

Challenges of Fasting in Nigerian Society: Persuasion from the Book of Prophet Isaiah Chapter Fifty-Eight

Emmanuel Gana, PhD & Rev. Fr. Dr. Abashiya, Danjuma John

Department of Arts and Social Science Education,

Faculty of Education

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

emmaganapati2011@gmail.com

ekgana@abu.edu.ng 07039453924

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Abstract

Religious obligation of fasting has to be performed in accordance with the right attitude that is pleasing to God. Observation has shown that many Nigerian politicians and top government officials do not care about how they fast. All kinds of inhuman treatments and atrocities were going on simultaneously with fasting. The paper defined fasting and reasons for the observance. It examined both the physical and spiritual benefits of fasting. Brief discussions of some peculiar challenges of fasting in the Nigerian society that are similar to prophet Isaiah' indictments of Israel in chapter fifty-eight were made. They include un-confessed sin and none repentance; talking and complaining in front of others and putting on a face that shows they are "suffering for God"; refusal to heed to scriptural warnings of no oppression of the poor and the needy, promotion of injustice, stealing from the government coffer, and continuously shedding of innocent blood; poor health conditions; receiving of answers to prayer or request after fasting; fasting as hope or prerequisite for revival; proving one's spiritual status; and secure victory over satanic manifestations. Thus, the paper recommends that religious leaders must preach or show their adherents' transgressions or sins; religious adherents should confess and repent of every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to their remembrance; and government should address unemployment by creating jobs opportunities through spread of wealth into rural communities.

Key words: *fasting, challenge, Isaiah, sin, repentance*

Introduction

Outwardly, the Nigerian society seems to be very religious. Visibly, religious activities abound everywhere but do not translate to peace and justice in the society. These activities are devoid of righteousness and fear of God as depicted in Isaiah chapter fifty-eight. One of the religious observances and ordinance is fasting. This is observed by African traditionalists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews and Muslims among others. Although, the mode differs from one religion to the other, the accrued benefits are similar especially for the spiritual development of the adherents if done the right way. The challenge, is the manner in which fasting is observed in

the Nigerian contemporary society. Many Christians and Muslims recently and outwardly performed religious practice of fasting irrespective of God's requirement in Isaiah chapter fifty-eight, thus, acting as if they did the right thing while all manners of crimes were on going. This was why Jesus warned the people of his days about the hypocritical mode of fasting in Matthew 6:16-17. They were pretending to be humble before God but wicked to fellow men. For instance, members of Academic Staff Union of Universities were denied their wages by the politicians and those in power for demanding for justice in the education sector. Meanwhile billions of naira and dollars meant to address such educational needs were diverted to private accounts while other staved and denied their legitimate wages during fasting. Schools were closed as a result of strike and no concerted efforts were made to re-open them simply because the children of those in power are studying in abroad. Yet they look sanctimoniously humble. This kind of humility during fasting by Nigerian politicians and those in power is rightly described by Piper (2022) as afflicting selves with hunger.

To be fair to all politicians and those in power in Nigeria, restricting selves from food according to Schenkman (2020) gives the body more time to use up fat. When we eat, the body use carbohydrates for energy, and if we do not need them right away, they get stored in the liver as glycogen or converted into fat. After we have finished eating for the day, the body continues to run on glucose from the carbohydrates that we have just eaten for a few hours before tapping into stored carbohydrates, or glycogen, in the liver. That glycogen lasts for several hours before running out roughly eight hours after we have stopped eating, which is when our bodies begin to tap into its stored fat.

However, Yesudasan (2022) categorically states that in Isaiah 58, God sees the nation of Israel abstaining from food for a day in order to seek help from Him entails justice for Israel and judgment on those who have oppressed Israel. Meanwhile, the help does not come, and the people complained. God turns the tables on Israel, pointing out how the Israelites are oppressing their own people as can be seen in Nigeria. Employers withhold payment of salaries from the workers (e.g. Federal Government versus ASUU), and the people act violently toward each other. Through Isaiah, God tells the people that He does not want them to go a day without food but to abstain from the ways they have oppressed one another. More critical condition is applicable to the Nigerian society. The politicians and top government officials can afford to buy a form at ₦50,000,000.00 and ₦100,000,000.00 million naira respectively just to become governor and president of the country while the masses are being owed salaries for months.

