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Those about to return with Ezra from the Captivity fasted at the river of Aha in the face of the dangers faced on the journey (Ezra 8:21,23). Esther and the Jews of Shushan (or Susa) fasted when faced with the destruction planned by Haman (Esth. 4:3,16; 9:31).

In times of grief, people fasted. A seven-day fast was held when the bones of Saul and his sons were buried (I Sam. 31:13). Fasting was often done by individuals in times of distress. David fasted after hearing that Saul and Jonathan were dead (II Sam. 1:12). Nehemiah fasted and prayed upon learning that Jerusalem had remained in ruins since its destruction (Neh. 1:4). Darius, the king of Persia, fasted all night after placing Daniel in the lions' den (Dan. 6:18).

Going without food or water was not automatically effective in accomplishing the desires of those who fasted. In the prophet Isaiah's time, people complained that they had fasted and that God had not responded favorably (Isa. 58:3-4). The prophet declared that the external show was futile. The fast that the Lord requires is to loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, feed the hungry, shelter the poor, and clothe the naked (Isa. 58:5-7).

In the New Testament Anna at the Temple "served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37). John the Baptist led his disciples to fast (Mark 2:18). Jesus fasted 40 days and 40 nights before His temptation (Matt. 4:2). Using a marriage-feast comparison, however, Jesus insisted that fasting was not suitable for His disciples as long as He, the Bridegroom, was with them (Matt. 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35).

Cornelius was fasting at the time of his vision (Acts 10:30). The church in Antioch fasted (Acts 13:2) and sent Paul and Barnabas off on the first missionary journey with fasting and prayer (Acts 13:3). Paul and Barnabas prayed with fasting at the appointment of elders in the churches (Acts 14:23). Paul suggested that husbands and wives might abstain from sexual intercourse to give themselves to fasting and prayer (I Cor. 7:5).

No doubt, Christians today would be blessed greatly by submitting to periods of fasting. However, to get the most out of fasting it should always be a personal matter.

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