

Elder Carl B. Pratt

A proper fast day observance

Brethren, I hope you noticed this morning, as President Hinckley prepared to announce the names of two new Apostles, he spoke of fasting and praying to know the Lord's will.

Fasting has always been a practice among God's people. In our day it is a commandment given by the Lord to all members of the Church. In addition to occasional special fasts that we might have for personal or family reasons, we are expected to fast once a month on the first Sunday. We are taught that there are three aspects to a proper fast day observance: first, abstaining from food and drink for two consecutive meals or, in other words, 24 hours; second, attending fast and testimony meeting; and third, giving a generous fast offering.

For the Pratt family our regular fasts have always been from the Saturday noon meal to the Sunday noon meal. That way we fast for two meals, Saturday evening and Sunday morning meals. Although there is no Church standard for fasting, except that it should be for 24 hours and two meals, we have found a spiritual advantage in attending fast and testimony meeting toward the end of the fast.

For those who are physically able, fasting is a commandment. Speaking of our monthly fast day, President Joseph F. Smith said:

“The Lord has instituted the fast on a reasonable and intelligent basis. . . . Those who can are required to comply . . . ; it is a duty from which they cannot escape; . . . it is left with the people as a matter of conscience, to exercise wisdom and discretion. . . .”

“But those should fast who can. . . . None are exempt from this; it is required of the Saints, old and young, in every part of the Church” (*Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. [1939], 244).

I fear, brethren, that too many of us are either not fasting on fast day or we are doing so in a lackadaisical manner. If we are guilty of taking our fast day for granted or simply fasting Sunday morning instead of making it two complete meals—24 hours—we are depriving ourselves and our families of the choice spiritual experiences and blessings that can come from a true fast.

Fasting with a purpose

If all we do is abstain from food and drink for 24 hours and pay our fast offering, we have missed a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth. On the other hand, if we have a special purpose in our fasting, the fast will have much more meaning. Perhaps we can take time as a family before beginning our fast to talk about what we hope to accomplish by this fast. This could be done in a family home evening the week before fast Sunday or in a brief family meeting at the time of family prayer. When we fast with purpose, we have something to focus our attention on besides our hunger.

The purpose of our fast may be a very personal one. Fasting can help us overcome personal flaws and sins. It can help us overcome our weaknesses—help them become strengths. Fasting can help us become more humble, less prideful, less selfish, and more concerned about the needs of others. It can help us see more clearly our own mistakes and weaknesses and help us be less prone to criticize others. Or our fast may have a focus on a family challenge. A family fast might help increase love and appreciation among family members and reduce the amount of contention in the family, or we might fast as a couple to strengthen our marriage bonds. A purpose of our fast as priesthood holders might be to seek the Lord's guidance in our callings, as President Hinckley has demonstrated, or we might fast with

our home teaching companion to know how to help one of our families.

Power of combining fasting and prayer

Throughout the scriptures the term *fasting* is usually combined with prayer. “Ye shall continue in prayer and fasting from this time forth” is the Lord’s counsel (D&C 88:76). Fasting without prayer is just going hungry for 24 hours. But fasting combined with prayer brings increased spiritual power.

When the disciples were unable to cure a boy who was possessed of an evil spirit, they asked the Savior, “Why could not we cast him out?” Jesus responded, “This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:19, 21).

Let us begin our fasts with prayer. This could be kneeling at the table as we finish the meal with which we begin the fast. That prayer should be a natural thing as we speak to our Heavenly Father concerning the purpose of our fast and plead with Him for His help in accomplishing our goals. Likewise, let us end our fasts with prayer. We could very appropriately kneel at the table before we sit down to consume the meal with which we break our fast. We would thank the Lord for His help during the fast and for what we have felt and learned from the fast.

In addition to a beginning and ending prayer, we should seek the Lord often in personal prayer throughout the fast.

Teaching children about fasting

We should not expect our young children to fast for the recommended two meals. But let us teach them the principles of fasting. If fasting is discussed and planned in a family setting, the small children will be aware that their parents and older siblings are fasting, and they will understand the purpose of the fast. They should participate in the family prayers to begin and end the fast. This way, when

they reach the proper age, they will be eager to fast with the rest of the family. In our family, we have done this by encouraging our children between 8 and 12 years of age to fast for one meal; then as they have turned 12 and received the Aaronic Priesthood or entered Young Women, we have encouraged them to fast for two complete meals.

The Lord’s description of a proper fast

After chastising ancient Israel for fasting improperly, the Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, speaks in beautiful poetic language of a proper fast:

“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).

If we fast and pray with the purpose of repenting of sins and overcoming personal weaknesses, surely we are seeking to “loose the bands of wickedness” in our lives. If the purpose of our fast is to be more effective in teaching the gospel and serving others in our Church callings, we are surely striving to “undo the heavy burdens” of others. If we are fasting and praying for the Lord’s help in our missionary efforts, aren’t we desiring to “let the oppressed go free”? If the purpose of our fast is to increase our love for our fellow man and overcome our selfishness, our pride, and having our hearts set upon the things of this world, surely we are seeking to “break every yoke.”

The Lord continues describing the proper fast: “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?” (Isaiah 58:7). It is truly a wonderful thing that through our fast offerings today we can feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked.

The blessings of a proper fast

If we fast properly, the Lord promises:

“Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; . . .

“Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. . . .

“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 noonday:

“And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, . . . and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not” (Isaiah 58:8–11).

It is my prayer that we can improve our fasts so we can enjoy these beautiful promised blessings. It is my testimony that as we “draw near” to the Lord through our fasting and prayer, He will “draw near” to us (see D&C 88:63). I testify that He lives, that He loves us, and that He wants to draw near to us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Elder Cecil O. Samuelson Jr.

Perilous times

Brethren, it is both comforting and potentially worrisome to know that we live in an age and a time that was not only foreseen by the prophets of previous dispensations but was also clearly a focus of their concerns and their aspirations. The Apostle Paul said, “In the last days perilous times shall come” (2 Timothy 3:1), and then he went on to catalog and describe with remarkable accuracy much that we currently see daily in the media, in advertisements for entertainment, and almost everywhere in the world around us. As careful as we might and should be, absolute avoidance of much of the peril which is seemingly enveloping us is at best difficult and often nearly impossible to avoid.

Happily, we are not left without hope or spiritual sustenance as we strive individually and as families to accomplish the sacred purposes of mortal life for which we came to this earthly probation. Each of our circumstances is unique. We come literally from the four corners of the earth, and we also come from tremendously different families, backgrounds, challenges,

opportunities, experiences, triumphs, and disappointments.

Likewise, in common with all of the human family—everyone being the progeny of our loving Heavenly Father—we share vast congruence in our DNA or genetic physical makeup, as well as the universally possible and promised blessings and characteristics that identify our divine parentage and spiritual potential. It is this special blending of our common origins and characteristics and also of our unique attributes, experiences, and specialized challenges that makes each of us who and what we are. While we may have differences in what constitutes special peril for us individually, we share much that establishes the apt description of “perilous times” for all.

Continue in the things you have learned

Paul, in describing our “perilous times,” did not promise that things would necessarily get easier or necessarily better. He did give counsel to those seeking comfort and assurance in the face of the deteriorating conditions of our day. Just as his prophecies or predictions were clearly