"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chr 7:14). This passage has not only encouraged me to pray more, but has also encouraged me to fast whenever contemplating a potentially life-changing decision. God has graciously grown my own understanding of the connection between fasting and mission to the point where fasting and prayer are now my basic response to a crisis in mission. A recent example in Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM), the ministry where I serve, will demonstrate the relationship.

**Fasting and Prayer in Mission—A 2013 Example**

In early 2013, our project leader in a West African country received a threat from a previously unknown group demanding that AFM stop teaching Bible at our school of more than 300 students. After prayer and counsel with the AFM leadership, the project leader visited with local officials, and to his dismay was instructed to cease morning prayers and open the school for classes each Sabbath. After a season of prayer, AFM decided to close the school for 10 days. The AFM leadership team back in the home office gathered together and called for 10 days of prayer and fasting. For each of the 10 days, colleagues fasted and prayed. We fasted and prayed to humble ourselves before God and ask that he would be glorified in the local region. We claimed the promise of 2 Chr 7:14. Around the world, AFM family members and supporters joined in solemn prayer and fasting.

On the first day of prayer and fasting, a local official visited the school and addressed the students in an assembly, instructing them to refuse to participate in the morning worship service. The students rejected his
counsel and threatened to riot. In a moment of supreme irony, our team leader had to rescue the official from the angry students!

On the third day of prayer and fasting, a meeting of the parents resulted in overwhelming support for our Adventist principles of education (though less than five percent are Adventist), and a delegation of vociferous parents visited the local officials. On the fifth day of prayer and fasting, a local official came to apologize for the difficulties being caused for our school and our students, but the restrictions were still in force.

On the seventh day of prayer and fasting, a delegation arrived from two national ministries in the capital. After a detailed investigation, they declared publicly that our school was doing nothing wrong, and we were free to operate the school according to Adventist principles.

On the tenth day of prayer and fasting, our school reopened—with Bible classes, morning worship and prayers, and with a continued honoring of the Lord’s Sabbath day! A candle may not appear to give much light at midday, but when the darkness gathers, the candle’s light is visible to all! God indeed was glorified throughout that local community and country—a truly wonderful day!

Through that experience, God was indeed glorified—and within a month there was a surge of baptisms among a highly resistant people group. AFM in that situation had resisted the temptation to rush into action and seek human solutions, but recognized instead that behind the physical threat was a spiritual threat. Our response had to seek for a spiritual solution, so we claimed the promise of 2 Chr 7:14 and waited in humble prayer for God to work out his perfect will. In the following sections I will note the concepts of fasting and prayer in the Scriptures.

**Fasting in the OT Scriptures**

In the 2 Chr 7:14 passage, to “humble oneself” before God means to fast. Fasting in the Bible is not an end in itself nor is it a competitive sport. It is a means by which people worship God and submit themselves in humility before him. Believers cannot make God love them any more if they fast. Nor do they fast to manipulate God. Rather, they fast and pray for results, but the results are in God’s hands.

In fasting, the results glorify God in the person who fasts and in others for whom God’s people fast and pray. When Christians fast, they literally carve out multiple hours each day to rest in the presence of God in humble prayer rather than engaging in food purchasing, preparation, eating, and cleaning up. Fasting is a cessation of engaging in the vanity of human responses, giving room for God to demonstrate his glory and power.

Elmer Towns (1996) argues that Christians can find the true fruit of
the fasting God seeks in Isa 58:6-8. His summary of the types of fasts are outlined below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse in Isaiah 58</th>
<th>Name of Fast</th>
<th>Purpose of Fast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v. 6. “To loose the bands of wickedness”</td>
<td>The Disciples Fast</td>
<td>To free ourselves and others from addictions to sin (Matt 17:21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 6. “To undo the heavy burdens”</td>
<td>The Ezra Fast</td>
<td>To solve problems, inviting the Holy Spirit’s aid to lift loads and overcome barriers that impede our walk with God (Ezra 8:23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 6. “To let the oppressed go free”</td>
<td>The Samuel Fast</td>
<td>For revival and soul-winning, to identify with God’s people enslaved by sin and asking God to deliver them into his Kingdom (1 Sam 7:6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 7. “To share our bread with the hungry”</td>
<td>The Elijah Fast</td>
<td>To conquer the emotional and mental problems that would control us, and return control to God (1 Kgs 19:4,8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 8. To allow God’s light “to break forth like the morning”</td>
<td>The Widow’s Fast</td>
<td>To care for the poor and meet the basic needs of others in their hour of need (1 Kgs 17:16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 8. So that “health shall spring forth”</td>
<td>The Apostle Paul Fast</td>
<td>To bring clearer perspective and insight as we make decisions (Acts 9:9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 8. So “your righteousness shall go before you”</td>
<td>The Daniel Fast</td>
<td>To gain a healthier life, a clearer mind, or for physical healing (Dan 1:8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 8. That “the glory of the Lord” will protect you from the evil one</td>
<td>The Esther Fast</td>
<td>That our testimony and witness for Jesus will be enhanced before others, that it will shine brighter (Luke 1:15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Towns, fasting brings certain physical benefits: (1) it helps overcome food addictions, (2) it gives our digestive system a rest, (3) it contributes to lower cholesterol, lower blood pressure, relief from arthritis, loss of body mass and weight, and helps our bodies fight cancer, and (4) it contributes to improved mental health, including providing a calming effect, helping us to focus on priorities, clearing our mind of impurities, elevating thought patterns, and providing an important component of the overall treatment of a variety of mental health disorders.