Logically, it is expected that Nigerians should react to this pitiful state of the nation. In fact, Singer (2017) is of the view that direct action be taken. Direct action is to put pressure on the government outside the established channels of voting, participation in town hall meeting and lobbying. The theory is to create situation or crisis that the authorities need to address. The Nigerian society is unique that instead of addressing the issues maturely, they invoke "no work no pay" policy and invite the gullible law enforcement to use force. For example, those in authority do not care about the direct action (strike by the public tertiary institutions in Nigeria) because they loot public funds to send their children abroad for studies. Yet, they lift up their eyes to God for mercy in hunger strike called fasting.

Definition of fasting

Many Nigerians were born into families where they grew up to see their parents observe fasting and prayers. It has been a culture and failure to do the same is taken as a crime or disrespect for parents' religion. Therefore, it is a religious obligation that must be observed especially in Nigeria. For Christians, 40 days is stipulated while the Muslims observe 29 or 30 days. Yesudasan (2022) opines that fasting is a practice of humbling selves before God and not to boost spiritual ego. This implies that fasting is observed for personal and spiritual awakening, genuine repentance and desire to do the will of God.

Literally, fasting is self-denial of food and drink for a particular length of time. It takes different modes among adherents. Riggelman (2021) posits that the word "fast" or "a fasting" is *tsom* in the Hebrew and *nesteia* in the Greek language. The literal Hebrew translation would be "not to eat." The literal Greek means "no food." It is the spiritual discipline of denying selves something (typically food) just to feast on the things of God. Clark (2022) expatiates that on the Day of Atonement, a precedent of twenty-four hour period was set. It is not a form of penance or a way to attain God's favour as some people may view it. Przybyiski (2015) notes that there are some spiritual difficulties and circumstances where breakthrough are achieved by combining prayer with fasting.

In Islam, fasting is called *sawm* in the Qur'an, which literally means "to abstain". It means complete abstinence from food, drink, intimate intercourse and smoking before the break of the dawn till sunset. Islamonline.net (2022) outlines the things that invalidate the fast and require *qadaa'* (making up for those days) are eating, drinking or smoking deliberately, including taking any non-nourishing items by mouth, nose or anus; deliberately causing self to vomit; beginning of menstrual or post-childbirth bleeding even in the last moment before sunset; sexual intercourse or other sexual contact (or masturbation) that results in ejaculation (in men) or vaginal secretions (orgasm) in women; eating, drinking, smoking or having sexual intercourse after *Fajr* (dawn) on the mistaken assumption that it is not *Fajr* time yet. Similarly, engaging in these acts before *Maghrib* (sunset) on the mistaken assumption that it is already *Maghrib* time. Sexual intercourse during fasting is forbidden and is a great sin. Those who engage in it must make both *qadaa'* (make up the fasts) and *kaffarah* (expiation by fasting for 60 days after Ramadan or by feeding 60 poor people for each day of fast broken in this way).

In the Bible, lots of fasting can be identified. Some are named after the biblical characters who observed them. In summary, Oates (2022) skillfully group fasting into seven types that must all be done with the attitude of humility and hunger for God. The first is partial. This is abstinence from eating from sun up to sundown or set time. The time range is determined before commencement. Second is Daniel fast; It takes number of days but fruits, vegetables, water, and nuts are taken for strength as recorded in Daniel 10:2-3. Third is complete fasting – abstinence from solid food entirely but if it exceed three days, some choose to drink water and juice to help maintain some energy. Fourth is absolute fast based on Paul and Esther experiences. No food or water is taken for three days. Some call it dry fasting. The records are in Acts 9:9; and Esther 4:16 but Moses and Jesus extended theirs to 40 days each as recorded in Exodus 34:27- 28 and Matthew 4:1-2. Fifth is corporate fasting, as the name implies, group of individuals, spouse, church members etc as recorded in Esther 8:21-23; and Matthew 18:20. Sixth is sexual fasting. It comes from Paul

who from experience taught spouse to abstain from sex to devoted time for prayer after mutual consent as recorded in 1Corinthians 7:3-6. Seventh is soul fasting, a deliberate attempt to sever ones' life from those thing that are consuming his or her time that may ruin the life such as social media, television, films, magazine etc.

In all the aforementioned, Franklin (2022) cautions believers that irrespective of the ones they choose, the attitude of a sincere heart gets God's blessing. Bright (2021) admonishes that fasting should be combined with prayers as it is the spiritual atomic bomb that our Lord has given us to destroy the strongholds of evil and usher in a great revival and spiritual harvest around the world.

