

Sunday February 21, 2021  
Lesson 12: Godly Fasting  
Scripture: Isaiah 58: 1-11

**Context:**

We move to the book of Isaiah for our next section as we begin the season of Lent. On this first Sunday in a season of reflection and repentance, we look at the spiritual discipline of fasting. The prophet Isaiah has a word for the people of God and what true fasting is to look like for them.

Today's passage in the book of Isaiah comes towards the end of the book. Scholars have divided the book of Isaiah into three portions. There is First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and then Third Isaiah (or "Trito-Isaiah").<sup>1</sup> As in Second Isaiah, the setting of Third Isaiah establishes Jerusalem has been destroyed and there is a promise the exiles will return.<sup>2</sup> However, there are other passages indicating the Temple has been restored and is functioning, leading scholars to assert Third Isaiah is a work of the early postexilic period rather than of the preceding exilic period.<sup>3</sup> As the details emerge, there is a distinction in how the community is healing and rebuilding from the ruins of the city.

Because of the different quotations and prophecies, the work of Third Isaiah has been a challenge for scholars. As the author(s) have quotations of and allusions to earlier biblical accounts, this section of the book is difficult to date.<sup>4</sup> There are many who conjecture the book was compiled sometime in the late sixth century BCE, after the completion of the Temple in 515 BCE.<sup>5</sup> Due to the allusions to earlier chapters in the book of Isaiah, many believe this writing can be attributed to the school of Isaiah, those trained under Isaiah who compiled his writings alongside their own collection of facts to piece together the book.<sup>6</sup> The oracles in this section alongside our lesson today point to a foreknowledge of the oracles of Isaiah and his purpose in coming to the people.

In today's passage, the prophet instructs the people to fast. There is a focus upon how they make a show of fasting such as the abstinence from food and self-imposed infliction of pain. Instead, the people are called to fast from selfishness and to look to others sharing from their own table and abstaining from verbal attacks upon people. They are called to reflect and to fast from behaviors separating them from others so the Lord can truly make them into a watered garden.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 422.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 423.

## **Application**

The spiritual discipline of fasting is perhaps the least discussed and popular of the spiritual disciplines. For high church Protestants, the only time fasting becomes prominent is the season of Lent when people seek to find spiritual disciplines to connect closer to God. It makes sense fasting should be a core discipline as it has a long history for people of faith.

The Old Testament begins the narrative of fasting as countless adherents of the faith fast in order to draw near to God. Job fasts when he mourns for what is happening to him with all his trials and ordeals. The city of Nineveh also fasts when they hear the message of Jonah as they seek to repent of their evil ways. Fasting becomes an individual and communal discipline shared together.

The discipline of fasting continues in the New Testament. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights when he was in the desert. In his preaching, Jesus talked about the hypocrisy some displayed as they would make shows of their fasting and yet continue to ignore their neighbors and the other commandments of God. Fasting was something Jesus knew as part of the practices to give life to the community of faith.

Today I think fasting can still play an important role in our faith life and not just in the season of Lent. Occasionally or intermittently fasting can help us grow as we learn of potential obstacles preventing us from fully loving God and neighbor. If anything, we can reflect on what is going on in our soul and how God might be nudging us to grow from our fast.

I once had a colleague encourage me to occasionally fast from social media. They had noted my irritation with others and thought a break from social media might help me to cool my heels and rest. At first I resisted using all the excuses about staying in touch with others and the need for it for work. We finally came up with a plan to help me to stay focused with work but not overindulge with personal use.

The honest to God truth is I kept up the fast beyond a month. I noted I was irritated less and spent more time on myself whether that was reading, putting puzzles together, scripture reading, or even praying. I had a peace in my spirit as I stopped allowing the opinions and annoyances of others to gain my attention. The fast was one to help me focus on my relationship with God and others.

There are other times I have found we can experiment with fasting. Food fasting can help us in our prayer lives and help us to pay attention to our bodies. I once read of a colleague who gave up candy bars for Lent. She didn't do it to start a diet. As she did it, she realized she was eating candy bars when she was bored and didn't want to be alone. And then she started to realize how she struggled with being still and listening to God's voice. What started out as giving up a favorite food became a spiritual practice to help her realize the call God had placed on her life.

Fasting from things can also help us grow in different ways. I mentioned social media fasting, but others have found different things to help them grow. I once heard of someone who abstained from criticism and it helped them to see how much time they wasted criticizing others instead of actually getting to know those people. Others might fast from places or activities which consume too much of their time. As they do, they realize what or who they truly need to prioritize in their life.

Fasting is not to be a punishment of one's self. Instead, fasting is meant to act as a

discipline to draw us closer to God and to one another. We are encouraged by prophets such as Isaiah to find those ways of fasting to help us grow. Perhaps like the Israelites we might consider experimenting with fasting. Instead of simply giving up food, break bread with someone who needs it. Instead of talking loudly about your own spiritual disciplines, ask others what they have found to work for them. Instead of attacking others, perhaps praise or encourage them instead.

Why do you think fasting is so important as a spiritual discipline? What is something you could fast from during this Lenten season? How do you think fasting can help grow in our walk with Christ?

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