

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
February 1, 2015

Lesson Text: Daniel 1:5, 8-17; Matthew 6:16-18
Lesson Title: Feasting and Fasting

Introduction

When someone speaks about “fasting” you assume they are trying a new diet. But the “fasting” we are studying today has nothing to do with losing weight. Fasting was beneficial in biblical times and still serves a spiritual purpose today. In today’s lesson we will examine the benefits of fasting in Daniel’s day and then examine our Lord’s teaching concerning fasting.

There are four basic types of fasting in the Bible. One, there is the *normal fast*. This is where someone goes without food for a determined period of time with a specific purpose in mind. The *normal fast* allows the individual to drink water but not food. The purpose of this fast may be for discipline or spending more time in prayer. Second, there is the *absolute fast*. This is a fast that allows no food or water for a specific period of time. Moses fasted in this manner for 40 days. Sometimes this type of fast is for seeking the Lord’s will or preparation for service. Someone on an *absolute fast* is very serious about the matter at hand. Third, there is a *rotational fast* which consists of not eating certain families of food such as grains. This type of fast may be for better physical health that would allow a greater concentration on spiritual matters while helping the body at the same time. Fourth, there is the *partial fast* where certain foods are omitted from the diet. This is the fast that Daniel and his three Hebrew friends participated in while in Babylonian captivity. Daniel fasted in this manner because the king’s food was contrary to Jewish dietary law.

Daniel and his three Hebrew friends were captives in a foreign land. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, had decided to select a few intelligent young Jews for special training which would have trained them in the Babylonian culture and way of thinking. The first step in this special training was to be fed a specially prescribed diet from the king’s kitchen. The problem was the king’s diet was contrary to Jewish dietary law. Daniel could have easily ate the king’s meat and few if any of his Jewish brethren would have known. But God would have known, so Daniel made a choice to do without in order to obey the Lord.

What does Daniel’s decision to not partake of the king’s meat have to do with us today? The answer is self-denial and obedience to God’s Word. Jesus made it clear that Christianity requires a denial of self (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Denial of self doesn’t mean depriving oneself of earthly necessities

or all earthly things. The meaning of “denying self” is submission to the will of the Lord. It means saying no to what we want or what others think we need and say yes to what the Lord wants.

Denying ourselves certain things in life does not save us. Salvation is by grace through faith and not a result of giving up certain things or refusing to participate in certain things (Ephesians 2:5-8). But once we are saved the Lord may require that we deny ourselves certain things in life in order to do His will.

How can we be good stewards of our Christian life and testimony in a world that is anti-God and anti-Christ? Do Christians need to be more open-minded, especially in matters such as what we eat and drink? If we do decide to obey the Lord and follow His commands, what should our attitude and spirit be toward those who are watching us? How can we be good stewards of the life Christ has given us? Let’s look at Daniel and hopefully answer these questions.

Daniel and Purpose in Fasting (Daniel 1:5, 8-17)

The events recorded in the Book of Daniel took place at a difficult time in Israel’s history. The northern kingdom, Israel, was taken into Babylonian captivity in 722 B.C., when Samaria fell to Assyria (2 Kings 17:4-23). A few years later, the southern kingdom, Judah fell at the hands of the Babylonians. The main blow to Judah came in 586 B.C. when Jerusalem was destroyed (2 Kings 25:1-21). About eleven years before, during the reign of King Jehoiachin, some 10,000 leading people were carried to Babylon (2 Kings 24:11-16). It was slightly before this time that Daniel and his three friends, and other young men had been forced to go to Babylon.

Verse 5

“And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king.”

Babylon was the educational center of the world in Daniel’s day. It was Nebuchadnezzar’s purpose to brainwash Daniel and his friends. The king wanted them to look like Jews on the outside and think like Babylonians on the inside. There was nothing trivial about the king’s intentions. He was committed to a “three year” plan of diet and education. Daniel and his friends were given Babylonian names (Daniel 1:7). The purpose in the name change was to remove the significance and identity of them as individuals and their connection with Jehovah God. The king then ordered a special Babylonian diet.

The “appointed daily provision of the king’s meat, and of the wine which he drank” was without question the best in the land. Most people would have been glad to have received this type of dietary arrangement, especially while in

captivity. The king's plan was to keep them on this diet for "three years" and then bring them to "stand before the king" to be evaluated. The words "at the end" are significant. When "the end" comes will you be known for your feasting or fasting? It's an important question that must be answered now! Daniel's fasting from the king's diet was preparing him for "the end."

Verse 8

"But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself."

The Bible doesn't tell us specifically but something in the king's diet was contrary to Jewish law. As a result, Daniel "purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat." The word "purposed" means "determined" or "resolved." Daniel resolved "in his heart" that if he ate what the king had prescribed that he would "defile himself."

Daniel was not arrogant, proud, or ugly in his refusal. In fact, "he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself." The "prince of the eunuchs" was a man named "Ashpenaz" (Daniel 1:3). Ashpenaz was an important official serving as chief of the "eunuchs." "Eunuchs" were court servants to high ranking officials. It was the "prince of the eunuchs" job to oversee or look after the well-being of those who served the king.