Why fasting?

There are lots of reasons for fasting. For Clark (2022), it is design to humble us. It is a medium of repentance or seeking for forgiveness of sin. To expound it further, Downing (2022) posits that prayer is great and fasting is fantastic, but the discipline of using them together can help those who fast make life in a sinful world more bearable by connecting them to God and drawing on His power instead of their own. Klipp (2022) postulates that individuals, people and groups in ancient times fasted to show their devotion to their deity, to demonstrate the depth of their sorrow over a sin or some situation in their lives, or to show their commitment to a certain cause—among other reasons. Carter in Klipp (2022) harmonized ten reasons for biblical fasting. They include strengthening prayer (Ezra 8:23), seek God's guidance (Judges 20:26), express grief (1 Samuel 31:13), seek deliverance or protection (2 Chronicles 20:3-4), express repentance and a return to God (1 Samuel 7:6), humble oneself before God (1 Kings 21:27), express concern for the work of God (Nehemiah 1:3), minister to the needs of others (Isaiah 58:3-7), overcome temptation and dedicate self to God (Matthew 4:1-11); and express love and worship for God (Luke 2:37). At least one of these could be the reasons for fasting even when not done the right way as stipulated in Isaiah 58.

Benefits of fasting

Fasting has both physical and spiritual benefits. Most Nigerians especially the politicians and top government officials can get physical ones pointed out by Netshiomvani (2021) who gave us 14 proven benefits of fasting. These include loss of weight, lower blood pressure, reduce cholesterol, fast healing, detoxification, radiant skin, anti-aging hormones, boost metabolism or digestion, reduce appetite, manage or check obesity. Similarly, Hewitt (2022) expatiates that loss of weight, improves insulin sensitivity, speeds up metabolism, promote longevity, improves hunger, improves eating pattern, improves brain functioning, improve immune system, contribute to self-enlightenment, help clear the skin and prevent acne. On a deeper note, Kandola and Olsen (2018) explain that weight loss potentially influence other factors linked to an increased risk of diabetes. Being overweight or obese is one of factor for developing type 2 diabetes; better learning and memory as tested in mice with intermittent and those with free access to food; reduce the risk of neurological disorders, including Alzheimer and Parkinson diseases and stroke; delay the onset of tumors; and decrease several biological factors with links to cancer, such as insulin levels and inflammation.

The spiritual benefits include righteousness, answer to prayers, God's guidance, favour, prosperity, good model to posterity among others. Bright (2021) says fasting enables the Holy

Spirit to reveal our true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance and a transformed life; and confidence and faith in God will be strengthened. Riggelman (2021) states that fasting helps detach one from this world while prayer re-attaches us to God. Yet, most religionists have not participated in this sacred discipline or have heard of it as intermittent fasting for weight loss. Yesudasan (2022) posits that Christian fasting is not only the spontaneous effect of superior satisfaction in God, it is also a chosen weapon against every force in the world that would take that satisfaction away. Wilson (2018) opines that fasting helps him to gain a new perspective and a renewed reliance upon God.

Challenges of fasting in contemporary Nigerian society

Many Nigerians especially the politicians and those at the helms of affairs are not willing to part with sins. Sin is the first challenge. Butts (2022) explains that people struggle with sin issues every day. This automatically means the aim is not achieved without genuine confession and repentance. Bright (2021) attests that un-confessed sin will hinder our prayers. Sin is a reproach to an individual and the entire nation. This implies that sin has to be dealt with before commencing the fast. The way forward is for an individual to acknowledge his or her errors, confess them and seek for pardon. Then, the unmerited favour is released to the sinner who then enjoys the spiritual benefits of fasting.

Second challenge according to Haines (2019) is talking and complaining. People make a big deal in front of others and are putting on a face that shows they are “suffering for God”. There are some people who complain and talk about certain things just to be pitied or favoured or for others to will feel sorry for them. Jesus witnessed this unfortunate display of hypocrisy while on earth. He promptly addressed the religious leaders to do the needful while fasting to get the accrued benefits. Moreover, Vankalwala (2015) adds that the talk over silly things, shift values when necessary, and judging others which ought not to be so.

