Chapter 12

FASTING

“Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning.” Joel 2:12

FASTING is a daily process which is broken in the morning at our first meal of the day—Breakfast. Medical fasting is performed from time to time as ordered by a physician.

Spiritual fasting is performed much less often. You can probably count on one hand the number of times you have fasted for spiritual reasons.

Perhaps the most famous fast in America was ordered by President Lincoln to be observed on March 30, 1863 during the civil war to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Do you recall the incident in the Bible when the apostles were unable to cast an evil spirit out of a man’s son, and Jesus commented that this could only be done by “prayer and fasting?”

We don’t understand why this condition required this ap-

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proach, but Jesus made it clear for us.

There are several examples of fasting in scripture.

Jesus, Moses and Elijah fasted for 40 days for different reasons. Jesus was preparing for the temptations, Moses was with the Lord—so you could also say he was preparing to meet the Lord, and Elijah was preparing to meet the Lord at Mt. Horeb.

When King Saul and his sons were killed in battle the Philistines mutilated the bodies and hung them on the wall of one of their cities as a sign of victory, and a few Israelite men retrieved them in the dark of night. After the bodies were buried the men fasted seven days as recorded in 1 Samuel 31:13. This was done as a ritual of mourning.

The next scene of fasting was King David—how he had arranged for the death of Uriah in order to take his wife. The prophet Nathan came to David and revealed that the Lord was so displeased with his actions that punishment was necessary. David had fathered a child with Uriah's wife, and the child was struck with an illness. A contest of wills ensued as David began a fast of unlimited duration. As long as the child lived King David fasted. Finally the child died on the seventh day, and the king ended his fast of contrition and repentance.

2 Chronicles 20:1-19 describes an exciting scene where fasting was used to demonstrate dependence on the Lord. Here's what happened:

“It came to pass after this also, that the children of Moab, and the children of Ammon, and with them other beside the Ammonites, came against Jehoshaphat to battle. Then there came some that told Jehoshaphat, saying, there cometh a great multitude against thee from beyond the sea on this side Syria;

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and, behold, they be in Hazazontamar, which is Engedi.

And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.

And Judah gathered themselves together, to ask help of the Lord: even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord.”

Can you imagine their fear? They were greatly outnumbered, and there was no way of escape without divine intervention.

“And Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord, before the new court, and said, O Lord God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven? And rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? And in thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee?

Art not thou our God, who didst drive out the inhabitants of this land before thy people Israel, and gavest it to the seed of Abraham thy friend forever?

And they dwelt therein, and have built thee a sanctuary therein for thy name, saying, If, when evil cometh upon us, as the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we stand before this house, and in thy presence, (for thy name is in this house,) and cry unto thee in our affliction, then thou wilt hear and help.

And now, behold, the children of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom thou wouldest not let Israel invade, when they came out of the land of Egypt, but they turned from them, and destroyed them not; Behold, I say, how they reward us, to come to cast us out of thy possession, which thou hast given us to inherit.

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O our God, wilt thou not judge them? For we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee.

And all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children.

Then upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, the son of Benai-ah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, came the Spirit of the Lord in the midst of the congregation; And he said, Hearken ye, all Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou King Jehoshaphat, Thus saith the Lord unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's.

Tomorrow go ye down against them: behold, they come up by the cliff of Ziz; and ye shall find them at the end of the brook, before the wilderness of Jeruel.

Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them: for the Lord will be with you.

And Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground: and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the Lord, worshipping the Lord.

And the Levites, of the children of the Kohathites, and of the children of the Korhites, stood up to praise the Lord God of Israel with a loud voice on high.”

Isn't this exciting? They were doomed; there was no escape. So they fasted and prayed to the Lord. Then they praised Him with singing as if to say they had faith that He would intervene; they placed the whole situation into His hands, and the Lord

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responded with assurances. He told them to prepare for battle, but to do nothing. Just wait.

I could stop here and move to another story, but I know you are curious to hear what happened. So we'll pick up the story in verse 20.

“And they rose early in the morning, and went forth into the wilderness of Tekoa: and as they went forth, Jehoshaphat stood and said, Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem; Believe in the Lord you God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper.

And when he had consulted with the people, he appointed singers unto the Lord, and that should praise the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army, and to say, Praise the Lord; for his mercy endureth forever.”

This was a strange army, yes? Imagine this scene of armed men marching to battle singing praises to God!

And when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments against the children of Ammon, Moab, and mount Seir, which were come against Judah; and they were smitten.

