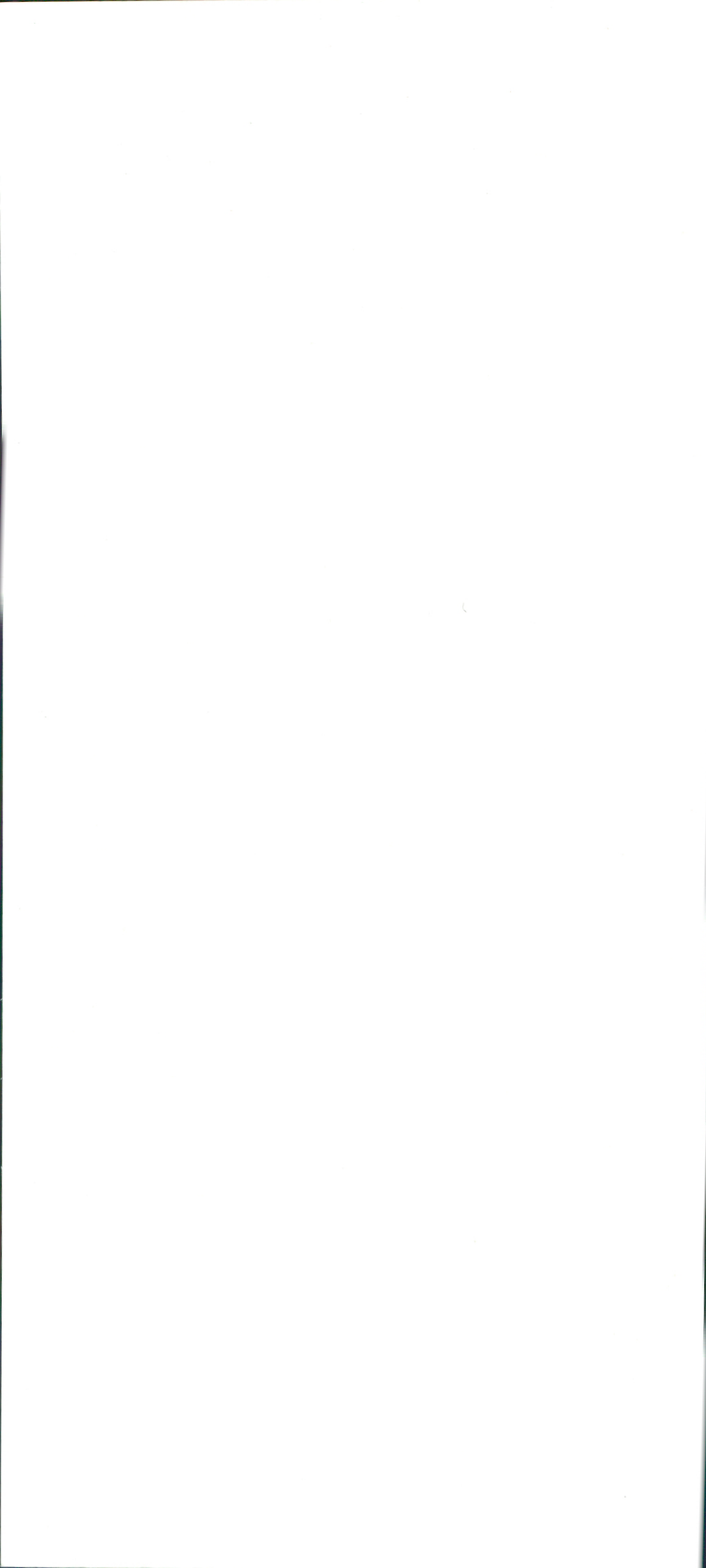


CHRISTIAN LIVING SERIES

SUCCESSFUL FASTING



by Robert Hooley



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The message contained in this booklet was delivered to an audience by Robert Hooley. It has now been made available to you in printed form in order to share the truth of God's Word with hungry hearts everywhere.