At a much deeper spiritual level however, Isa 58 lays out the spiritual fruit of fasting, which includes the “Esther Fast” for God’s protection from satanic agencies, the “Disciples Fast” to deliver Satan’s prey from demonic bonds, and the “John the Baptist Fast” that our testimony and witness for Jesus Christ will shine brighter when we launch our mission. All of these fasts occur within the context of mission or wherever there is a direct confrontation between the powers of good and evil, when the Kingdom of God is interrupting into areas and lives hitherto fore controlled by the Prince of Darkness.

An instructive example of the relationship between prayer, fasting, and mission is found in the life of the prophet Daniel. In Daniel 10, Daniel is engaged in spiritual warfare in exactly the manner later commanded by Jesus. Daniel records that he had been on a partial fast for 21 days and that at the end of this extended period of prayer and fasting he received a vision in which Jesus Christ personally appeared to him. During the vision, it was revealed to Daniel that for the duration of his fast there had been intense spiritual warfare beyond the realm of human physical perception.
with the territorial demon of Persia withstanding angelic interventions until Michael (Jesus Christ) had to personally intervene to gain the victory in the supernatural realm and for God’s people in the temporal realm.

In this story, we find that Daniel’s prayer and fasting for 21 days mirrored an intense supernatural conflict between fallen and unfallen beings, which was only brought to a conclusion by the personal intervention of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, this crucial and successful intervention of Jesus Christ in the supernatural realm before the main vision of Daniel 11–12 is given prefigures the final and successful intervention of Jesus Christ in the natural realm of human history on behalf of his people at the end of time, which is revealed at the end of the vision that is given to Daniel in this episode from his life (Dan 12:1). Daniel’s role in the conflict of mission was to pray and fast, and Jesus’ role was to gain victory over the hostile demonic forces on behalf of his praying prophet.

**Fasting in the NT Scriptures**

In the NT, it is suggested in Matt 6:16-18 that Jesus assumes his followers will fast as a normal part of their discipleship. Many Christians tend to understand this passage in the context of personal devotional habits. However, in Mark 16:15–18, Matt 10:1, and Luke 9:1, Jesus gave very specific commands to his disciples in the context of charging them for mission outreach. All three Synoptic Gospels are united in the specifics of what the Twelve were commanded to do: to preach the Good News; to heal the sick; and to cast out demons. Even when Jesus commissioned the seventy-two (Luke 10:1, 17–19), he gave them the authority to cast out demons and to deliver the victims of satanic oppression. After his ascension, the book of Acts notes that the apostles and disciples took Jesus literally and went around proclaiming the Good News, healing the sick, and casting out demons (Acts 5:12–16, 8:5-8).

In the famous mission story of Matt 17:14–21, where the disciples were confronting the powers of darkness as they proclaimed the Good News, it states that the disciples found themselves unable to cast out a demon. When Jesus arrived on the scene, he magisterially rebuked the demon and delivered the boy. “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” (Matt 17:18–21 KJV).
Jesus in this passage counseled prayer and fasting as the appropriate faith response of his disciples when involved in demonic encounters, that is he encouraged a turning to God for deliverance rather than attempting to directly confront demonic beings in one’s own strength, which was later attempted by the seven sons of Sceva and resulted in a severe beating from the evil spirit for each of them (Acts 17:11–17).

The testimony of Scripture encourages us to realize that Jesus Christ has never lost in any conflict with Satan, and since the showdown in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11), he has the right and authority to deliver any captive of Satan (Mark 3:27) either directly or through the ministry of his servants. Within that wilderness showdown, Jesus Christ himself fasted and prayed for 40 days and 40 nights before the encounter with Satan, providing an example to his disciples of how victory in mission can be accomplished.

Turning to Jesus’ teaching on how his disciples are to pray, we find the Lord’s Prayer rendered thus in the KJV:

“After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen” (Matt 6.9–13).

The NIV provides a more accurate translation of the second phrase of v. 13, “but deliver us from the evil one,” a translation that is also included in the NRSV and NAB. The NIV, NRSV, and NAB translations are to be preferred, because Jesus literally commands his disciples to pray each day for deliverance “from the evil one.”

Jesus does not teach his disciples to pray for daily deliverance from evil as an abstract concept, but for daily deliverance from a personal, malevolent evil being. God’s people cannot withstand this personal malevolent being in their own strength, but must turn to God each day for protection from what must be presumed are daily demonic attacks. Rev 12 and 1 Pet 5 indicate clearly the identity of the attacker of Jesus’ disciples—Satan, the Devil, the ancient serpent of Eden, the dragon, the deceiver of the whole world, the roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, together with his fallen angels (demons).