For the children of Ammon and Moab stood up against the inhabitants of Mount Seir, utterly to slay and destroy them: and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, everyone helped to destroy another.

And when Judah came toward the watch tower in the wilderness, they looked unto the multitude, and, behold, they were dead bodies fallen to the earth, and none escaped.

And when Jehoshaphat and his people came to take away the spoil of them, they found among them in abundance both

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riches with the dead bodies, and precious jewels, which they stripped off for themselves, more than they could carry away: and they were three days in gathering of the spoil, it was so much.

And on the fourth day they assembled themselves in the valley of Berachah; for there they blessed the Lord: therefore the name of the same place was called, The valley of Berachah, unto this day.

Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, and Jehoshaphat in the forefront of them, to go again to Jerusalem with joy; for the Lord had made them to rejoice over their enemies.

And they came to Jerusalem with psalteries and harps and trumpets unto the house of the Lord.

And the fear of God was on all the kingdoms of those countries, when they had heard that the Lord fought against the enemies of Israel.

So the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet: for his God gave him rest round about.”

This one experience is profound and makes me wonder how the later generations could abandon God. This was fresh evidence of divine support, and yet its impact was so fleeting. This people turned from God until He was forced to let them go—but that’s another story.

In the book of Ezra is another account of fasting—this time for protection as a large group of people left Babylon and returned to Jerusalem. Here’s what happened as recorded in chapter eight:

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“Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, ‘The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him.’

So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us.”

We can read further in this book and learn how they were, indeed, protected, and they made the journey safely.

Another example of fasting is found in the book of Daniel, chapter nine where Daniel is fasting and praying for his people. The purpose of this fast is for confession of sins and repentance.

Let’s read Daniel’s prayer:

“And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments;

We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:

Neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to

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the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee.

O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee.

To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him;

Neither have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.

Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law, even by departing, that they might not obey thy voice; therefore the curse is poured upon us, and the oath that is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him.

And he hath confirmed his words, which he spake against us, and against our judges that judged us, by bringing upon us a great evil: for under the whole heaven hath not been done as hath been done upon Jerusalem.

As it is written in the law of Moses, all this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth.

Therefore hath the Lord watched upon the evil, and brought it upon us: for the Lord our God is righteous in all his works which he doeth: for we obeyed not his voice.

And now, O Lord our God, that hast brought thy people forth out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast gotten thee renown, as at this day; we have sinned, we have

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done wickedly.

O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us.

Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake.

O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies.

O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name.”

When I read his prayer I'm moved. It's a beautiful prayer and it expresses his emotions that are full and deep.

Daniel was a righteous man, and he fasted and prayed for the people—not for himself.

Let's now turn to the New Testament for an example: the church in Antioch, where they were the first to call themselves Christians. Acts 13:1-5 explains it:

“Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

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And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus.

And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John to their minister.”

So here is an example where fasting was used as a sign of humility and preparation for service.

Mrs. White gives us counsel for our time regarding fasting. We learn that it’s an appropriate thing for us to include in our relationship with God. We can do it for any of the reasons employed in the Bible, as we grow in Christ.

Here’s what we are told:

“Now and onward till the close of time the people of God should be more earnest, more wide-awake, not trusting in their own wisdom, but in the wisdom of their Leader. They should set aside days for fasting and prayer. Entire abstinence from food may not be required, but they should eat sparingly of the most simple food.” ⁽¹⁾

So it is recommended that we fast on a regular basis. Did you know that?

Did you know that you and I are to fast frequently?

We are counseled to “set aside days for fasting and prayer. Entire abstinence from food may not be required, but they should eat sparingly of the most simple food.”

When was the last time your church fasted?

We find ourselves in a situation where the majority of the

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church is overweight and we never fast. Isn't that ironic?

So, in a letter, Ellen White advised one member that they would benefit if they fasted once each week, but this was for health reasons as the person must have been overweight. The reasons she elicited included having a clear mind, and more active lifestyle. Sometimes we fail to remember that our diet affects our intellect.

This gives us yet another reason to fast regularly. It helps our intellect, which means it also helps our ability to grow spiritually.

Therefore fasting needs to be incorporated into our Spiritual Exercise.

But there is yet another type of fasting and its articulated in Isaiah 58:

“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.

Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.

Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

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Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?

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?

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am.

If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity;

And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day:

And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

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If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words:

Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

So fasting isn't always about food.

It's about self-sacrifice; it's about living a life of service as a humble servant.

Something to think about.

REFERENCES

- 1 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 18, 1904.