INTRODUCTION

The Bible teaches that absolutely amazing and tremendous results are obtainable through successful fasting. But, what would be the response if the following two questions were to be asked of the average Christian today: (1) Is the experience of fasting a regular part of your Christian life? and (2) Do you regularly see in your life or ministry a fulfillment of the results of successful fasting, as in Isaiah 58:6?

The obvious and almost unbelievable fact is that in literally thousands of churches, God's people are not encouraged to fast or even taught about this important area of Bible truth. This failure of Christians to appropriate one of God's most powerful and effective weapons in the warfare against spiritual forces can only benefit Satan and the powers of darkness — the enemies of God's people.

The material presented in this booklet is not intended to be a thorough doctrinal study on the subject of fasting, but rather, a concise and practical and challenging exhortation which we pray will help and encourage every Christian to pick up this powerful weapon of fasting and — under the guidance of the Holy Spirit — begin to use it effectively for God.

SUCCESSFUL FASTING

AMAZING RESULTS OF SUCCESSFUL FASTING

"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6) By simply reading and meditating upon this verse of scripture, one receives the clear understanding that God intends for fasting to be a powerful weapon for good in the lives of His people.

In the above verse, the amazing results which can be wrought through successful fasting are concisely outlined for us. These results are so profound and staggering in dimension that we can only respond with a hearty "Amen!" to the question asked by God in this verse: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen?"

Let us now examine the results of successful fasting, as recorded in this verse, Isaiah 58:6.

(1) "... to loose the bands of wickedness..."

We are all quite familiar with the meaning of the word "wickedness." The Hebrew word which is used here means "a wrong," and an English dictionary defines the word "wicked" as meaning "evil, sinful, bad or vicious." The word "bands" means "bonds, ties, chains, fetters or shackles," and speaks of restraint, confinement, captivity or even enslavement. Successful fasting, then, will loosen the strong and terrible hold — the enslavement — of wickedness.

The Bible says, in Psalm 45:7, that God loves righteousness and hates wickedness. And so, He has given us an effective weapon — fasting — that can break the evil grip of wickedness upon the life of an individual, a family, a city, a nation. Certainly, every one of us is aware of numerous conditions or situations, whether in our own lives or elsewhere, in which this needs to be done.

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ came "... to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the

opening of the prison to them that are bound.” (Isaiah 61:1) It is clearly God’s will that the bands of wickedness be broken.

(2) “. . . to undo the heavy burdens. . .”

In contemplating the word “burdens,” we tend to think of a load that is carried, something that is worrisome. The Hebrew word used here gives us the thought of an encumbrance which in some way binds one’s life. Millions of people today are living under the pressure of heavy burdens — all tied up and involved in seemingly hopeless problems. For some, the cares of this world are just too much to bear.

But, here again, God has provided a way out, because successful fasting can not only lift from our hearts and minds the weight of these burdens, but can even undo the circumstances that create the burdens — Praise God! The Lord states in His Word, *“My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:30) It is obvious that He wants to give us relief from the heaviness of burdens. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was sent to give, “. . . *the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. . .*” (Isaiah 61:3)

(3) “. . . to let the oppressed go free. . .”

Oppression is understood to be an unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power. When a person is oppressed, he often becomes discouraged, broken or crushed within. The Bible reveals that oppression is one of the chief spiritual weapons which Satan and the powers of darkness use against mankind. Literally millions of people, Christians and non-Christians alike, are affected to some degree by this weapon of spiritual warfare.

Fasting is a spiritual weapon that God has given us to use against the enemy — to break his yoke of oppression. When fasting is properly used, we can see the oppressed go free. Praise God for this tremendous truth. Also today, untold numbers of Christians desire to have more spiritual liberty in their lives, but first there needs to be a setting-free from oppression. If you don’t personally have a need for deliverance in this area, look around you — many others do.

(4) “. . . and that ye break every yoke.”