Daniel's request teaches us that it is still possible to have biblical convictions without being rude, ugly, or legalistic! You can still be a gentleman or a lady and fast from the things of the world. It is always right to do right and treat even those who oppose our beliefs and convictions with common courtesy and respect.

Verse 9

"Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs."

Daniel was able to make this courageous stand because "God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs." Any change in menu would have to be cleared through the proper channels. So it is important for Daniel to have access and understanding from Ashpenaz. In order for Daniel to refuse this menu he must tell those in charge of his well-being what he had decided. What a blessing to know God is working not only in Daniel's life but in the life of "the prince of the eunuch" as well.

God is always faithful to His obedient children when a decision is made to do His will. God caused Daniel to be in a good relationship with those over him.

The Hebrew word for “favour” is used often in the Old Testament to indicate God’s unfailing love for His people (Psalm 5:7; 36:5). Here in Daniel 1:9, it is used to indicate God’s good will toward Daniel. The words “tender love with the prince of the eunuchs” speaks of compassion. The implication is that the remarkable attitude that Ashpenaz showed toward Daniel was caused by God. Had Daniel not conducted himself in the manner in which he did, the results would not have been as they were.

In His own marvelous way, God, at this moment, gave this pagan “prince of the eunuchs” a special sympathy for Daniel and the dilemma in which he found himself. There are circumstances in life that call for the child of God to take a stand and separate from the world menu. When that happens, it is good to know that God is always working on our behalf.

Verse 10

“And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.”

Although Ashpenaz was sympathetic toward Daniel’s situation and decision, he was also afraid of going against the king’s order. The word “endanger” means “to be made liable to penalty.” In other words, the king wouldn’t come looking for Daniel if something went wrong, he would come looking for Ashpenaz. If Ashpenaz allowed the diet of these Jews to be different from what the king ordered, and if that difference resulted in their loss of strength and physical appearance, he could lose his head! Nebuchadnezzar could order the execution of Ashpenaz without a second thought.

Ashpenaz showed his human nature in thinking first of his own welfare before that of Daniel and his friends. It is to his credit, however, that he at least considered the request even with this legitimate “fear” for his own life. Once again, it is obvious God is working in Daniel’s life because Daniel is choosing to fast from the king’s menu.

Verse 11-12

“Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.”

“Then” suggests that Ashpenaz had declined Daniel’s request. Therefore, Daniel takes his request to the “Melzar.” Ashpenaz, the prince of the eunuchs, had appointed a “melzar” to oversee the training of Daniel and his friends. “Melzar” is a title, not a person’s name. After Daniel had taken his request directly to

Ashpenaz, he now speaks to the man personally appointed to carry out the king's orders. Daniel submits his plan to the "melzar." His plan is, "Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink." Daniel is proposing a "ten day" trial period. That seems like a short period of time, but likely Daniel wanted to present a plan the melzar couldn't turn down.

Daniel's "ten day" plan of "pulse," or vegetables to eat and "water to drink," shows remarkable faith on Daniel's part. Daniel was asking for a meat free meal plan. His request was also for a wine free drink. The "meat" and "wine" in the king's menu was no doubt dedicated to the gods of Babylon and therefore Daniel wanted nothing to do with it. He and his friends would eat vegetables and drink water.

Verse 13

"Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants."

"Countenances" literally means "appearances." After ten days Daniel wanted the melzar to literally look at his face and compare them to the "children that eat of the portion of the king's meat." Daniel and his friends were to be compared to the others who ate meat and drank wine. And then, "as thou seest, deal with thy servants." In other words, if the melzar decided that Daniel and his friends looked better than those who ate the king's meat and wine, then allow Daniel and his friends to stay on the substitute menu.

Obviously Daniel had confidence in the melzar's honesty and ability to judge with objectivity. But deep down Daniel's faith was in Jehovah God to protect him and his friends. Daniel also had great confidence in the word of God where Daniel had learned the dietary laws. Any fasting or separating ourselves from this world must be based on the teaching of God's Word.

Verse 14

"So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days."

"Consented" means the melzar listened to Daniel's request and granted them "ten days" to "prove" themselves.

Why did the melzar "consent" or agree to this? The only possible answer is the hand of God and Daniel's wisdom. Hats off to Daniel for devising such a plan. You see, Daniel recognized the melzar's problem. He saw the matter from the melzar's point of view, and devised a plan he could understand and live with.

How much easier it would be for Christians to live a separated life in the midst of our Babylon if we would be wise (James 1:5).

Verse 15

“And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.”

There's those words “at the end” again. Our choices in life will eventually be revealed. At the end of the ten day trial, the “countenances” of Daniel and his friends “appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the kings' meat.” “Fairer” means “good.” “Fatter” means “plump, firm, fatted, and plenteous.” Taken together, the words mean Daniel and his friends showed a definite advantage in health over the others. Rather than declining from the substitute food, they were actually benefiting.

