

## The True Fast

Passages: Isaiah 58:1–8  
Luke 4:1–13

Isaiah was a prophet who lived 700 years before Christ. And yet, through the Spirit of God, he was able to see things (future things) which we now regard as key focal points in the Church calendar. This is what I was talking about last week:

- Through the 4 weeks of Advent, we turn to Isaiah's prophecies to hear his predictions of the coming of God into our world—"Immanuel, God with us"
- At Christmas, we turn again to Isaiah's prophecies and he foretells the miracle of the virgin birth.
- With the coming of Epiphany, we look again at Isaiah's predictions of how foreign Kings would come to honour Israel's new-born Messiah.
- Then, as we did last week, we turn again to Isaiah, this time to read his prophecy concerning Messiah's baptism; how the physical anointing of God's Spirit upon this man equipped him to fulfil the task of gathering a new people unto God, from every nation, race, tribe and tongue.

In other words, Isaiah had a lot to say about Jesus: His birth, life, death and even His resurrection were all prefigured by this prophet! And that's why the ancient church used his prophecies as key markers to create a calendar by which we might systematically ponder the wonders of these God-events, one by one, through the year—a calendar by which we might remind ourselves of the birth, life, death and resurrection and, more importantly, learn to live our lives by the rhythm of Jesus' life.

What the prophecies of Isaiah teach us is to marvel at the precise nature of God's plans... plans concerning Jesus, the Messiah, which were revealed to the prophet 700 years before they occurred!

Today, we look at the next event on the calendar of Jesus' life, to the event that took place immediately following His baptism in the Jordan River and His anointing by the Spirit of God. It's the story of how Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the desert to fast and be tempted by the devil for 40 days and nights. (We read about it in Luke 4.)

But, of course, the first question we need to consider is this: **Did Isaiah foresee this event as well?** Did He predict that this fasting would also happen? And, if so, does Isaiah shine any light on what it all means?

These are our questions for today. But first, let's pray.

**Did Isaiah foresee the fact that Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the desert?** And, if so, does Isaiah shine any light on what it means?

Well, one thing I hope I made clear last week is the fact that Isaiah foresaw a man who was so filled with the Spirit that **His arrival would radically challenge the status quo in Israel!** Isaiah pictured Him as a **religious rebel** who would oppose and bring down all the vestiges of idolatry and worthless ritual that had gradually choked Israel's relationship with God. This Spirit-filled Messiah would initiate a new way of life in Israel...a life embodied with God's truth, righteousness and justice... and would extend that life beyond the borders of Israel, to all humankind!

It is in this light that Isaiah speaks, in chapter 58, about **the ritual of fasting!**

As we see in the opening verses of Isaiah 58, fasting had become a dead ritual in Israel; a ritual by which men and women thought they could twist God's arm and thus be favoured with comfort and riches. Of course, God disputes this common idea in the opening verses of Isaiah 58.

***"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. <sup>2</sup> For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.***

***<sup>3</sup> 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?***

***Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'***

***"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. <sup>4</sup> Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.***

***<sup>5</sup> Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?***

What these opening verses show is that, not only did Israel need to be re-educated about fasting, but they also give a strong hint that **it will only be the Messiah who will be able to restore Israel to the true ways of fasting.**

What, then, are the ‘true ways’ of fasting that Messiah will demonstrate to Israel?

Listen to the rest of the passage:

***6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.***

It is in this notion of the true fast that we begin to see what Jesus has come to do in in Luke 4, in the story of Jesus in the wilderness. But before we discuss this connection between the Old and New Testaments, let me invite you back into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by asking a very frank and contemporary question: **What do you think about “abstinence”?**

In one sense, it’s a trick question because, sadly, in our day and age, anyone who talks about abstinence is usually talking about abstinence from sex...as if that’s all the word refers to! But, of course, the refusal to have sex before marriage is only a small part of the bigger picture of abstinence!