One is almost staggered by the immensity of this truth. We are clearly told that successful fasting is such a powerful weapon, that in its proper use we can break every yoke. It is important to emphasize the fact that the Bible says, “every yoke.” A yoke is a mark of servitude or suffering, but here we find that God clearly and unequivocally states that regardless of any condition or unnatural circumstance, including any Satanic influence which exercises unwarranted control over a life, any and every yoke can be broken by successful fasting.

As a matter of fact, the Bible reveals that some yokes cannot be broken without using the weapon of fasting. An example of this truth is found in Matthew 17:14-21, which says, “*And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a certain man, kneeling down to him, and saying, Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick, and sore vexed: for oft-times he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water. And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him. Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.*”

“*And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour. Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.*”

Here is one example where a boy's deliverance from a yoke of severe physical affliction could only be wrought through prayer and fasting. And Christians need to truly understand that this important and powerful weapon of successful fasting — by which we can break every yoke — is available to all believers. We read in Galatians 5:1 that God's people are not to be entangled with any yoke of bondage. In the light

of this, it is little wonder that Satan does everything he can to minimize the importance of fasting.

Now that we have looked at this brief summary of the amazing and tremendous results obtainable through successful fasting, what would be the response if the following two questions were to be asked of the average Christian today: (1) Is the experience of fasting a regular part of your Christian life? and (2) Do you regularly see in your life or ministry a fulfillment of the results of successful fasting, as listed in Isaiah 58:6? I'm afraid that the overwhelming majority would be forced to answer, "No, not really."

The obvious and almost unbelievable fact is that in literally thousands of churches, God's people are not encouraged to fast or even taught about this important area of Bible truth. This failure of Christians to appropriate one of God's most powerful and effective weapons in the warfare against spiritual forces can only benefit Satan and the powers of darkness — the enemies of God's people.

The remaining material which will be presented in this message is not intended to be a thorough doctrinal study on the subject of fasting, but rather, a concise and practical and challenging exhortation which we pray will help and encourage every Christian to pick up this powerful weapon of fasting and — under the guidance of the Holy Spirit — begin to use it effectively for God.

UNSUCCESSFUL FASTING

Without a doubt, successful fasting is one of the most powerful weapons that God has ever given to His people. The amazing results of successful fasting are nothing less than stupendous. Before giving further consideration to the subject, however, it will be helpful to briefly comment on some of the aspects of unsuccessful fasting.

In Isaiah 58:1, the prophet is told to "*Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.*" It becomes clear, as we continue reading, that this rebuke of the house of Jacob was directed toward the area of their religious practices; they were deeply involved in religious activity.

Verse 2 says, "*Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.*" But, what displeased God was the sinful condition of their hearts and lives — even in the course of their religious pursuits.

Isaiah brings up the subject of fasting as being one specific area of religious activity in which God was displeased with His people. Although they were fasting regularly, their improper attitudes and purposes and practices were destroying the effectiveness of their fasting. And because their fasting was unsuccessful, they began to blame God and to question Him. Verse 3 says, "*Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? . . .*"

In Verses 3 and 4, God answers His people as to why their fasting was unsuccessful, saying, "*. . . Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.*"

Let's take a closer look at God's answers pertaining to the causes of unsuccessful fasting.

(1) "... Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure. . ."

An often used basic definition of fasting is, "to abstain from food." The people of Isaiah's day were obviously doing this; yet, during their time of fasting they were pursuing unnecessary pleasurable activities — seeking pleasure when they should have been seeking God. It isn't difficult for us to understand what God was pointing out to them. He expected something more from them than just abstaining from food; He wanted them to get their hearts right, humble themselves and diligently seek Him in prayer and supplication. This could not be done if they chose to involve themselves in unnecessary pleasurable activities during the fast.

Likewise, if we enter into a fast and then simultaneously pacify ourselves with television, movies, sporting events and other such pleasures, our fasting will only be superficial — just skin deep. Successful fasting must involve a right condition of the heart whereby we forsake the flesh and diligently seek God.

