

Dag Tessore

Fasting



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Chapter 1

Fasting as a Way of Returning to God

The practice of fasting, that is, abstaining from all food, or from certain foods, for a given period of time, is universal. There are very few religions or cultures, either ancient or modern, in which fasting does not exist. The religion of the Bible is no exception. In the Old Testament there are many references to fasting (*som*, in Hebrew). Let us have a look at some of these references and what the context is.

Not eating, even for just one day, is painful and exhausting, and in fact, fasting is always associated with suffering. It comes as no surprise therefore, that in the Old Testament, fasting is an expression of pain, of suffering. For example, when Elijah prophesied to the evil King Ahab about all the disasters that

were to fall upon his perverse tribe, the king “tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted” (1 Kings 21:27; cf also Nehemiah 1:4).

In the Bible, and in almost all religions, fasting is also a sign of mourning. On the death of Saul, David and his men “mourned and wept, and they fasted till evening because Saul and Jonathan his son and the army of the Lord and the house of Israel had fallen in battle” (2 Samuel 1:12; cf 2 Samuel 3:35; Judges 20:26). On the occasion of Saul’s funeral they fasted for seven days (cf 1 Samuel 31:13; 1 Chronicles 10:12).

In fact it is quite natural that on the death of a loved one, those left behind feel that to start immediately feasting and gorging on food is not appropriate. The death of a loved one causes us to suspend our normal daily routine for a while, and leads us to reflect on another, more serious, dimension. The sorrow and the emotions that accompany the death of a loved one often help us forget, at least for a moment, our own needs and pleasures.

If we spontaneously mourn and fast when someone dear to us has died or is suffering, it is easy to understand why Israel felt she had to weep and to fast when her most dearly beloved, God, was suffering. This is why, for example, when Moses sees the sins of the peo-

ple and the love of God injured and offended, he says: "Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, for forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin you had committed, provoking the Lord by doing what was evil in his sight" (Deuteronomy 9:18). Here fasting means: while the others are eating and drinking and offending God with their various sins, I love you, I want to be near you and share in your bitterness and your sorrow. Thus, in the Old Testament, fasting on the Day of Expiation, once a year, was instituted; a day when the whole people was obliged to fast in remembrance of the many offences committed against God during the year (Leviticus 23:27-32). On that day, the Bible says, "you will mortify yourselves."

Other similar concepts can be found throughout the Bible. Warned by the prophet Jonah, "the people of Nineveh," repentant and sorrowful for having sinned against God, "believed in God; they proclaimed a fast.... No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water" (Jonah 3:5-7). In fact, the fast of the Ninevites is still practised today, once a year, in the Coptic Church, as a sign of repentance and conversion to God. The prophet Daniel also says, "Do penance," and then goes

on to explain what this means: “I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth” (Daniel 10:2–3).

To abstain from food for three days, like the Ninevites, or from rich foods for three weeks, like Daniel, or to practise any other form of mortification through fasting, expresses the disposition of the soul which repents of its errors and sins and wants to be reconciled with God. As God himself says, through the mouth of Joel: “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning” (Joel 2:12).

There are many cases quoted in the Bible of very pious people who, feeling inadequate before the immense love of God, fasted “every day” (in other words, they only had one meal a day, and ate only frugally: one such example would be Judith (Judith 8:6), and another the prophetess Anna (Luke 2:37). Fasting, says St Ambrose, is “*humilitas mentis*”¹: [lowliness of mind] physical abstinence from food, with the resultant feeling of hunger, suffering and tiredness, and is translated automatically, on the psychological level, into an attitude of humility and sincere repentance. An authen-

1. Ambrose, *De Elia et ieiunio*, VIII (22).

tic prayer to God, a sincere pleading to the Almighty, presupposes “a humble spirit and a contrite heart; but whoever eats rich foods cannot have a humble spirit and a contrite heart. Thus it is obvious that prayer without fasting is weak and shallow. Whoever wants to pray for anything, will have fasting as a support in his prayer”². “Repentance without fasting is useless,” says St Basil³.

Also in this perspective, the Church views fasting as a “punishment,” as a penance imposed by the confessor on the believer who has sinned: “impose healthy fasts, as long as they are not fatal”⁴ is an effective way of helping the penitent to feel sorrow for his sins and urge him towards a more sincere repentance.