Generally-speaking, **abstinence is a synonym for what the Bible calls “self-control”**—it’s a fruit of the Spirit and, in fact, it’s a major aspect of what it means to be a Christian. As Christians, we are called to abstain—to say ‘no’ to ungodly temptations, unhealthy desires and unhelpful activities—all the things that harm our relationship with God. We abstain from these things as a deliberate choice that we might live more conscientiously as God’s children, in the dignity of His image.

And so, throughout the OT...

1. God's people were encouraged not to allow their body and mind to be contaminated by things that were never meant for them (bad thoughts, unhelpful images, pagan worship). Abstinence from these contaminants was important to their spiritual health as God's chosen people.
2. They were also encouraged to abstain from selfish behaviour! When God commanded Israel to "love the Lord with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and to love their neighbour as themselves", He knew that this would only be possible through self-denial! Only when they said 'no' to their own selfish desires would they have room in their lives to say 'yes' to God and to others. Abstinence from selfishness allowed God's people to be servants... of God and of each other.

Abstinence, therefore, was a visible sign of their relationship with God...in much the same way that abstinence is a sign of my relationship with you! I don't do whatever I want in your presence! I abstain from many things: from spitting on the ground, or using foul language, or making obscene jokes—Why? Because I respect you! And in my respect for you, I abstain from those things that might be displeasing to you. This is the same reason why God's people abstained from things that were disrespectful to God-- Their relationship with God was so important that it necessitated a high level of respect!

Now, **this is where fasting comes in!** You see, throughout the OT, the people of God were regularly commanded to **abstain from food**; not because food is evil, but simply because **the outward action of fasting from food was meant to be a visible reflection of all the other areas of life in which God's people were called to abstain.** In other words, abstinence from food was simply a way of showing that you were, in a general sense, **a self-disciplined person**; that you lived a self-disciplined life...under the control of God's Word and Spirit; that you practiced self-denial. Moreover, a regular routine of fasting was thought to help you build up 'the muscles' of will-power and self-denial.

This idea becomes even clearer when we realise that the Hebrew word for "fasting" literally means "to afflict one's soul" or to "humble one's soul". Fasting was a very serious practice; the pain of your hunger was deliberately intended to help you step down from your comfortable lifestyle so that you could better identify with the poor, the lowly and

the suffering. By ‘humbling your soul’, you could more easily stand alongside the poor, the suffering and the afflicted of Hebrew society.

Indeed, the divine command for all of Israel to fast together was meant to heighten this corporate sense of community and responsibility towards one another; fasting was meant to teach Israel to put others first and to think of others before themselves! In this sense, **abstinence was a mark of spiritual maturity!**

And this is exactly the point being made in **Isaiah 58!** You see, **Israel’s fasting had become immature, self-centred, and sinful.** They needed to come back to the principles of True Fasting where Israel’s spiritual maturity was marked by acts of justice, mercy and compassion.

This is where the passage from Isaiah 58 intersects directly with the picture found in Luke 4, where Jesus is fasting for 40 days and nights in the wilderness!

Why did Jesus agree to do it? As with all fasting, Jesus entered His fast out of **obedience**: He did it because His Father has commanded Him to do it; and so, He gave in to the prodding of the Spirit!

But more importantly, He entered His fast as an expression of His **spiritual maturity**, demonstrated in this amazing act of self-discipline. Here is a man who stands against the devil; who will not let any contamination of ungodly thoughts or ideas invade His mind; here is a man who quotes Scripture to keep the enemy at bay! He will not be moved.

Even more important is the fact that Jesus’ fast in the wilderness was an expression of **His passionate desire to put others ahead of Himself**. You see, He obeyed the call to go into the wilderness...He agreed to follow the Spirit’s lead... because He knew that He was doing it **for God’s people**— He was fighting the devil on their behalf! He was keeping the faith on their behalf! Indeed, as He fasted, He was fully identifying with all the humble, poor and afflicted in Israel who felt abandoned by God and all alone in their own wilderness of faith.

Do you see? **Jesus came to keep the true fast**, the fast about which Isaiah had prophesied. And because Jesus kept the fast, the concluding truth of the Isaiah’s prophecy would also come true!

