

What Is Fasting and Why Should I Do It?

In this study we will review the meaning of the biblical fast, its purpose, and the different times it was performed. Many people have a misconception about fasting. Some have exalted religious fasting beyond the scriptures and imposed it as an obligatory doctrine. Others have decided to ignore the subject by treating it with indifference and deeming it totally unnecessary and undesirable. What has caused so much misunderstanding and indifference to a subject discussed so often in the Bible? First of all, among other reasons, fasting has developed a bad reputation because of its excessive and exaggerated practice in times past. Second, many have concluded that fasting was a Jewish or other religious custom and of no value or need in the Christian era.

FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

I. EXAMPLES OF FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7)

1. This phrase appears here, depending on the translation you read: “Deny yourself, afflict yourself, afflict your souls, humble yourself.”
2. This is translated from a customary Hebrew term meaning *fasting*; not only meaning abstinence from food, but the penitence and humiliation which give scope and purpose to the outward act of fasting.
3. Some modern translations translate the phrase to *fasting* in Psalm 69:10; 35:13.
4. The Day of Atonement was the only public fast commanded by the Law of Moses.
5. On fasts observed in later times, see Zechariah 7:5; 8:19, for references.

B. Other examples of fasting in the Old Testament

Fasting was done frequently and without any specific commandment in times of affliction, collectively or individually.

1. There was fasting in times of war or threat of war.
 - a. Israel fasted at Bethel when facing the Benjamites (Judges 20:26).
 - b. They also fasted at Mizpah before they faced the Philistines (1 Samuel 7:6).
2. There was fasting when loved ones were sick.
 - a. David fasted and pleaded with God for his child (2 Samuel 12:16-23).
 - b. David also fasted for others when they were sick (Psalm 35:13).
3. There was fasting when a loved one died.
 - a. The men of Jabesh Gilead fasted for Saul for seven days (1 Samuel 31:13).
 - b. David and his men also fasted for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:12).
4. There was fasting to seek forgiveness from the Lord.
 - a. Moses fasted for 40 days interceding on behalf of Israel (Deuteronomy 9:15-18).
 - b. Ahab fasted and humbled himself before the Lord (1 Kings 21:17-29).
 - c. The Ninevites fasted to avoid the disaster Jonah warned about (Jonah 3:4-10).
 - d. Daniel fasted as he interceded on Israel’s behalf for the many sins they had committed (Daniel 9:3-5).
 - e. Israel fasted as they confessed their sins and Heard the word of the Lord (Nehemiah 9:1-3)
5. There was fasting when they faced imminent danger.

- a. Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast in Judah when Edom threatened war (2 Chronicles 20-1-3).
- b. Ezra proclaimed a fast to inquire the favor of the Lord as they returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21).
- c. Nehemiah fasted when he heard the state of the city of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4).
- d. The Jews fasted together when they heard Haman's decree (Esther 4:3).
- e. Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews in Susa fasted together before Esther presented herself to the king (Esther 4:16).

II. DESCRIPTION OF FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. The purpose of fasting.

1. Sometimes fasting was a natural reaction to grief caused by the loss of a loved one, but often it was done to humble oneself before God (Ezra 8:21). The purpose of humiliation in the face of God through fasting was the effect it would have on the soul and not particularly on the body.
2. Evidently, they sought God's favor by humbling themselves before Him (Isaiah 57:15; Ezra 8:21-23). Since they sought God's favor, fasting was accompanied by prayer.
3. We already saw examples of why some fasted:
 - a. For forgiveness (Moses, Ahab, Daniel).
 - b. For health of a loved one (David).
 - c. For protection against dangers (Ezra).
 - d. To be rescued from enemies (Israel).

B. Ways of fasting.

1. The most common form of fasting was to abstain from eating except for water.
2. In rare occasions we see a partial fast, like the one Daniel had eating only vegetables (Daniel 10:2-3).
3. Sometimes the fast was absolute, no food and no water:
 - a. As in the Ninevites, whose fast was also imposed on the animals (Jonah 3:5-10).
 - b. As in Esther, when she was going before the king (Esther 4:16).
 - c. As in Moses, when he went up to the mountain to get the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 9:9), and Elijah, when he traveled up to the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:8).