(2) "...and exact all your labours. . ."

The same principle is involved here as in the previous point. These people were going through the mechanics of fasting — abstaining from food — but were seeking diversions instead of seeking God. God wasn't saying that the people shouldn't go to their regular jobs or clean their houses or do the necessary chores during their time of fasting — He expected this. Rather, He was chastening them for seeking extra activities, for busying themselves with all manner of work that really did not need to be done — to the exclusion of seeking God.

Jesus gives us some wise instruction concerning fasting in Matthew 6:16-18, *"Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward*

thee openly." This text makes it clear that a person can enjoy a successful fast while still involved in his necessary workload.

(3) ". . .Behold, ye fast for strife and debate. . ."

So far, God has spoken about the unnecessary activities which these people pursued during their time of fasting — not evil activities, but innocent and commonplace things which, nevertheless, destroyed the effectiveness of their fasting and revealed the condition of their unfaithful and disinterested hearts. But now, God speaks of even deeper and more hidden motives of their hearts, exposing the fact that these people were fasting "for strife and debate." They were fasting with the hope that it would help win their arguments and prove them right in their goals, controversies, contentions and quarrels.

This reflected the deceitfulness of their prideful hearts as well as their ignorance of God's ways. The Bible says, in Psalm 51:17, "*. . . a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*" but it is obvious that a prideful heart shall always be a hindrance to successful fasting — the motive must be righteous before God.

(4) ". . .and to smite with the fist of wickedness. . ."

Here, God says that wickedness of the heart is another reason why the fasting practiced by these people was in vain. "To smite with the fist of wickedness" pictures the perpetration of an assault through some form of evil — seeking to wound, condemn or hurt another person for revenge or for personal gain or for any other reason. This motive would be in direct conflict with God's stated purposes or results of successful fasting, one of which is, "to loose the bands of wickedness." Is it any wonder that God would never honor such a fast? How clear it is, then, that successful fasting involves much more than merely abstaining from the eating of food.

Having exposed the improper practices and the ungodly motives of these people in connection with their fasting, God now makes it crystal clear to them that this kind of fasting will never cause their voice to

be heard by Him in heaven. He states in Verse 4, "... *ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.*" It is interesting to note that by inference, God is saying that successful and proper fasting can make our voices to be heard on high, but we must recognize that in addition to our abstaining from food, we must humbly seek Him with all our heart, and our motives must be pure.

Now that we have examined some of the reasons given by God for unsuccessful fasting, let's consider another important and very significant aspect of fasting. For many people, the primary emphasis is upon the length of time during which one abstains from food — the duration of the fast.

From personal experience, I've found that we believers have often sincerely begun a fast with a definite time factor or goal in mind, and then have felt a furious battle commence between our mind and our stomach. I'm sure that I'm not the only person who has desperately held out until the close of a specific time period, then furiously attacked the refrigerator at 12:00 midnight with a sigh of relief. In all honesty, many times we didn't make it to 12:00 midnight.

Praise God for these times of learning, these early experiences. He is so loving and patient with us. But now, we can enter into a successful fast with a new emphasis on the attitude of our heart. It would be better to have a shorter fast with proper emphasis — a balanced experience — than to have a longer fast that falls short of God's requirements.

KEYS TO GOD'S CHOSEN FAST

"Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?" (Isaiah 58:5) This verse clearly sets forth some of the keys that produce successful fasting, and these keys reveal those aspects of fasting — beyond the obvious requirement of abstaining from food — which are expected by the Lord and which are acceptable to Him. They are of such importance that they should be considered absolutely essential to the success of our fasting. Let's examine them one by one.

(1) "... a day for a man to afflict his soul. . ."

The soul of man is stirred by various appetites — including craving for pleasure, comfort, ease, eminence, prestige, and many other areas of self-gratification. The natural tendency is to satisfy all these desires, even to the extreme of exalting self. But, God says that in order for a person to have a successful day of fasting and make his voice to be heard on high, one must afflict his own soul — withhold the satisfaction of these self-centered appetites, deny these desires, and forcefully abase self. It takes real determination for one to cast down the demands of self, to deny its unsatiable appetites.

