

## Fasting in the Bible and Reformed Tradition

There are many biblical accounts of fasting. A quick review of these stories helps us to understand the nature and purpose of this practice.

In the Old Testament, Moses fasts for forty days on Mount Sinai when he receives the law from God (Exodus 34); here, fasting is a way of preparing oneself to receive God's Word. During the war with the Philistines, Samuel calls the people of Israel to fast at Mizpah (1 Samuel 7), as a way of seeking God's will and protection. Later, when Saul is killed by the Philistine army, the people of Israel fast for seven days at Jabesh, as a sign of mourning. Elijah fasts in the wilderness for forty days after fleeing for his life from Ahab and Jezebel, and before hearing the voice of God in the silence that followed the wind, earthquake, and fire (1 Kings 19). Again, fasting is preparation to receive God's Word. Nehemiah fasts and prays when he learns of the destruction of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1), as a way of expressing his grief. The people of Ninevah announce a fast when they hear Jonah's warning: "Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown." The universal nature of this fast is fascinating, in that it involves everyone, "great and small," including the king, and even includes the animals of Ninevah (Jonah 3). Here, fasting is a sign of repentance, of turning toward God and away from evil. The prophet Joel proclaims a fast for the people of God in a time of trouble. It's important to understand the nature of this fast. Joel calls for genuine repentance and lamentation, not merely outward displays of penitence: Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. (Joel 2:12-13) Similarly, the prophet Isaiah excoriates those who practice fasting as a show of religious piety, but do not attend to the demands of justice and the needs of the poor. The fast that God chooses is to do justice, to liberate the oppressed, to feed the hungry, to give shelter to the poor, to provide clothing for the naked and not to hide ourselves from our own human family (Isaiah 58).

In the New Testament, the prophet Anna, who greets Jesus in the temple in Luke 2, is known for her faithful worship and vigil, including prayer and fasting. Anna's fasting seems to be a form of preparation to receive God's Word—in this case, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to fast for forty days (Matthew 4, Mark 1, Luke 4). The gospels characterize this as a time of testing, as Jesus prepares for his public ministry. Jesus is later asked why his own disciples don't fast, like the disciples of John the Baptizer and the Pharisees. Jesus replies that the time for fasting will come later, after he departs from them, but that while he is with them they should celebrate like wedding guests (Matthew 9 and Luke 5). Jesus does acknowledge the practice of fasting, however, in Matthew 6, when he says: Whenever you fast, don't be like the hypocrites who look miserable and disfigure their faces in order to impress others (Matthew 6:16). Jesus doesn't say, "don't fast." He says, when you do it, do it for the right reasons and with the right attitude—in other words, in order to tune your heart to the purpose of God. Finally, the church at Antioch fasted and prayed in preparation to lay hands on Paul and Barnabas, and commission them for ministry (Acts 13.1-3). In turn, Paul and Barnabas taught Christian communities to pray and fast as they appointed elders for leadership in the church (Acts 14.23). Fasting is again a way to discern the will of God and to prepare for ministry.

In Christian tradition, fasting has long been associated with the season of Lent. The practice of fasting in Lent folds together all of the biblical themes of fasting we have seen: repentance and mourning for our brokenness and sin, seeking the will of God, preparation for baptism (in the case of the catechumens or new believers), and preparing to receive God's Word made flesh in the paschal mystery of Easter. As the Ash Wednesday liturgy in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* says:

I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ,  
to observe a holy Lent  
by self-examination and penitence,  
by prayer and fasting,  
by works of love,  
and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

For Christians, the practice of fasting is not only confined to Lent, however. There are other seasons and events in human life that call for times of intentional prayer, penitence, self-examination, sobriety, and focused attention of the word of God. Just as the people of ancient Israel fasted to discern God's will and express their grief in times of war, famine, or natural disaster, we may observe special times of prayer and fasting in times of trouble and pain.

There may be a misconception on the part of some Presbyterians that fasting is not an appropriate part of the Reformed tradition. John Calvin actually writes quite extensively and eloquently on the virtues of fasting in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He says that, "according to the need of the times, [pastors] should exhort the people either to fasting or to solemn supplications, or to other acts of humility, repentance, and faith" (4.12.14). Calvin elaborates on the "need of the times" as follows: "whenever a controversy over religion arises ... whenever there is a question about choosing a minister ... whenever ... any difficult matter of great importance is to be discussed, ... or [in times of] pestilence, war, and famine" (4.12.14).

Calvin defines fasting as follows: "we do not understand it simply as restraint and abstemiousness in food, but as something else. Throughout its course, the life of the godly indeed ought to be tempered with frugality and sobriety, so that as far as possible it bears some resemblance to a fast. But, in addition, there is another sort of fasting, temporary in character, when we withdraw something from the normal regimen of living, either for one day or for a definite time, and pledge ourselves to a tighter and more severe restraint in diet than ordinarily. This consists in three things: in time, in quality of foods, and in smallness of quantity" (4.12.18). Basically, for Calvin this means, for certain periods of time, to avoid delicacies and eat more sparingly, "only for need, not also for pleasure."

Calvin identifies three purposes of fasting: (1) as a personal spiritual discipline, to control the appetites of the body; (2) as preparation for prayer and meditation, which can either be a public or private practice; and (3) as testimony of our repentance before God and our reliance on God's provision and strength, which can also be a public or private practice (4.12.15). On the idea of fasting as an appropriate accompaniment to prayer, he says: "Surely we experience this: with a full stomach our mind is not so lifted up to God that it can be drawn to prayer with a serious and ardent affection and persevere in it" (4.12.16). As for the notion of fasting in a time of public disaster or crisis, Calvin points to examples from scripture (noted above), concluding: "What reason is there why we should not do the same?" (4.12.17).

As one might expect, Calvin is highly critical of any practices of fasting that, in his view, smack of hypocrisy, superstition, or works of merit. The point is that fasting is primarily the embodiment of an inner disposition—a reorientation of the heart, which includes true repentance, self-examination, and humility.