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## **JESUS AND FASTING: AN EXAMPLE OF SELF DENIAL**

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### **ABSTRACT.**

Abstaining from eating and drinking which is seen as fasting by Christians, possesses a religious significance. The paper discussed that fasting as a self-denial could be a sign to express deeper loss, it could also be a sign of expectation for better things, it may also stand in as a sign of sober reflection of sin committed. The paper also discussed that Jesus did not take up fasting as a discipline on its own right but as an activity which he gave high priority. The paper also discussed that fasting should be a thing of pure heart, submission to the will of God and not necessarily hypocritical like the Pharisees.

**Keywords:** Fasting, Self-Denial, Religious life, Prayer, Jesus.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A religious life in all its ramifications demands self-denial in one form or the other. Self-denial is the rejection of self, renunciation of one's own personal desires or ambition in favour of a higher goal which is usually spiritual. Human nature possesses very weak frame which in itself, the desire for frailty is always inclined to things of the flesh in which certain pleasures can be derived, the desire for pleasure always projects temptation wherever and whenever self-denial struggles to survive, that is why each time self-denial is mentioned, it is difficult not to mention temptation which may arise to test its credibility<sup>1</sup>.

As the desire for pleasure breeds temptation, it should be understood that temptation itself usually directs the tempted to the potential pleasure to be enjoyed. Chadwick discussed that every pleasure is the consequence of an appetite, and an appetite is a certain pain and anxiety, caused by need which requires some object<sup>2</sup>. Temptation itself is not a sin and it cannot be avoided as long as one is in flesh, but to yield to it is sin, Jesus was tempted but he never sinned (Heb. 4:15), that is why he is in sympathy with those who are tempted.

In different circumstances, some individuals have exercised much self-denial. Self-denial covers a wide area of life, refusal of luxury, sexual restrict, celibacy, keeping vigil, fasting or alms-giving, when it gets to a stage where much severity is involved, it becomes asceticism, self-denial emerges in a way involving a group of persons or individual. The vocation of Israel is understood in terms of subordinating their national ambition to the purpose of God, it is a corporate type of self-denial (Is. 48:1-8)

### **OLD TESTAMENT ERA**

Israel as a body had to love and obey God as a chosen nation through which God would be revealed to the whole world, Self-denial in Old Testament also becomes the obligation of

certain individuals called to forego their ambitions or inclinations to make them fit for their calling. Abraham was called out of his father's house at the age of seventy-five and he had to leave Haran with his family (Gen.12:1-9). Lot was called out of Sodom, he was to leave with his family without looking back, but because his wife could not deny herself, she became a pillar of salt. (Gen.19: 1-27).

Moses must have been enjoying his stay in the land of Midian when God called him to undertake the leadership of Israel (Ex.3:1-22). Jeremiah was called to be a prophet, an office which demands real self-denial, Prophet Ezekiel's wife was used as an example of what would befall Israel, He was that his wife would die and he should neither weep nor mourn but should take the message to the Israelites and that the Lord would remove the delight of their eyes and the pride of their power just as Ezekiel's wife was removed from him<sup>3</sup>. With self-denial, the prophet proclaimed the message in the morning and the wife died in the evening [Ez 24:15-27]. Prophet Hosea was instructed to marry Gomer to the harlot as a symbol of Israel's unfaithfulness to God [Hosea 1]. Among the Jews, we cannot rule out example of self-denial which sometimes extended to a sort of extreme, each group has a form of life pattern peculiar to it but generally this pattern reflects a high standard of self-denial.

The Essenes adopt a sort of voluntary poverty and they have all things in common within their monastic colonies, they were indifference to money or worldly status they would eat limited quantity of food whose quality is strictly regulated, some could even avoid marriage, they all tend towards spiritual growth.

The Hermits do not live together as a group like the Essenes, they operate on individual, they see the society as vices breeding community, they therefore fly away the allurements of the society by living in solitude, they may decide to live to the wilderness life of discipline<sup>4</sup>. John the Baptist also lived as a hermit; he was clothed with carmel's hair with a leather girdle around his waist. His food was mainly locust and on honey (Mk1:6) his point of emphasis in his proclamation for the forthcoming saviour. The type of asceticism practiced by the pious Jews was mild, they do not have to go into the deserts to become hermits or to be as strict as Essenes but they were engaged in prayers and fasting. In this class is prophetess Anna, she was in the temple for about seventy-seven years as a widow when Jesus was brought there as a baby for purification/circumcision for all those years she had been fasting and praying day and night (Lk 2:22-24,26-38). The Pharisees were also pious with could do was to try to rescue the situation by imposing their own forms of life on others.

The disciples of Jesus were usually called at a time they were enjoying their daily labour for example the first disciples to be called, Peter, Andrew, James and John (Mk1:16-20). Paul an apostle wrote in Epistles to the Corinthians a summary of his self denying experiences.....with far greater labours far more imprisonments with countless beatings and often near death five times I have received at the hands...

## **FASTING**

Fasting is not peculiar to the Jews who made it a traditional exercise. In the Old Testament times there are records of fasting which may be individual, corporate, private or public. Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, neither eating nor drinking (Ex34:28), the fast is similar to that of Elijah when he went to Mount Horeb (1Kings19:8) and Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism (Mt4:2).

During the era of monarchy, David fasted and besought God to spare the life of the child he had through Bathsheba the wife of Uriah whom he seduced having planned the murder of Uriah (11Samuel 12:7-17) but the Ahab resolved to fasting whom prophet Elijah told him God's displeasure over the way Naboth was killed and his vineyard inherited by him, these type of fast are individual and private.

