

It appears that the voting has been unanimous in the affirmative. Thank you.

### President Benson

The choir will now sing "Our Savior's Love." Following the singing, we shall hear from Elder Howard W.

Hunter, a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles.

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The women's choir sang "Our Savior's Love."

Elder Howard W. Hunter spoke without further announcement.

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## Elder Howard W. Hunter

### Fasting unique to Church

If it were not for general conference, we would be attending fast day services in our own wards today because it is the first Sunday of the month. Not only would we be attending the service, but we would be fasting in compliance with the established practice of members of the Church. In this respect, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is unique, although the principle of fasting has been observed down through ecclesiastical history.

It seems to be impossible to determine, from the records that are available to us, the circumstances under which fasting originated in ancient times, or what its purpose was in the beginning. Nevertheless, we find reference to it as having been practiced in the earliest of times as an expression of grief or emotion. It was associated with serious and heartfelt sorrow for sin, with times of mourning, and with occasions of strong emotion.

### Fasting among early Israelites

The early Israelites practiced fasting, although there are very few references to it. Usually such references as are made are associated with some particular occasion or in connection with attempts to receive communications from God, as was the case of the fasting of Moses and Elijah. (See Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8.)

Prior to the period of the exile, there are few records of fasting by the people of Israel as a whole, except those fasts held for the needs of special occasions such as the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. (See 1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:12.) There were other public fasts to seek divine assistance before wars or battles. (See Judges 20:26; 2 Samuel 14:24; 2 Chronicles 20:3.) It can be presumed that Moses fasted because he mentioned fasting, without advocating any particular fast in his writings.

After the period of the exile, however, both public and private fasts began to be observed, sometimes accompanied by weeping and wearing sackcloth and ashes. The most prominent fast was the annual Day of Atonement. It also became a custom of the pious in Judaism to fast on two days of the week—the second and fifth days, which were the days Moses went up and came down from Mount Sinai.

### Changes in practices of fasting

Approaching the Christian era, we find a great devotion to fasting among the extreme groups of the Jews, particularly the Pharisees; but Jesus did not instruct his disciples by setting down any specific requirements regarding the nature or frequency of fasting. In his Sermon on the Mount, however, he said: "When ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance" (Matthew 6:16). This would indicate

that there should be sincerity when fasting was observed. He himself had fasted forty days and forty nights. (See Matthew 4:2.)

Many of the things established by the early Church during the time of Christ were changed and corrupted after the death of the last of the Apostles. Fasting and prayer had been matters of voluntary observance, but eventually they became subject to ecclesiastical rules and regulations which all communicants were expected to follow and observe under pain of excommunication for the disobedient.

### Modern revelation

When the early colonists settled the eastern seaboard of this country, they did not follow the customary fasts of the churches from which they had departed. They established their own fast days, many of which have been perpetuated to the present time. Some of these fast days were supported by legislative bodies or public officials.

Many of the early members of this Church were from New England or had a background of the religious culture of the colonists, and fasting was part of their religious beliefs. Because of this background, it may be that many of them felt the need of close communion with their Heavenly Father. They followed the teaching of the Lord by fasting in secret (see Matthew 6:17-18), but no mention is made of this principle in the early history of the Church.

Modern revelation as contained in the Doctrine and Covenants makes little mention of fasting and gives no specific instructions regarding it. A year and a half after the Church was organized, the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation which mentions observance of the Lord's day and incidentally refers to fasting, without additional comment. This is the portion of the revelation that makes mention of it:

"And on this day thou shalt do none other thing, only let thy food be prepared with singleness of heart that

thy fasting may be perfect, or, in other words, that thy joy may be full.

"Verily, this is fasting and prayer, or in other words, rejoicing and prayer" (D&C 59:13-14).

This is an echo from Old Testament times, and the principle of fasting in the spirit of prayer is confirmed in this dispensation.

The following year came a more explicit revelation on the subject from the Lord in which he said, "Also, I give unto you a commandment that ye shall continue in prayer and fasting from this time forth" (D&C 88:76).

### "Continue in prayer and fasting"

Prior to this time there had been no observance of a fast in the Church on any regular basis. The wording of this revelation that "ye shall continue in prayer and fasting from this time forth" would seem to suggest the institution of fast meetings, but apparently there were none until the building of the Kirtland Temple in 1836.

The only other mention of fasting in modern revelation is in reference to the building of the Kirtland Temple and in the prayer of dedication, in which the temple is referred to as "a house of prayer, a house of fasting." (See D&C 88:119; 95:7, 16; and 109:8, 16.) There is frequent mention in the Book of Mormon of fasting, but these are ancient writings, as are those in the Bible. The scriptures of this dispensation give us little information.