Turning to the life of the Apostle Paul, perhaps the most famous missionary in Christian history, it is clear that prayer and fasting were integral to his mission. Immediately prior to the first missionary journey, the body of disciples in Antioch was gathered in prayer and fasting. While gathered in prayer and fasting, they were given guidance by the Holy Spirit to set aside Paul and Barnabas for a work of God. In response to this leading of
the Holy Spirit for the beginning of Gentile mission work, the disciples of Antioch, together with Paul and Barnabas, responded with more fasting and prayer (Acts 13:2–3).

Writing later in his ministry, Paul gave clear counsel to the church of Ephesus on the spiritual reality of the struggle to which God had called them. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:10–12 NRSV). The conflict the Body of Christ is engaged in is not primarily with our own fallen desires as if in a vacuum, but ultimately against a personal malevolent being called Satan who commands countless fallen angels, and who seeks to destroy every human being (1 Pet 5:6–9).

Rev 16:13–14 indicates that the final attacks on God’s people and attempts to corral the world’s population into overt rebellion against God will occur under the inspiration of three demonic spirits. The visible means may differ, such as obvious occultic activities such as black or white magic, mediums, astrology, tarot cards, Ouija boards, etc., or through a seemingly more innocent media such as Hollywood movies, popular television shows, or the lyrics of modern music. The means of attack will differ from individual to individual and from one body of disciples to another, but the underlying inspiration will remain of demonic origin and the purpose will be to inspire hatred of and hostility to God himself. Rev 12:17 indicates that at the end of time, Satan will “make war” on God’s true people, necessitating a response of prayer and fasting perhaps like never before.

Within this overall context, is it realistic to expect that the commands of Jesus Christ to those whom he sent out as his representatives to engage in mission (to preach the Good News, to heal the sick, and to deliver the victims of demonic oppression) would not apply down to the final conflict between good and evil? The commands of Jesus to heal the sick, deliver Satan’s prey, and preach the Good News were never time-limited, so we must conclude that the injunction to pray and fast, particularly in the context of spiritual warfare and the arrival of the Good News in territory previously controlled by demonic forces, holds true today.

**Prayer and Fasting in the Writings of Ellen G. White**

In the writings of Ellen White, who is considered to be an inspired and authoritative writer within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we find a similar understanding to the relationship between prayer, fasting, and mission.
We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the suffering and afflicted. We are to minister to the despairing, and to inspire hope in the hopeless. The love of Christ, manifested in unselfish ministry, will be more effective in reforming the evildoer than will the sword or the court of justice. These are necessary to strike terror to the law-breaker, but the loving missionary can do more than this. Often the heart that hardens under reproof will melt under the love of Christ. The missionary can not only relieve physical maladies, but he can lead the sinner to the Great Physician, who can cleanse the soul from the leprosy of sin. Through His servants, God designs that the sick, the unfortunate, and those possessed of evil spirits shall hear His voice. Through His human agencies He desires to be a comforter such as the world knows not. (1942:106)

Not only does Ellen White state that victims of satanic oppression will hear the voice of God through a “loving missionary” but God’s witnesses are also counseled on how such victims are to be delivered.

They [those who are victims of demonic possession or attack] should entreat those who have had a religious experience, and who have faith in the promises of God, to plead with the mighty Deliverer in their behalf. It will be a close conflict. Satan will reinforce his evil angels who have controlled these persons; but if the saints of God with deep humility fast and pray, their prayers will prevail. Jesus will commission holy angels to resist Satan, and he will be driven back and his power broken from off the afflicted ones. (1948:344)

White in this quotation counsels fasting, prayer, and deep humility as the primary means by which God’s witnesses petition God to deliver the victims of satanic oppression. She does not counsel any of the strategies of some modern deliverance ministries, such as prayer walks, claiming cities for Jesus Christ, aggressively seeking for demons, entering into dialogue with demons, challenging demons to reveal their names, interrogating or parleying with them. Rather, she counsels disciples of Jesus Christ to turn to God with humble spirits in prayer and fasting, asking the One who has never lost an encounter with Satan to deliver the prey of demonic attack. White’s counsels directly reflect what is found in the Scriptures.

Conclusion

The experience of prayer and fasting narrated above in an African country did not occur within a theological or spiritual vacuum. Prayer and fasting in the OT and NT are identified as the primary response of God’s people when engaged in spiritual conflict. Spiritual conflict occurs whenever God’s people are engaged in mission—it is the inevitable
consequence of mission. Just as Jesus was opposed by demonic forces in the storm of Galilee (Mark 4:35–41) when he crossed over into pagan Gentile territory, where he in turn met a man possessed by multiple demons, so Jesus’ disciples today will face human and demonic opposition whenever they seek to advance the Kingdom of God (see 2 Cor 12:7). In such circumstances, Jesus’ disciples’ primary response is to humble themselves before God in prayer and fasting, rejecting the vanity of human (and fruitless) intervention, and allowing God to be glorified in the situation.

Works Cited


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