Third challenge is refusal to heed to scriptural warnings. Calhoun (2015) affirms that the scripture gives a variety of warnings about fasting for the wrong reasons or with the wrong attitude: one of such is when people do not live as God desires they should be prepared for fasting to accomplish nothing (Isaiah 58:3-7). This implies that there is no spiritual benefit for those who fast and live contrary to God’s expectation. Fasting does not make anyone pious or holy, and it does not earn points with God (Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:9-14). Hence, it is better to do the right thing towards those around us than assuming God will overlook our wickedness. Meaning that, a preparation to love one another is necessary. St. John said it is not possible to love God who we do not see and hate those around us. If true love is extended to neighbours, great blessing can be attained for fasting.

The fourth challenge is oppression of the poor and the needy. These categories of people are deliberately denied their dues. Ahmad (2014) posits that being poor means deprived economically, politically and socially. They do not have shelter to live, food to eat, and clothes to wear while the privileged ones have extra, live a comfortable and a posh life. They ought to care for the poor and needy people and helping them is a noble endeavor. It is even proper to create a new system built on inter-dependency which motivates them to work and move forward and their dignity is maintained. Instead, the privileged ones are perpetually inconsiderate of the less in the society by assuming that giving five thousand to a poor man with dependents is enough for them

to be blessed when they can afford to feed a whole community. Prindiville (2015) suggests that poverty prevention programs, policies, and corresponding social movements of raising wages, empowering people, reducing poverty levels and changing lives should be pursued as in the United States.

Fifth challenge is promotion of injustice. Heinze (2013) defines injustice as it applies to any act that involves unfairness to another or violation of one's rights. The *injustices* are suffered by those who do not belong to their religion, tribe, political party and those in lower social status in the society. There are several agitations to restructure the country as a result of injustices. There are those who consider themselves as first class citizens and they treat others as second class. Opportunities are given according to tribe. Tribal and geographical differences determined the position one gets irrespective of abilities and potentials. The rights of those not close to power are trampled upon with impunity. People are denied employment, appointment and election because they belong to a different religion. The perpetrators of injustice in the country pretend also to be fasting knowing fully well that their ways are not right with God.

Sixth challenge is stealing from the government coffer, and continuously shedding of innocent blood. Ochojile (2021) reports that Transparency International (TI) had estimated that about US\$20 to 40 billion were stolen yearly from developing countries and hidden abroad, and said sometimes a small proportion was successfully confiscated and returned to the country of origin. Today, the scale of corruption from the prism of ordinary Nigerians is higher and above the one being projected by the international group against corruption. Furthermore, Fifty-five officials of the government, ministers, state governors, public officials, bankers and businessmen were allegedly said to have stolen N1.34 trillion (\$6.8 billion) from Nigeria's public purse over the last seven years, Nigeria's information minister had once alleged. While these massive lootings were going on at Federal Ministries and Agencies, Governors were allegedly having field days in their various states.

The seventh important challenge is health conditions. The motif could be right as well as attitude but fasting when sick especially with diabetes, gout, liver disease, kidney disease, ulcers, hypoglycemia, cancer and blood diseases are not healthy. Similarly, it is not mandatory when traveling, when pregnant or nursing, menstruating (for women) and children under the age of puberty. This means, fasting should not be observed as ritual. However, Neilsen (2019) observes that fasting is done by many just as a form of religion or ritual and love to God; to punish the body for sin for its sinful desires; atone for sin and acquire merit that Jesus already has done; as a matter of pride. That is, to see how religious or disciplined one can be to appear more religious or holy; and as a form of protest in order to get what one wanted.

The eighth challenge is to receive answer to prayer or request after fasting. Servant (2022) points it out that some people fast hoping that it will increase the chance of God answering their prayer requests. Jesus, however, told us that the primary means to answered prayer is faith, not fasting (Matthew 21:22). Fasting is not a means to "twist God's arm," or a way of saying to Him, "You better answer my prayer or I will starve myself to death!" That is not a biblical fast. It is more of a hunger strike. Remember that David fasted and prayed for several days for his sick baby by Bathsheba to live, but the baby died because God was disciplining him. Fasting did not change his situation or spare the life of the innocent child. David was not praying in faith because he had

no promise on which to stand. In fact, he was praying and fasting contrary to God's will, as evidenced by the outcome.

