

Fasting

A Special Study



**A Survey Of Fasting
In The Old And New Testament**

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Fasting

Fasting In The Old Testament

INTRODUCTION

1. In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the “**Golden Arches**” and an assortment of “**Pizza Temples**”, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times - **Richard Foster**, *The Celebration Of Discipline*, p. 47
2. As I begin to deal with subject like fasting, I do so with some hesitation for several reasons...
 - a. It is a very **emotional** and **volatile** subject
 - 1) Views about fasting usually go to extremes
 - a) “**Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason, and others have utterly disregarded it.**” - John Wesley
 - b) Some consider fasting unnecessary, undesirable, and therefore to be ignored
 - c) Others think fasting is to be bound as a matter of faith (like baptism)
 - 2) It touches upon a matter very personal to us: **Food!**
 - a) Many people are very dependent upon food
 - 1/ Not just for survival
 - 2/ But for dealing with anxiety, depression, boredom, etc.
 - 3/ Rather than eating to live, they live to eat
 - b) It is like preaching on gluttony or smoking, it often touches on raw nerves
 - b. It is an **untraditional** subject
 - 1) You rarely hear sermons on this subject
 - 2) One person found in his research that not a single book was published on fasting among some brethren from 1861 to 1954
 3. But the Scriptures have so much to say about fasting...
 - a. The list of Biblical persons who fasted becomes a “**Who’s Who**” of Scripture:

1) Moses the lawgiver	5) Daniel the seer
2) David the king	6) Anna the prophetess
3) Elijah the prophet	7) Jesus the Son Of God
4) Esther the queen	8) Paul the apostle

-- **Richard Foster**, p.48, *ibid.*
 - b. There is more teaching in the NT on fasting than repentance and confession!
 - c. Jesus taught more on fasting than on baptism and the Lord’s Supper!
 4. What would account for this almost total disregard for a subject so frequently mentioned in Scripture?
 - a. **First**, fasting has developed a bad reputation as a result of the excessive ascetic practices of the Middle Ages - **Foster**, *ibid.*
 - b. **Second**, many have simply concluded that fasting was a Jewish custom, of no value or need in the Christian age
 - c. **Third**, we have been convinced through constant propaganda that if we do not have three large

meals each day, with several snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation (we eat, not because we need to eat. but because it's time to eat) - **Foster**, *ibid*.

5. Because the Bible has so much to say about fasting, it is only right that we consider what it says. As we do so, I have several **requests**::
 - a. Please withhold judgment until you have heard all the material - cf. **Pro 18:13**
 - 1) Let's be "**spelunkers**" and not "**engineers**" with the Bible
 - 2) I.e., explore and follow what is there instead of rearranging what is there to fit our designs
 - b. Don't be hasty in drawing conclusions or applying what you hear - cf. **Pro 14:29**
 - c. If you have any additional information, questions or viewpoints, please feel free to share them with me - cf. **Pro 11:14**

[In this lesson, then, we shall take a look at "**Fasting In The Old Testament**", beginning with...]

I. OCCASIONS OF FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. THE "DAY OF ATONEMENT"...

1. Cf. **Lev 16:29-31; 23:26-32; Num 29:7**
2. This was the only fast commanded by the Law, to be observed on the tenth day of the seventh month
3. Though not called "fasting", the phrase "*afflicting one's soul*" was understood to refer to fasting
 - a. Cf. **Psa 69:10** ("chastened my soul with fasting")
 - b. Cf. **Ac 27:9** (where the term "Fast" refers to the Day of Atonement)
4. The use of the phrase "afflict one's soul" to refer to fasting suggests a **purpose** of fasting:
 - a. To have an affect on the **soul** (not particularly the body)
 - b. The goal of such affliction or chastening we shall notice later

B. OTHER FASTS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT...

- People often fasted without specific commandment in time of distress; some were communal affairs while others were acts of the private individual
1. **They fasted in war, or at the threat of it**
 - a. Israel fasted at Bethel in the war against the Benjamites - **Judg 20:26**
 - b. Also at Mizpah in the Philistine war - **1 Sam 7:6**
 2. **They fasted when loved ones were sick**
 - a. David fasted and wept for his son while the boy was ill - **2 Sam 12:16-23**
 - b. The psalmist also mentions fasting for his enemies - **Psa 35:11-13**
 3. **They fasted when loved ones died**
 - a. The men of Jabesh-gilead fasted seven days for Saul - **1 Sa 31:13; 1 Chr 10:12**
 - b. David and the people fasted for Saul and Jonathan - **2 Sa 1:12**
 4. **They fasted when they sought God's forgiveness**
 - a. Moses fasted forty days because of the sin of Israel - **Deu 9:15-18**
 - b. Ahab fasted to be forgiven - **1 Ki 21:17-29**
 - c. Nineveh fasted at the preaching of Jonah - **Jon 3:4-10**
 - d. Daniel fasted as he confessed the sins of Israel - **Dan 9:3-5**
 - e. The general fast at the communal reading of the Law by Ezra was an act of penitence

- **Neh 9:1-3**

5. **They fasted when faced with impending danger**
 - a. Jehoshaphat fasted when threatened by Edom - **2 Chr 20:3**
 - b. Ezra led a fast when seeking the favor of God toward his return from exile (a journey fraught with danger) - **Ezr 8:21**
 - c. Nehemiah fasted when he heard of the state of Jerusalem - **Neh 1:4**
 - d. The Jews fasted when they heard that Haman had obtained the king's decree against them - **Est 4:3**
 - e. Esther and Mordecai fasted before she went before the king - **Est 4:16**
6. **They set up fasts to commemorate certain calamities**
 - During and after the Exile special fasts were observed on the days the calamities had befallen Jerusalem
 - a. The tenth of the fifth month was the burning of the Temple - **Jer 52:12,13**
 - b. The second day of the seventh month was the murder of Gedaliah - **2 Ki 25:23-95; Jer 41:1ff**
 - c. On the tenth day of the tenth month was the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem - **2 Ki 25:1**
 - d. On the ninth day of the fourth was its fall - **2 Ki 25:3,4**

II. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. THE PURPOSE OF FASTING...

