

Question 5

- a) Fasting increases a sense of humility and dependence on God. It reminds us of our human weakness.
- b) Fasting allows us to give more time to prayer.
- c) Fasting heightens a spiritual and mental alertness and a sense of God's presence as we focus less on material things (e.g. food) and more on eternal realities.
- d) Fasting expresses earnestness and urgency in prayer.
- e) *"First, let it be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven"* (John Wesley).

Final Comment

- a) This study does not deal with the practical matters of how to fast. Such issues must be for another time.
- b) Charles Price puts it well when he writes: *"The primary theme of this section concerning giving, praying and fasting is not the techniques engaged in each, or the results that may be obtained, but the spirit and attitude in which they are done. God Himself is the motivation and the One whose pleasure we are to seek"*.

GROUP LEADERS NOTES – STUDY 19

Question 1

- a) Fasting was always God- centred; a point brought out in the negative sense in **Zechariah 7:5**.
- b) In scripture, fasting is almost always connected with times of prayer: e.g. **Ezra 8:23; Daniel 9:3; Luke 2:36-37**.
- c) It is therefore appropriate to see that Jesus is continuing the thought of prayer when He moves on to this theme of fasting in our current study.

Question 2

- a) The Law set only one public occasion for fasting – the Day of Atonement (**Leviticus 23:27** – 'afflicting' oneself meant abstaining from eating and drinking. **Acts 27:9** confirms that this was a fast).
- b) The other set fasts in the Old Testament are found in Zechariah 7:1-7; 8:19. These were probably introduced following the exile into Babylon; in memory of key historical events:

Don't dwell too much on the detail of these different fasts. They are listed below mainly for group leaders' information:

17th July – the capture of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 52:6-7)

7th August – the burning of the temple (2 Kings 25:8-9)

3rd October – the death of Gedaliah the Governor (Jeremiah 41:4-5)

10th January – the start of the attack on Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1)

- c) Under the Pharisees, set fasts became more frequent and by the time of Jesus' earthly ministry there were regular fasts on the second and fifth day of every week (Luke 18:12).
- d) In general, fasting in the scriptures came in response to certain times of:
 - National need – e.g. when under threat by the enemy (**2 Chronicles 20:1-4**).
 - Intensive prayer – e.g. when Nehemiah heard of the ruined Jerusalem (**Nehemiah 1:4**).
 - Repentance – e.g. When God's people sinned against Him (**Ezra 10:6**).
 - Guidance – e.g. When Paul and Barnabas were sent out from Antioch (**Acts 13:2-3**).
 - Protection – e.g. When the exiles were about to leave Babylon for the return to Jerusalem (**Ezra 8:21**).
 - Appointing Leaders - e.g. When the Elders in the early church were set apart (**Acts 14:23**).

Question 3

- a) Like prayer, fasting is a relationship between us and God; for His honour not our own.
- b) Evidently, what was in essence a matter of spiritual self-discipline had so often become an occasion to promote self-righteousness.
- c) What was intended as something internal had become external show.
- d) Fasting is not to be used to impress others but to humble ourselves before God.
- e) In **Isaiah 58:3-6** the Jews were rebuked by God for being very pious about fasting but at the same time neglecting justice; exploiting others; and indulging in quarrelling and strife.
- f) Unfortunately the Pharisees had also misunderstood the concept of fasting; a point which Jesus makes in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in **Luke 18:10-14**.

Question 4

- a) There does not appear to be any set requirement in the New Testament for continuing to fast.
- b) However, there are some thirty references to fasting in the NT; most of which are favourable towards it being on-going.
- c) Earlier we noted two occasions in Acts where fasting resulted in missionaries being sent out and Elders appointed.
- d) We have already considered Jesus words "*When you fast...*"
- e) A few chapters later in **Matthew 9:14-15** John's disciples question why Jesus' disciples are not fasting. Verse 15 records Jesus' expectation that although they do not need to fast while He is with them; nevertheless His followers will fast after He has ascended back to the Father.
- f) John MacArthur helpfully writes that: "*Fasting is never shown in Scripture to be the means to heightened spiritual experience, visions, or special insight or awareness-as many mystics, including some Christian mystics, claim. Fasting is appropriate in this age, because Christ is physically absent from the earth. But it is appropriate only as a response to special times of testing, trial, or struggle*".
- g) The times of need which led the Old Testament people of God to turn in prayer and fasting still come up today: e.g. need for deliverance, guidance etc.