Ninth challenge is hope for revival. It is natural for all churches to hope for a revival. Klipp (2022) argues that fasting is not a prerequisite to having a revival. There is no example of anyone in the New Testament fasting for a revival. Rather, the apostles simply obeyed Jesus by preaching the gospel. If a city was unresponsive, they obeyed Jesus again, sweeping the dust off of their feet and journeying to the next city (Luke 9:5; Acts 13:49-51). They did not stay around and fast, trying to "break spiritual strongholds," waiting for a revival. This being said, however, Klipp (2022) adds that fasting coupled with prayer can certainly benefit those who minister the gospel, making them more effective agents of revival. Many of the spiritual giants of whom we can read in church history were men and women who made a habit of prayer and fasting.

Tenth challenge is proving one's spiritual status. Dienstmann (2022) defines spirituality as a world view and a way of life based on the belief that there is more to life than what meets the senses, more to the universe than purposeless mechanics, more to consciousness than electrical impulses in the brain, and more to our existence than the body and its needs. It involves the belief in a higher form of intelligence or consciousness running the universe as well as life after death. It exists to satisfy the deeper human thirst for meaning, peace, mystery and the truth. Consequently, fasting for the purpose of proving one's spirituality or advertising one's devotion to God is a waste of time and an indication of hypocrisy. This was the reason why the Pharisees fasted, and Jesus condemned them for it (see Matthew 6:16; 23:5). Fasting is an exercise in self-control, and the same virtue is needed to walk after the Spirit and not after the flesh.

Eleventh challenge is to secure victory over satanic manifestations. In African societies, satanic or demonic oppression abound, hence, some people fast to get victory over Satan. Klipp (2022) says it is unscriptural. Scripture promises that if we resist Satan by faith in God's Word, then he will flee from us (James. 4:7; 1 Peter. 5:8-9). Fasting is not necessary weapon against satanic oppressions. When Jesus heard a report that His disciples had failed to deliver a certain boy from a demon possession, the first thing He did was to lament on their lack of faith (Matthew 17:17). When His disciples asked Him why they had failed, He replied that it was because of the littleness of their faith (Matthew 17:20). He may also have added as a footnote, "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21). Meanwhile, If Jesus gives someone authority over demons, as He did gave His twelve disciples (Matthew 10:1), then he has it, and fasting cannot increase one's authority. Fasting, of course, could give one more time to pray, thereby increasing spiritual sensitivity and perhaps his faith in his God-given authority. Also keep in mind that if Jesus did actually make the statement under consideration, it was only in reference to one kind of demon. Although Jesus' disciples once failed to cast out one particular kind of demon, they successfully cast out many other demons (Luke 10:17). All of this is to say that we do not need to fast to gain personal victory over Satan's attacks against us.

The twelfth challenge is wrong teaching or education concerning the theology of exclusiveness, hatred and hostility toward other religions. Nigeria is a pluralistic society. Therefore, the teaching even during fasting is responsible for raising generations of extremist young people who are firmly held by the negative forces of parochialism and sectarianism. Furthermore, Yabiliyok (2021:75) rightly observes that:

Nigerians have a high regard for their spiritual leaders. Whatever comes from the lips of such revered men and women need to be measured. Unfortunately, there have been several ethno-religious conflicts generated as a result of careless pronouncements by religious persons who are supposedly promoters of peace. The stake could not have higher for clerics on both sides. They risk igniting a religious inferno of unimaginable proportion by what they churn out in public or private settings

From this observation, Iwuchukwu (2016:282) earlier suggests inclusive teaching as “the effective and meaningful way of breaking the doldrums of hate and heinous acts promoted by exclusivism.

Thirteenth challenge is intolerance and hostile co-existence. It is not impossible with God the creator to create one race, one religion, one tribe and the rest of them. However, He allows the differences but has given mankind the ability to tolerate and mutually co-exist. Hence, interreligious dialogue becomes imperative while fasting. The purpose according to Tanko (2014:38) is “to enrich, deepening, and broadening religious life through mutual understanding of one another’s convictions and witness. To buttress further, Son (2018) concurs that it is an opportunity for breaking frontiers in creating respect and making peace.

The way forward

For Nigerians to maximize the benefits of fasting, the following recommendations are made as the way forward:

- 1 Religious leaders must preach or show their adherents’ transgressions or sins. They should not spare any like prophet Isaiah irrespective of status; and teach the acceptable means of fasting without religious sentiments
- 2 Religious adherents should confess and repent of every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance. In addition, seek for forgiveness from all those they have offended, and forgive all who have hurt them (Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4; 17:3,4). This should be done at all time because fasting is not limited to a period.
- 3 Government should address unemployment by creating jobs opportunities through spread of wealth into rural communities. Education should also be the compass through which government should attain greater national development.

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