Ambrose also says that fasting is “*sacrificium reconciliationis*”⁵ [a sacrifice of reconciliation]. In what sense? What is a sacrifice? In the Old Testament, sacrifice means renouncing voluntarily something we like, value or find useful, and offering it to God. For example they sacri-

2. John Chrysostom (attributed to), *Opus imperfectum in Matthaeum*, XV.

3. Basil, *De ieiunio sermo 1*, III.

4. The Council of Toledo (397-400), can. VII; cfr. Council of Tours (567), can. XIX.

5. Ambrose, *De Elia et ieiunio*, IX (31).

ficed animals, choosing the healthiest and best: man owned them; they were his by right. He could get a good price for them; he could use them to work on the land; he could get milk or wool from them; he could slaughter them and he and his family could eat them; but instead he took them to God's Temple and gave them away, for nothing. And what was more, often, when a holocaust was being offered, not only the person offering the animal was deprived of it, but no one got any benefit from it, not even the priest of the Temple. In fact the beast was completely burnt on the altar and nothing remained. In this way no human use or advantage could be gained from the sacrifice. So, why was it done? To give witness, through this act, which humanly speaking was absurd, that a God exists. According to biblical faith, God commanded these sacrifices to see if man believed in him, or if he was capable of doing something that makes sense only if God really exists.

Giving up something voluntarily therefore, especially food, applies to both sacrifice and to fasting: in both cases a person deprives themselves of something essential for their life to "understand that one does not live by bread alone" (Deuteronomy 8:3). Also, with

regard both to sacrifice and fasting, man, in his attempt to return to God repentant and converted, renounces those material goods and those pleasures which, often, were the cause of his going away from God in the first place. By renouncing them, he recognises that such things did not satisfy him and admits that God is worth much more.

So, fasting expresses repentance and conversion: but not just fasting. Fasting is often combined with other forms of mortification: weeping, wearing sackcloth and ashes, lying prostrate on the ground can all be found in the Bible, and not just in the Old Testament. When Israel wishes to avert God's anger and avoid his punishment, she turns to similar forms of repentance. There are many examples of this: Psalm 35:13; Jeremiah 14:12; Esther 4:3; 2 Maccabees 13:12; etc. Here we quote from Judith 4:9–13: "And every man of Israel cried out to God with great fervour, and they humbled themselves with much fasting. They and their wives and their children and their cattle and every resident alien and hired labourer and purchased slave — they all put sackcloth around their waists. And all the Israelite men, women, and children living at Jerusalem prostrated themselves before the temple and put

ashes on their heads and spread out their sackcloth before the Lord. They even draped the altar with sackcloth and cried out in unison, praying fervently to the God of Israel not to allow their infants to be carried off and their wives to be taken as booty, and the towns they had inherited to be destroyed, and the sanctuary to be profaned and desecrated to the malicious joy of the Gentiles. The Lord heard their prayers and had regard for their distress; for the people fasted for many days throughout Judea and in Jerusalem before the sanctuary of the Lord Almighty." This passage is a very good illustration of the biblical concept and practice of fasting.

Here we note another important aspect of fasting, according to the Bible, an aspect which, like others, is passed on quite naturally, to Christianity: the public and communitarian nature of fasting. "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly!" (Joel 2:15). In fact, the community of believers is not just a collection of individuals; it is a "mystical body." This is why both Jewish and Christian feasts are by their very nature communitarian. It is the whole people that celebrates the feasts of the Lord, and the whole people that mortifies itself and fasts together. As a matter of fact,

the Bible often makes the point that on days of penance all “people and animals” must fast (cf Joel 3:7).

The union and interconnection between the different members of the mystical body that is Israel, and then later, the Church, also explains the practice of “fasting for others.” Esther asks the Jews in exile to “hold a fast on my behalf” (Esther 4:16). And vice-versa, Moses fasts for his sinful people, who in the meantime were eating and enjoying themselves, in order to avert God’s anger. Similarly, to Christians it is said: “Bless those who curse you, pray for your enemies, fast for those who persecute you”⁶.

We have said that fasting, as repentance and conversion to God, also helps ward off divine punishment and the calamity that that brings with it. So, we are talking about a way of gaining God’s favour. In some cases this brings about a sincere proposal of conversion and renunciation of sin. Samuel, for example, to avoid defeat in the imminent battle against the Philistines, ordered the whole people to fast and “They fasted that day, and said, ‘We have sinned against the Lord’ ” (1 Samuel 7:2–6; cf 2

6. *Didache*, I, 3; cf Mt 5:44.