

## **Fasting**

### **Lesson Four**

**Focal Texts:** 2 Chronicles 20:1-4, 13-15; Matthew 6:16-18; Acts 13:1-3

**Background:** 2 Chronicles 20:1-17; Matthew 6:16-18; Acts 13:1-3

**Teaching Aim:** To lead members to gain a better understanding of the devotional practice of fasting and to determine how important fasting will be in their devotional life.

**Relate to Life:** Begin by asking members to discuss the following question: “Why is fasting not practiced by more Christians in our day?” Some of their suggested reasons may include the following:

1. We don’t hear much about it in our churches.
2. There is a lot of misunderstanding and confusion about fasting.
3. Some may feel that this is one of those religious practices, such as anointing with oil or speaking in tongues, that was important for the New Testament church but not for the church of today.

After this time of discussion, see if anyone in the class has had experience with fasting that they would be willing to share with the class. You may want to enlist someone ahead of time for this.

Then share with the class that we will be taking a fresh look at the practice of fasting in our study for today in order to determine if this is something that we should add to or enrich the practice of in our devotional lives.

**Guide Bible Study:** Begin by reading and discussing the two examples of fasting in the focal passages of 2 Chronicles 20 and Acts 13. Use the following questions to guide in this time of discussion:

1. What were the motivating factors behind these incidents of fasting? (For the Israelites it was the impending danger from the forces of the Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites. “These armies hoped the king of Judah would feel threatened enough to engage them on this narrow plain in battle. They could use the sea to their advantage and place troops between the army of Judah and Jerusalem, thus weakening Jehoshaphat’s military position. Further, the armies from the east far outnumbered Judah’s forces and Jehoshaphat knew his army was no match against such a mighty opponent.” The motivating factor for the church at Antioch was a need for wisdom in responding to the call of God. “After a trip to Jerusalem to deliver a financial gift to the church there, Saul and Barnabas had returned home to Antioch to seek further direction for ministry.”) So, in both of these instances, the people needed help from God. Their method of request was prayer and fasting.

2. What did these two acts of fasting have in common? (Both of these were corporate experiences of worship. 2 Chronicles 20:13 says that “all the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord.” In Acts “the church was together in worship and God revealed his plan for missionary action.” “Notice in Acts 13:1-3 that the church in Antioch fasted. They were fasting and worshipping together.” “They responded with a period of further fasting and prayer.”) So, fasting was often a corporate activity as well as a part of a person’s personal devotional time.
3. What were the results? (God spoke through Jahaziel to tell the people that He would take care of their enemies. The Holy Spirit spoke to the people at Antioch to let them know of God’s plans for Barnabas and Saul and their church.)

Then share with members that guidelines for fasting can be found in Matthew 6:16-18. Before reading these verses ask members to listen for these guidelines. These will include the following:

1. They were expected to fast. (“When you fast.”)
2. There is a difference between ceremonial fasts and personal times of fasting. (“The phrasing of this text clearly indicates he was not talking about ceremonial fasts like the Day of Atonement-everyone was fasting on that day. He was giving instructions about personal fasting. His disciples were Jews who already knew how to observe the feasts and celebrations. He was leading them to a deeper understanding of spiritual disciplines. He was calling them beyond the legalistic and hypocritical displays of religiosity rampant in his day.”)
3. This is a spiritual discipline that we should engage in. (“It is not reserved for ‘super-spiritual’ Christians. This is an activity for all of us.”)
4. We are not to make a big show of it! (“People have always been tempted to parade their spirituality in front of others. Jesus specifically condemns this. Fasting is a private decision. Jesus instructed his followers to continue their normal hygiene practices as usual. In other words, don’t use fasting as an occasion to prove to others how spiritual you are!”)
5. There is a connection between the practice of fasting and God’s response. (“He expressed the truth that God pays attention to what we do. He responds to His people. God is not aloof or disinterested. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that gets both our attention and God’s attention.”)
6. Fasting is a personal decision. (“We need prayer support when we are fasting, so we can inform a handful of our close brothers and sisters in Christ about our intent to fast and pray. They can support us and pray for us during our time of fasting. However, we don’t announce it to the world just so others will be impressed. We fast for spiritual reasons only. It is a spiritual exercise-not a weight-loss program!”)

**Encourage Application:** Then distribute copies of the “Guidelines for Fasting” article on page 49 of the Study Guide. Read through each one of these and allow members to make related comments or suggestions based on this study. Close with a time of challenge for members to practice fasting sometime this week or month.