There is also public fast which is the corporate type given wide publicity and for a particular purpose, it may be declare in preparation for a war (Jdg20:26,1 Sam14:24).the death of Saul and Jonathan on Mount Gilboa was mourned by the Israelites in the fasting. Desire for repentance may prompt people to fast. The people of Nineveh heard of the calamity were fast was also proclaimed by Joel and also by Jeremiah through Baruch (Jer36:4-10).

Fasting was prominent during the post-exilic period when it was given much attention within Jewish traditions; this condition was transmitted to the New Testament times. The Pharisees saw it as an exercise to be performed not only by them and their disciples but by all Jews, they took it so seriously that they had to supervise.

As observance as part of Jewish traditions, but there are exceptional fast during October-November if there was drought<sup>5</sup> .Jesus also fasted for forty daysand forty nights as mentioned earlier in that wise, one would expect Jesus to the same attitude to fasting as the Pharisees and the Jews in general, but it was not so.

Mark recorded how people came to question on Jesus why the disciples of John and the Pharisees fast but his disciples do not (Mk2:22) while Matthew recorded that it was the disciples of John themselves who came to ask question from Jesus (Mt9:14-17).Whatever happens, it clear that John's disciples and the Pharisees had a form of fasting which they expected the disciples of Jesus to observe.

Jesus himself was not accused directly. Those who came to Jesus must have been watching his disciples for a considerable length of time. Jesus understands the basic belief on those questions on religion exercises he therefore uses an illustration based on their belief, tradition and background, he compared the condition of his disciples with that of the guests of a wedding feast who rejoices with bridegroom and can not be expected to fast on such occasion, this means as long as Jesus is with them they need not fast, but when he dies the disciples may fast.

Rawlinson discussed that John's disciple expected the disciples of Jesus to join them in their mourning for their master who was beheaded them with fasting Jesus wanted them to realize that his disciples have not lost their own master and they needed not to fast the fact that his disciples were not fasting at that time does not mean that they were not in sympathy regarding John's death<sup>7</sup>. On the question of fasting observed by the Pharisees, Jesus compares it with sewing a piece of cloth on an old garment or putting new wine in an old wineskin the resultant effect is that the old garment tears and the wineskin burst. In this way, Jesus proved beyond any reasonable doubt the danger of blending together things which are not alike fasting in Jewish tradition as practiced by the Pharisees is for parade, piety and pretentious externalism.

Jesus saw its inadequacy compared with his own teaching in his sermon on the mount Jesus instructed to show that he was not actually against the practice but against the way it is being observed by the hypocritical Pharisees. With his declaration and when you fast.... (Mat 6: 16) he really encouraged fasting but in his own approach to his ministry, he would not impose it on his disciples.

### **JESUS PRINCIPLES ON FASTING**

The principle of fasting which Jesus teaches agrees with the old prophet, fasting deals with the heart, though the body is humbled and brought into subjection so that the heart may respond, prophet Joel said....Render your hearts and not your garments.... (Joel 2:13) to show that the fast he recommended is not merely an outward form but an inward principle. Prophet Isaiah also proved to the Israelites the reason why their fast was neither accepted nor acceptable to God (Is. 58:1-4).

Jesus describes how the Pharisees usually announce their fasting by conducting in a dismal manner, and showing it on their faces (Mat 6: 16) fasting is a private affair between the individual and God who will reward him or her openly. Fasting therefore prepares one for a relationship with God for communication and spiritual fellowship as Moses did on Mount Sinai, Elijah on Mount Horeb and Jesus in the wilderness.

On another occasion, a man brought his son who had a dumb spirit and the disciples could not heal the boy. Jesus told them that such healing cannot be performed except by prayer and fasting. In the main body of the text, only Mark mentioned 'prayer' (proseuche) although he recorded prayer and fasting as footnote.

Rawlinson is of the opinion that prayer and fasting appearing on the manuscripts may reflect the experience of the early church and not necessarily by the hand of gospel writer. He thought that prayer and fasting must have come into the text through the early church and not necessarily by the hand of the gospel writers. This opinion may be true but all the same.

The manuscripts have passed through many stages and different conditions that damage may alone to that part of the text. Whatever happens, both prayer and fasting are very

appropriate in the text not necessarily to project Jesus as an ascetic but as a challenge to the disciples who might have relaxed too much because the bridegroom is with them. Undoubtedly the disciples are expected to follow their master's example of self-denial<sup>9</sup>.

Self denial does not rest on fasting alone; oftentimes it may be accompanied by many things. Isaiah approached fasting on the basis of charity. There is no evidence that he fasted regularly during the time of his public ministry his concern that he and his disciples gain sufficient sustenance after extending themselves for others sake ( Mat 2:23) and that people coming to hear him and who had missed out a meal be properly fed are also revealing<sup>10</sup>. So too are his associating hospitality with a person's embracing the good news of the kingdom and with both his and his disciples anticipation of the quality of life in the kingdom itself. To Jesus, fasting is a tangible or direct corollary of ones relationship with God rather than a religious discipline.

### **CONCLUSION**

Jesus believed that some fasting will continue during his ministry. Jesus taught that fasting should be conducted towards God alone and disguise towards others by a joyful appearance, he recognized fasting with prayer (Mat 6: -15) and simplicity in the lifestyle of his Jewish disciples<sup>11</sup>.

In the present society, individuals or churches often go on fasting for intervention on certain uses that affect their lives, they do so by abstaining from food and drink for a certain period of hours and even for days; most will abstain from having sex with their wives, Among the celestial church, their main self-denial is staying in the church for a certain period of time which is called Abe-abo, such a member is instructed to stay with the premises of the church for a certain period of day as might have been directed by God, such a person will not have contact with his house except his place of work. People also see self-denial as doing away with luxuries, giving out properties, clothes and any other valuables

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