

## FASTING

Retreat for churches in Illinois

By Bill Vamos

I. Prayer

II. In order to initiate our discussion on fasting, I'm going to:

1. Share some insights on Fasting from the book. God's Chosen Fast, by Arthur Wallis.
2. Share from some experiences of fasting. Then proceed to your discussions.
3. Ask for you: to share your experiences, to raise questions or concerns, and to give your input.

III. Insights from God's Chosen Fast:

- A. In the preface to his book, Arthur Wallis focuses the role of fasting in our Christian discipleship by saying:

Fasting is important – more important, perhaps, than many of us have supposed, as I trust this book will reveal. For all that, it is not a major biblical doctrine, a foundation stone of the faith, or a panacea for every spiritual ill. Nevertheless, when exercised with a pure heart and a right motive, fasting may provide us with a key to unlock doors where other keys have failed; a window opening up new horizons in the unseen world; a spiritual weapon of God's providing, 'mighty, to the pulling down of strongholds'.

B. Why Fast?

1. Biblical people fasted, for example:
  - a. Old Testament – Moses; David; Elijah; Hannah; Ezra
  - b. New Testament – Paul; Anna; Jesus' Apostles fasted after his Ascension; (Acts 2, 3) and Jesus Himself (Luke 4)
2. Leaders of Christian history practiced fasting and testified to its value: Luther; Calvin; Knox; Jonathan Edwards; John Wesley
3. Many of God's people whose names are not recorded in Scripture, or in history books, fasted as part of their relationship with God and with people.
4. In New Testament times, fasting was a channel of God's power into the lives of God's people.
5. And, in our own day, "...A new thirst for the Spirit is beginning to awaken the slumbering church. (This)...is a day of spiritual renewal...with searching's and inquiries, burdens and longings on every hand. Fasting can be part of the church's renewal in Christ.

C. The Three Kinds of fasting, Indicated in Scripture:

1. The normal fast = not eating, but drinking water is acceptable.  
Example – Matthew 4:2 – “(Jesus) fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward He was hungry (there is no mention of His being thirsty).
2. The Absolute fast = abstaining from drinking as well as eating.  
“Normally this was never for more than three days, probably because any longer period might have proved physically injurious. The body can go long periods without food and be physically benefited, but only for a short time without water.

Example = In Acts 9:9 Saul of Tarsus arrived in Damascus, dazed and blinded by his encounter with the Risen Christ, “and for three days he...neither ate nor drank.”

Arthur Wallis goes on to say that “...there are examples in Scripture of absolute fasts which must have been supernatural in character because of their very long duration. For the separate periods for forty days and forty nights Moses was in the presence of God, neither eating nor drinking.

3. The Partial Fast = The emphasis here is upon restriction of diet rather than complete abstention.

Elijah’s spiritual preparation included something akin to a partial fast. *In the morning and the evening, the ravens brought him bread and meat, and he drank from the brook. Later, he was sustained with simple cakes made from meal and oil in the home of the widow Zarephath (I Kings 1:12).* In his food intake Elijah practiced self denial, which is essential for a person who is entrusted with spiritual power, and, at the same time, Elijah identified with many of his fellow countrymen who were facing starvation. When we take the needs of others into our own lives, we are able to minister effectively to them.

D. Perhaps the most crucial statement in the New Testament on the question of fasting is in Matthew 9:14, 15 (B.V. read)

“*The time when the bridegroom is taken away from the,*” refers to the period between His ascension and His second coming. Arthur Wallis says: “The fast of this age is not merely an act of mourning for Christ’s absence, but and act of preparation for His return...Fasting is a God-appointed means for the flowing of God’s grace and power....(that last sentence, in my opinion, is an excellent definition of fasting.)

- E. It is also crucial to know that our fasting is to be done unto God, and not for public approval. John Wesley says: “First let

(fasting) be done unto the lord...Let us beware of fancying we merit anything of God by our fasting...Fasting is only a way which God hath ordained wherein we wait for God's unmerited mercy; and wherein without any desert of ours, God hath freely promised freely to give us God's blessing.

