



"Wisdom is oftentimes nearer when we stoop than when we soar."
—William Wordsworth

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The Forgotten Promises

In casual conversations with brethren, fasting has occasionally come up for discussion, and it turns out that it is the rare individual who fasts regularly. Years ago, church members were encouraged to fast monthly, but Scripture does not require any particular regimen. The only fast that [God](#) strictly commands is the annual fast on the [Day of Atonement](#).

The Bible, however, contains many examples of fasting. David made it a practice to fast for those who were ill, even for his enemies: "[T]hey repay me with evil for good, rendering me all forlorn. When they were ill, I wore the [sackcloth](#), I went humbly fasting, I prayed for them, with head bent on my breast" ([Psalm 35:12-13](#), James Moffatt translation). David provides an excellent example of loving one's enemies through fasting ([Luke 6:27-28](#)).

Regular fasting should be among the most essential and effective items in our spiritual toolbox, one we use to draw close to God. Consider that Jesus' disciples did not fast while He was with them, but when He was removed from them, what filled the void? Notice [Matthew 9:14-15](#):

Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" And [Jesus](#)

said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."

Note that John's disciples did not fast just on Atonement but "often." The Pharisees fasted twice each week, as one of them proudly pointed out to God in [Luke 18:12](#). Jesus did not discount regular fasting, only that it was unnecessary while He lived with His disciples. They would practice it after He had ascended to heaven. Fasting, then, should be a regular part of our lives to lessen the distance, as it were, between God and us.

Fasting is important not only to us but also to God. When disaster struck Judah, God was aware, but He did not just wave a magic wand and fix everything. No, through the prophet Joel, He proclaimed a fast throughout the nation ([Joel 1:14](#); [2:12](#), 15). Why? If properly executed, a fast humbles us before the Almighty, drawing us closer to Him, and "who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him" ([Joel 2:14](#))?

However, there is a right way and a wrong way to conduct a fast. God tells Jeremiah, "When [the people of Judah] fast, I will not hear their cry" ([Jeremiah 14:12](#)). Why not? Because they were not fasting correctly. In [Zechariah 7:5](#), God asks a rhetorical question of the Jews of a later generation: "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?" He explains that their fasts were selfish.

Isaiah 58 is all about improper and proper fasting:

Why have we fasted, they say, and You do not see it? Why have we [afflicted](#) ourselves, and You take no knowledge [of it]? Behold [O Israel], on the day of your fast [when you should be grieving for your sins], you find profit in your business, and [instead of stopping all work, as the law implies you and your workmen should do] you extort from your hired servants a full amount of labor. [The facts are that] you fast only for strife and debate and to smite with the fist of wickedness. Fasting as you do today will not cause your voice to be heard on high.

Is such a fast as yours what I have chosen, a day for a man to humble himself with sorrow in his soul? [Is true fasting merely mechanical?] Is it only to bow down his head like a bulrush and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him [to indicate a condition of heart that he does not have]? Will you call this a fast and an acceptable day to the Lord? ([Isaiah 58:3-5](#), *Amplified Bible Classic Edition* [AMPC])

So, what is the purpose and proper conduct of a fast? God continues His instruction:

[Rather] is not this the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every [enslaving] yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house—when you see the naked, that you cover him, and that you hide not yourself from [the needs of] your own flesh and blood? ([Isaiah 58:6-7](#) [AMPC])

Along with drawing close to God, a crucial purpose of fasting is to aid us in changing from the typical human attitude of self-centeredness to one of outgoing concern for others. One fast each year on Atonement will not effect much change in our character. Relieving the burdened, poor, and needy is so important that God brings it to our attention in both the Old ([Leviticus 25:35-36](#)) and New Testaments ([Matthew 25:35-36](#)). Amazingly, both places contain not only similar subject matter but also the same chapter and verse numbers! While neither context mentions fasting, their subject and purpose are strikingly similar to [Isaiah 58:6-7](#).

Another purpose for fasting is to seek God's guidance, as shown in [Ezra 8:21-23](#). Along with Ezra, several of the heroes of [faith](#), including Jesus Himself, fasted to seek God's direction. They were following Solomon's advice in [Proverbs 3:6](#), "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths."

Jesus provides instruction about proper fasting:

Moreover, 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 their reward. But you, 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. ([Matthew 6:16-18](#))

Numerous scriptural examples show that we should afflict ourselves by abstaining from both food and water for at least 24 hours (see [Leviticus 23:32](#); [1 Kings 19:8](#); [Ezra 10:6](#); [Daniel 10:3](#); etc.). Both longer and shorter fasts are possible, but the full, one-day fast is the standard.

The Complete Word Study Dictionary comments on the word "consecrate" in [Joel 1:14](#)—"Consecrate [*sanctify*, KJV] a fast"—that the time spent fasting should be set aside and treated as holy. It is sanctified time spent before the Almighty God, and we should spend a good part of it in prayer and study.

So, what are the forgotten promises? They are the rewards promised to those who fast properly before God. In [Isaiah 58:8-11](#) (AMPC), God lists the rewards for fasting:

Then shall your light break forth like the morning, and your healing (your restoration and the power of a new life) shall spring forth speedily; your righteousness (your rightness, your justice, and your right relationship with God) shall go before you [conducting you to [peace](#) and prosperity], and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, Here I am. If you take away from your midst yokes of oppression [wherever you find them], the finger pointed in scorn [toward the oppressed or the godly], and every form of false, harsh, unjust, and wicked speaking, and if you pour out that with which you sustain your own life for the hungry and satisfy the need of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in darkness, and your obscurity and gloom become like the noonday. And the Lord shall guide you continually and satisfy you in drought and in dry places

and make strong your bones. And you shall be like a watered garden and like a spring of water whose waters fail not.

What marvelous promises! No one who has been in the Body of Christ for very long needs to be reminded that life is hard! Can any of us afford to pass up blessings like these? Perhaps some few, but can any of us afford to ignore the command and will of God?

- Mike Fuhrer

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[Isaiah 58 and Fasting](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

On the Day of Atonement, we do no work because the work of atonement is done by God Almighty. We fast, afflicting our souls, reminding us how much we depend upon God both physically and spiritually, enabling us to lighten our loads and other people's loads. Fasting puts us in a proper humble and contrite frame of mind, allowing God to respond to us, freeing us from our burdens and guiding us into His Kingdom and His family.

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by David F. Maas

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