### Brigham Young's instructions

We do not know when fasting was adopted in the Church as a regular observance, but there are records that indicate that some fast meetings were held in the Kirtland Temple on the first Thursday of each month in the year 1836. There is no indication that these fasts were associated with donations to the poor, except a remark made by Brigham Young more than thirty years later in the Old Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. He had this to say:

"You know that the first Thursday in each month we hold as a fast day. How many here know the origin of this day? Before tithing was paid, the poor were supported by donations. They came to Joseph and wanted help, in Kirtland, and he said there should be a fast day, which was decided upon. It was to be held once a month, as it is now, and all that would have been eaten that day, of flour, or meat, or butter, or fruit, or anything else, was to be carried to the fast meeting and put into the hands of a person selected for the purpose of taking care of it and distributing it among the poor" (*Journal of Discourses*, 12:115).

Although Brigham Young indicated that this was the decision that was made, there is no record that it was ever observed.

### Special fasts

There were occasional fasts held in Nauvoo with some special objective in view, but no fasts on a regular basis. It was not until 1845 that a fast was held in Nauvoo to provide for the poor. In the *History of the Church* we find this notation made by Brigham Young:

"Thursday, 15 . . . *Fast Day*: all works were stopped. Meetings were held in the several wards and donations made to the bishops for the poor; enough was contributed to supply the wants of the poor until harvest" (*History of the Church*, 7:411).

Special fast days for various purposes were held during the exodus from Nauvoo, and after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, some fasts were held on the first Thursday of the month. It cannot be determined with any certainty when fast days became established on a regular basis, but during the difficult years of 1855 and 1856, because of prolonged drought and famine, the exceptionally hard winter, and the plague of grasshoppers, many of the Saints were in desperate circumstances. This is what Brigham H. Roberts wrote of it:

### Fast days, fast offerings, and care for the poor

"To meet the very great demands of charity upon Latter-day Saints in those trying years, our fast day came into existence; the servants of the Lord instituted the first Thursday in every month as fast day, with a view of taking what was saved by this sacrifice and minister unto those who otherwise would be in want. This plan of meeting that emergency became an established institution" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1913, p. 120).

### Fast meeting changed to Sunday

Prior to this time the poor had been sustained by donations, but now the care of the poor became associated with fast day and what was donated became known as fast offerings, which were brought to the monthly fast meetings. From this early period when the Saints came to the valleys of the mountains to 1896, a regular fast day was held on the first Thursday of each month, and offerings were brought and given largely in kind.

In the early days when the membership of the Church was small, the holding of fast day on Thursday was not a problem, but as time went on it caused employees to take time from their work to attend fast meeting, merchants had to close their businesses, and many other difficulties resulted from weekday observance. A decision was made by the First Presidency and the Twelve that the monthly fast meeting should be held on the first Sunday of each month. The first Sunday of December, 1896, was the date set for the change. From that time to the present—nearly a century—the fast day has been observed, in most instances, on the first Sunday of the month as a religious practice.

### Fasting defined

Members of the Church may fast at any time as they have a need, but the

fast contemplated on the day referred to as fast day, as defined by President Joseph F. Smith, "is that food and drink are not to be partaken of for twenty-four hours, 'from even to even.'" From even to even has been given the meaning of going without two meals—from the evening meal on the night before to evening meal on fast day. President Smith went on to say:

"In addition, the leading and [principal] object of the institution of the fast among the Latter-day Saints, was that the poor might be provided with food and other necessities. It is, therefore, incumbent upon every Latter-day Saint to give to his bishop, on fast day, the food that he or his family would consume for the day, that it may be given to the poor for their benefit and blessing; or, in lieu of the food, that its equivalent amount, or, if the person be wealthy a liberal donation, in money be so reserved and dedicated to the poor" (*Improvement Era*, Dec. 1902, p. 148).

### **Fasting brings us in tune with God**

Are we not wealthy if the Lord has blessed us with something we can share with others?

To discipline ourselves through fasting brings us in tune with God, and fast day provides an occasion to set aside the temporal so that we might enjoy the higher qualities of the spiritual. As we fast on that day we learn and better understand the needs of those who are less fortunate.

May the Lord bless us as we live his commandments and share with our brothers and sisters, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### **President Benson**

We have just heard from Elder Howard W. Hunter, a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles.

We shall now hear from Elder Hartman Rector Jr., a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy. He will be followed by Elder M. Russell Ballard, a new member of the Council of Twelve Apostles.

## **Elder Hartman Rector, Jr.**

### **The gospel of Jesus Christ**

My brothers and sisters, I would like to spend a few moments discussing with you the power of God unto salvation, or the gospel of Jesus Christ. I think more properly for us, the gospel is the way to salvation, and surely there is no other way. Mortals will get there through the gospel of Jesus Christ, or they will not receive salvation, meaning eternal life.

The word *gospel* means literally "glad tidings" or "good news." If you were to receive the news that a long-lost relative of whom you had never heard had died and left you a million dollars, that quite possibly could be considered good news, but it would not be the

gospel. The gospel is, then, a particular kind of good news. It is the good news about Jesus Christ and his atoning sacrifice for our sins and the original transgression that took place in the Garden of Eden.

If we were to search for the best definition of what is contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we could hardly do better than look to the Lord Jesus Christ's definition of what his gospel is. We read from 3 Nephi 27, beginning with verse 13, "Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me." I presume we—you and I—also came into this world to do the