F. What is the value of Fasting? I'm going to mention some answers to this question, but these answers do not exhaust all the possibilities. Fasting is a valuable aid to:

1. Personal Sanctity. Psalm 69:10 – *"I humbled my soul with fasting."*
2. To Freeing the Captives. Isaiah 58:6 – *"Is not his the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"*
3. To Gugging (disciplining the body.) I Corinthians 9:27 Paul believed that fasting was a way to discipline the body which opens us to self-control and to the grace and power of God.
4. To Health and Healing. John 3, verse 2 – *"Beloved I pray that...you may be in health."* Isaiah 58:8 *"Your healing shall spring up speedily."* (B.V. read the whole passage – Isaiah 58:6-8a) Not only does fasting focus us on God, and the needs of God's people, there is also a natural healing and rejuvenation of the body that can take place. However, before you begin any form of fasting, it is imperative to see your doctor and ask for his or her guidance, not only on the wisdom of fasting.

G. How to begin:

If you are new to fasting, I strongly recommend reading Arthur Wallis' book God's Chosen Fast, before you begin. Chapter 20 of his book deals with the question of how to begin, and I am convinced his entire book is required reading for anyone who is interested in fasting. I'm going to quote just a portion of the chapter on how to begin – "...Start with a partial fast, or else fast one day till the tea meal. Next time extend the fast till night, breaking it with just a light meal or fruit only. "When you can manage a one-day fast without feeling faint or famished, (we do not say without feeling hungry!) you will be ready for any call of God or a longer fast, of three, five or seven days."

Mr. Wallis also has five excellent questions which he feels are helpful to put to ourselves when considering the discipline of fasting:

1. Am I confident that this desire to fast is God-given? Would He have me undertake a normal or just a partial fast? “Jesus was let up by the Spirit into the wilderness”.
2. Are my motives right? Is there any hidden desire to impress others? “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”
3. What are my spiritual objectives in this fast? Personal sanctification or conservation? Intercession? What special burdens? Divine intervention, guidance, blessings? Spirit fullness for self or others? To loose the captives? To stay the divine wrath, bring revival? “I press on toward the goal.”
4. Do my objectives tend to be self-centered? Is my desire for personal blessing balanced by genuine concern for others? “Let each of you look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.”
5. Am I determined above all else to minister to the Lord in this fast? “They were worshipping the Lord and fasting.”

IV. My own experience of fasting has been limited but very meaningful.

- a. A normal fast, on one day each week until 10:00 at night when I ate a meal. I did this every Tuesday for three months after Martin Luther king, Jr. was killed. It would have been better for my health had I started with a partial fast, since I ate a large meal at 10:00 and over-worked my digestive processes. I sensed God calling me to do this as a way of participating in Jesus’ ministry of freeing the captives and as a means of identifying with those for whom Dr. King lived and died. I found myself growing closer to God and to people who are politically and socially oppressed.
- b. A partial fast. (value = to free the captives and participate in their needs.) Twice during a recent year I agonized and rejoiced with a small group of people in our church in what is called the “Hunger Exercise,” and experience suggested by Richard Hoehn. Each time there were different people in the group. For two weeks we lived on a poverty-level income for food and drink (\$8.00 per week per person). We met twice a week for mutual support, and committed ourselves to prayer for each other. We were also open to become listening ears to any member of the group for whom the hunger pangs were traumatic.

At the end of the two weeks, we brought together our observations and our commitments to at least one change in life style. Nearly everyone reported a constant craving for food. Some observed a sense of inspiration from the fact that we were doing this for others (we gave the difference between the \$8.00 a week and what we usually spend for food to starvation relief). They further reported that this inspiration strengthened them, while the malnourished of the world are constantly ravenous for no purpose at all – every day. Both times that we tried this two-week experiment, members of the group decided on changes in personal living patterns that would benefit those in need.

- c. A one-time only 30 hour normal fast, from noon on a Friday to 6:00 p.m. on a Saturday, with about 25 youth in Elkhart, followed by a Third World Meal. (value = freeing the captives and participating in their needs). The fullness of God's Spirit entered us, as evidenced in the sharing at the Third World Meal.

- V. Discussion: Invite them to share their experiences of fasting, to raise questions and concerns, to give their input.