**“Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.”**

Friends, here is the glory of abstinence; of fasting for the sake of others; of saying ‘no’ to our own desires so that justice, mercy and compassion might prevail over the self-indulgence and individualism! It proclaims the desire of God to make this world a better place.

So, what about us? We call ourselves the followers of Jesus, right? Will we abstain for others? We who have been filled with God’s Spirit, will we follow Jesus and enter the True Fast? After all, if you read through the NT, you’ll see how often we are urged to develop the virtues of self-control and self-denial so that we might abstain from things that might contaminate our bodies, minds and souls. You will also see repeated exhortations to say ‘no’ to ourselves so that we might put others first in loving acts of justice and mercy.

So, let’s think through some of the more contemporary cultural issues that fasting might address today:

1. **Gluttony!** Gluttony is basically a fixation with food. In an article wonderfully titled “To Hell on a Cream Puff,” Frederica Mathewes-Green concludes: “Gluttony is not wrong because it makes you fat; it is wrong because it is the fruit of self-indulgence.” Being fixated on food means that we are distracted from the pursuit of real life in the service of others. One way to change this is by abstaining... asking the Spirit of God to help us take charge over our self-indulgent natures.
2. **Materialism!** The Christian tradition has long suggested that fasting can play a practical role in combating our material addictions. Try a fast that includes no shopping for three months...or a fast that says, “I will not go on ebay for the rest of the year.” To put it bluntly, fasting in this way may be the only corrective to our rampant problem of covetousness. And as you fast from materialism, remember to give away the money you’ve saved to issues of justice and mercy! Fast for others!
3. **Unhealthy Friendships!** It may never have occurred to you but there are some friendships that may not be healthy for your walk with God: relationships that undermine your faith or take you away from Christian fellowship. So, why not ‘fast’ from them for a while? Abstinence may not seem like fun, but some degree of it may be the only way to re-align your life with God. The justice

side of this issue will also eventually become apparent, for the truth is that a renewed Christian fellowship tends to reorient my focus to the bigger picture of social needs by getting me out of my own narrow social circle.

4. **Pleasure-seeking!** Pleasure is a driving force of our culture. Sadly, even our spiritual values have often been driven by the ideals of pleasure. Part of the recent awakening to fasting comes because many Christians are feeling increasingly deadened by the pleasure-seeking attitudes of our culture. By abstaining from the pleasure-seeking focus of our culture, we are far more likely to hear the voice of God speak about ways we can serve the lost and the lonely, the poor and the outcast.

The point I'm trying to make is that **fasting** (whatever the shape or look of it) **cuts across the cultural grain** and says, "I refuse to constantly give in to outside forces and cultural values. I believe that the Spirit has other values, and I wish to hear them." **With this in mind, would you consider fasting on a regular basis?** (Interestingly, Kim and I have just agreed to make Thursdays our 'fast day'.)

Two final points:

1. It's interesting to note that the early church reinvigorated the practice of fasting in the face of the increasing moral decadence of the Roman Empire. Indeed, the Christian calendar was developed with a six-week period known as **Lent**, a season usually associated with fasting. (You give up chocolate for Lent!) Although this idea of Lent has been sorely abused, the idea of a six-week fast can be a helpful aid in allowing the Spirit to develop self-discipline in your life-- particularly today, when our world is not very different to the decadence of Rome! A bit of spiritual discipline won't go unnoticed!
2. The key to fasting is to do it "in step with the Spirit"—in other words, be prayerful as you fast. Be aware of God's presence. For the fact is that we don't fast alone. As we fast, we participate in the pattern of redemptive history set by Jesus Christ. As Christ successfully resisted temptation for us in the wilderness, **we now follow him into the wilderness** to also be tested on our journey towards the promised land. He goes with us; He endures the fast with us, giving us the power to abstain on behalf of others.

In the end, fasting proclaims the great desire of God to make this world in to a better place. As Isaiah was able to foresee 700 years before Christ:

**“Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.”**

**Let’s pray.**