C. The duration of fasting.

1. Usually, fasting lasted a day, from sunup to sundown (Judges 20:26; 1 Sam 14:24; 2 Sam 1:12).
2. Esther's fast lasted three consecutive days (Esther 4:16).
3. The fast done by the men of Jabesh Gilead on account of Saul's death was for seven days (1 Samuel 31:13).
4. David fasted for seven days as well while his child was sick (2 Samuel 12:16-18).
5. The longest fasts in the Bible lasted 40 days, by Moses, Elijah and Jesus (Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Matthew 4:2).

D. Warnings about fasting.

1. Fasting can become an external ritual, purely ceremonial, devoid of true repentance and contriteness of heart. Isaiah warned about such superficial fasting (Isaiah 58:3-4).
2. This is the most vigorous attack on this type of fast. Israel complained it had fasted and not been heard by God. They were not heard by God because their fast was nothing more than a ritual act to mortify the body and without any conviction. They fasted and covered themselves with ashes, but they ignored God's commandments, indicating that fasting without obedience and repentance is rejected by God. Fasting alone has no magical power. It must be accompanied by humility, prayer, obedience, and repentance.
3. God claimed the same about the ceremonial fasts the Israelites had added to commemorate certain occasions (Zechariah 7:1-14). They wanted to know if they should follow the fasts they had observed for so many years. God answered that fasts had not been observed for Him. They should have done God's will, but because they did not, their fasts had no value before God.

FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

I. FASTING IN JESUS' LIFE

A. Jesus fasts for forty days in the wilderness.

1. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-11).
2. He was tempted for forty days and considered a fast appropriate for this occasion (Luke 4:1-2)

B. Jesus taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16-18).

1. He said, "when you fast...", assuming His disciples would fast.
2. Fasting the right way for God pleases Him and brings reward.
3. Jesus teaches about giving, prayer, and fasting as deeds done by His disciples.

C. Jesus was questioned concerning fasting (Luke 5:33-35).

1. He was speaking about a time when His disciples would fast.
2. Evidently, fasting would have an important place in the life of a Christian, but only if done appropriately, not as a ceremonial act.

D. The powerful combination of prayer and fasting (Mark 9:14-29).

1. In modern translations verse 29 only includes *prayer*.
2. In many older manuscripts the phrase includes *fasting*, as in "This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting."
3. There are times when prayer needs to be accompanied by fasting.
4. In these times and circumstances prayer and fasting can accomplish more than just faith or praying by itself.

II. FASTING IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

A. At the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3).

1. They collectively worshipped and fasted.
2. They fasted and prayed before sending Saul and Barnabas on their mission.

B. At the churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch in Syria (Acts 14:21-23).

1. They prayed and fasted in each congregation.
2. The main reason was for the appointment of elders, committing them to the Lord.
3. Paul participated in these fasts with the congregations, and it was also part of his lifestyle (2 Corinthians 11:27-28).

CONCLUSION

SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST TODAY?

1. Yes! Jesus said His disciples would fast when He was not with them (Matthew 9:15).
2. He also taught them how to fast with the right mindset (Matthew 6:16-18) and spoke about situations when prayer should be combined with fasting (Matthew 17:20-21). *Verse 21 only appears in the KJV, by the way. In other versions it is a footnote.*
3. We have various examples of brethren fasting in the New Testament (Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-23), including the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 11:27-28). Paul calls us to follow him as he follows Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:1).

WHY SHOULD WE FAST?

1. The Old Testament gives us various reasons:
 - a. In times of war (Israel).
 - b. Because of sickness of a loved one (David).
 - c. When we seek forgiveness (Ahab, Daniel).
 - d. When we ask for protection (Ezra).
2. The New Testament gives us more reasons:
 - a. When we are tempted (Jesus)
 - b. When we begin a new mission/work in the kingdom (Church in Antioch)
 - c. When we appoint elders in the church (various churches)

HOW SHOULD WE FAST?

1. Not to be seen or to boast (Matthew 6:16-18)
2. Not as a tradition or ceremonial ritual, only at appropriate times that call for it (Mark 9:14-29).
3. With a contrite heart, penitent and obedient. Prayer and fasting are useless if we are not faithful and obedient to God's word (Isaiah 58:3-9).
4. Understanding that the purpose of fasting is to humble ourselves and afflict our soul before God to receive a favorable response as we seek His face during difficult times.

Practical suggestions:

1. Please read the other study/document titled Guidelines for Fasting
2. If you are unfamiliar with fasting or have never done so, start with a fast of no more than one day. Finish the fast gradually. Preferably with small amounts of fruits or vegetables.
3. Fasting is more effective when you have a day(s) with enough time to pray and meditate on God's word.

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