The positive result of Daniel's “countenance” is more about God's intervention than it is about vegetables verses meat or water verses wine. If Daniel's color, weight, and overall appearance was better than the others it wasn't because the others were overweight or overeating. It wasn't because the king's food was nutritionally bad for Daniel. The results are a testimony of God's faithfulness to those who do His will!

Verse 16

“Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.”

“Took away the portion of their meat” indicates that the melzar continued to allow Daniel and his friends to eat “pulse” and drink water in place of the king's meat and wine. This suggests that this process continued for the three years, but the text doesn't actually say that. It is also possible that the melzar continued this on a day-to-day basis.

Verse 17

“As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.”

“As for these four children” is a reference to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, or as best know them, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. This phrase seem a little formal for the story but it seems it is written this way to magnify the fact that these four and unique to the other captives.

“God gave them” reminds us that any progress and advancement these young men are making is due entirely to the hand of God. As believers, any spiritual

growth or progress we make in the Christian life is due to the hand of God upon our life. It is not just the doing without meat and wine that is making these four the young men they are. It is God's favor upon their lives. God must be praised for all of life's successes and attainments, for truly they are His gracious gifts.

What did He give them? First, He gave them "knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom." "Knowledge" is the same word as "science" in Daniel 1:4, and means "to know" or "that which is known." "Skill" refers to mental activity involving the knowledge which means Daniel and his friends were able to explain and utilize what they knew. "All" stresses the extent of their knowledge and skill. "Learning" refers to their mastery of books. "Wisdom" refers to their ability to understand and apply what they were studying and reading.

Second, Daniel "had understanding in visions and dreams." In addition to what the others had received from God, Daniel had insight into interpreting dreams. This was a special gift from God. This would be very important because the Babylonians believed that true intellect meant you could interpret the will of the gods. They would soon find out that Daniel could tell them the will of the One and only God, Jehovah!

Note: Babylon was the center of education in that day. History records that the Babylonians had the benefit of extensive knowledge in science and literature. They were well advanced beyond the civilizations around them. But as great as they were, Daniel and his friends were far superior. And their superiority was not just because God had given them that ability, they studied and applied themselves and used their God given gifts and abilities.

Verse 18

"Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar."

There's those words "at the end" again! Remember, what you're doing today will show up later! "Now at the end of the days" refers to what occurred at the close of the trial period involving Daniel's fasting verses the king's menu. The "days" here in view are those of the "three-year" period. The "king" who by now is obviously aware of what has been going on in regard to the food has ordered Daniel and his friends to be brought in to see him. The "prince" was Ashpenaz, the one in charge of Daniel's training.

The presentation of Daniel and his friends before "Nebuchadnezzar" was as important for the king as it was for them. Their appearance would prove their character and integrity which would be essential in the coming days. It is here at this meeting that the king would make his selection of those who would fill

court positions. God was definitely at work in the lives of Daniel, the king, and in Babylon and the world.

Jesus and Pretense in Fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)

From Babylonian captivity and a great example of fasting we fast forward several centuries to our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Fasting is still an important subject and one our Lord was compelled to address in His sermon. Jesus' audience was "*the multitudes*" (Matthew 5:1) and "*his disciples*" (Matthew 5:1).

Verse 16

"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."

The benefits and purpose of fasting is lost when our motives are wrong. Jesus told the multitudes and his disciples that when "the hypocrites" fast, they put on "a sad countenance" and intentionally "disfigure their faces" so everyone looking at them will know they are fasting. In other words, they are "hypocrites," or "actors." They were making a public show, or a production out of their fasting. They wanted to impress "men" outwardly with what should be an inward work of sacrifice and self-denial resulting in holiness.

Jesus said, "They have their reward." Those who look at them is their "reward." There will be no other benefits gained. If they fast to impress others then when others are impressed, that's it. No other reward. It's said when even our fasting becomes a bid for popular approval.

When Jesus said, "Of a sad countenance," your mind goes back to Daniel 1:15, "*their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.*" What you choose in life and the reason you choose it always shows up on the outside!

Verse 17-18

"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."

Jesus promised a reward for sincere fasting. "Anoint thine head, and wash thy face" is a command to remove all outward signs of the act. In other words, when you fast, don't let others know about it. If you are fasting, that is between you and your heavenly Father. Also, don't worry about your "reward." The Lord

who “sees in secret,” will “reward you openly.” When you deny self and separate yourself in order to be with the Lord, He will take care of your “reward.”

Conclusion

Fasting had its place in biblical times and it still has its place today. It emphasizes the denial of self and is a great aid in controlling the flesh. It can still be very beneficial to the Christian if done in the right way and with the right motive. If done only for a show in the flesh, it can result in hypocrisy and even lead the believer into temptation (1 Corinthians 7:7).

Have you ever fasted? If not, maybe you should ask the Lord if fasting would benefit you spiritually. The Lord may not ask you to fast from food. He may ask you to fast from social media, sporting events, or some hobby that has totally consumed your life. He may ask you to fast from something that does us more harm than food or event. He may ask you to fast from SELF! And remember, when you fast, don't tell anyone or show off with it! Like Daniel, the “end” will reveal it!

Amen.