(2) "... to bow down his head as a bulrush. . ."

Next, a person must completely humble himself before God — bow down his head as a bulrush. A bulrush is an almost worthless reed-like plant that grows in marshy areas. It is often hollow or pithy inside, is inherently weak, and is easily bent or broken. This pictures the attitude of humility and lowliness that one must have as he approaches his omnipotent God — not just an outward posture that a person should assume, but a true inner bowing of the head and heart in total submission to Almighty God. It's an acknowledgement and testimony of the worthlessness of man's self righteousness in relation to a holy God — in ourselves we are nothing. When one fasts and comes before the Lord in this manner, something great is going to happen.

(3) “. . . to spread sackcloth and ashes under him. . .”

Sackcloth is a coarse cloth of loosely woven goats' hair, usually black and heavy. In Bible days, it was commonly used to make a sack-like garment which was worn by mourners and sometimes by prophets, and it expressed extreme heart-felt unhappiness, sadness, grief and mourning. Sitting in ashes was another outward sign which indicated the same deep attitude of heart.

God is not suggesting that a person employ either of these outward symbols to express his heart-felt emotions during his fast, as this would be contrary to the aforementioned exhortation by Jesus in Matthew 6:16-18. Rather, God is saying that our hearts must carry these same deep feelings concerning the situation or matter for which we seek Him through fasting, and that we must lament and cry out to Him with all fervency. This kind of fasting and seeking God carries us into a new dimension of power.

These three important keys which God has given to us are vital if we expect to experience a successful fast. In addition to abstaining from food, we must make a definite effort to deny the desires of self, become humble before God, and fervently cry out to Him concerning the matters at issue. God's ways are higher than our ways, and this is the attitude of heart that He requires. Isaiah 58:5 closes with this: “. . . wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?” It's up to each one of us to give our own answer to God's question.

A WAY TO VICTORIOUS LIVING

In this message, our desire has been to point out the important keys leading to successful fasting and to encourage every believer in Jesus Christ to regularly use this mighty weapon which has been given to us by God. Even if one starts by fasting just one meal — the important thing is that he starts.

As we have already pointed out in discussing the amazing results of successful fasting, it is abundantly clear that the proper use of this spiritual weapon can loose the bands of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke. We see here that the power available in fasting results in victory over all of those things which are of a negative nature — including the powers of the devil and his evil forces of darkness. But, there is another often overlooked area of fasting — one which deals with the loosing of the positive powers of good and the launching of our lives into the realm of total victorious living.

This two-fold aspect of successful fasting can also be reflected in the ministry of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. I John 3:8 tells us, “. . . *For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.*” However, Jesus not only came into the world to break the powers of evil, but He also came to provide believers with something very good. He said, in John 10:10, “. . . *I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*” So, it is very important that we comprehend how our fasting relates to the abundant and victorious life which Jesus came to provide for each of His own.

Many, many Christians who have truly accepted Jesus Christ as personal Saviour are still living far short of the abundant life which Jesus wants them to have. In some areas of life, they are still under a yoke of bondage. Let's look at Isaiah 58:7-14, where we find listed many of the tremendous and far-reaching benefits which will follow successful fasting.

“Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy

house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

"Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day:

"And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

"If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

I'm sure that the vast majority of Christians would love to be living a far more abundant and victorious life, like the one pictured in Isaiah 58:7-14. The powerful weapon of fasting is the means whereby we can see every yoke broken, and more — we can see our lives loosed unto a ministry to others; we can receive healing, health, prosperity, a victorious prayer life, and on and on. Don't let the devil rob you of God's best. The Lord will bless you as you begin to fast after the scriptural pattern and sincerely use this mighty weapon of SUCCESSFUL FASTING for His glory.