1. Some fasting was a natural reaction to grief over the loss of a loved one (like the men of Jabesh-gilead and David)
2. But more often, fasting was done to purposely:
 - a. "afflict the soul" - **Lev 23:26-32**
 - b. "chasten the soul" - **Psa 69:10**
3. The purpose of such affliction or chastening was to "humble" the soul (**Psa 35:13**), and not for any affect it might have on the body
4. Evidently, they felt that by so humbling themselves they would more likely incur God's favor - cf. **Ezr 8:21-23; Isa 57:15; 66:1-2**
5. So they would fast when they needed:
 - a. Forgiveness for sin (Moses, Ahab, Daniel)
 - b. Their loved ones restored to health (David)
 - c. Protection from danger (Ezra)
 - d. Deliverance from their enemies (the Israelites)
6. Because they were seeking God's favor, **fasting would almost always be accompanied with prayer**

B. THE NATURE OF FASTING...

1. The **normal** means of fasting involved **abstaining from all food but not water**
2. Sometimes the fast was but **partial** - a restriction of diet but not total abstention - cf. **Dan 10:2-3**
3. On rare occasions there was the **absolute** fast
 - a. As in the case of the people of Nineveh, who also included the animals in their fast - cf. **Jon 3:5-10**

- b. As in the case of Queen Esther - **Est 4:16** (cf. Paul, **Ac 9:9**)
- c. The absolute fasts of Moses and Elijah must have had divine assistance - **Deu 9:9; 1 Ki 19:8**

C. THE LENGTH OF FASTS...

- 1. A fast was often for **one day**, from sunrise to sunset, and after sundown food would be taken - **Jud 20:26; 1 Sa 14:24; 2 Sa 1:12; 3:35**
- 2. A fast might be for **one night** - Dan 6:18
- 3. The fast of Esther continued for **three days**, day and night, which seems to have been a special case - **Est 4:16**
- 4. At the burial of Saul, the fast by Jabesh-Gilead was **seven days** - **1 Sa 31:13; 1 Chr 10:12**
- 5. David fasted **seven days** when his child was ill - **2 Sa 12:16-18**
- 6. The longest fasts recorded in Scripture were the **forty day fasts** by Moses, Elijah, and Jesus - **Exo 34:28; Deu 9:9; 1 Ki 19:8; Mt 4:2; Lk 4:2**

D. WARNINGS CONCERNING FASTING...

- 1. Fasting can easily turn into an **external show** and **ceremonial ritualism**, when it did the prophets spoke out against it
- 2. The most vigorous attack against such fasting is made in **Isaiah 58**
 - a. The people complained that they had fasted and God had not seen - **Isa 58:3a**
 - b. But they had not been fasting for the right reason (to be heard by God) - **Isa 58:3b-4**
 - c. In contrast to simply an external display of bowing one's head like a bulrush and spreading sackcloth and ashes, the Lord would prefer they:
 - 1) Loose the bonds of wickedness
 - 2) Let the oppressed go free
 - 3) Share bread with the hungry
 - 4) Bring the poor into one's house
 - 5) Cover the naked-- Then they should be heard in their prayers - **Isa 58:6-9**
 - d. I.e. fasting without true repentance defeats the purpose of fasting: to have your prayers heard by the Lord!
- 3. The same point was made about the ceremonial fasts that had been added by the Israelites to commemorate certain occasions - **Zec 7:1-14**
 - a. The people wanted to know if they should fast on the special occasions as they had done - **Zec 7:1-3**
 - b. The Lord responded that the fasts had not be done for Him - **Zec 7:4-6**
 - c. They should have instead done the will of the Lord - **Zec 7:7-10**
 - d. But because they did not, the fasting in the past was of no value - **Zec 7:11-14**

CONCLUSION

- 1. At this point we have not tried to establish whether fasting is for Christians today
- 2. Rather, we have just considered the practice of fasting as found in the O.T., to have a better understanding of why people of God fasted

3. What have we learned?
 - a. Only one fast was specifically commanded in the O.T. (The Day Of Atonement)
 - b. But people often fasted when they wanted God to hear their prayers
 - 1) The purpose of the fast was to humble themselves by “afflicting their souls”
 - 2) Believing such humiliation would be pleasing in God’s sight (and it often was)
 - c. However, fasting was fruitless...
 - 1) When it was done for the wrong reason
 - 2) When it was done without true repentance
 - d. We have also seen that there were no set principles concerning the length or nature of fasting

In our next lesson, we shall look at fasting as found in the New Testament...

Fasting

Fasting In The New Testament

INTRODUCTION

1. In our previous lesson, we examined the subject of “**Fasting In The Old Testament**”
2. Here is what we found:
 - a. Only one fast was specifically commanded in the O. T. (on the Day of Atonement)
 - b. But people often fasted when they wanted God to hear their prayers:
 - 1) In times of war or at the threat of it
 - 2) When loved ones were sick
 - 3) When seeking God's forgiveness
 - 4) When faced with impending danger
 - 5) When seeking God's will
 - c. The purpose of such fasting:
 - 1) To humble themselves by “afflicting their souls”
 - 2) Believing that such humiliation would be pleasing in God's sight (and it often was)
 - d. However, fasting was fruitless when:
 - 1) It was gone ceremonially
 - 2) It was done without true repentance
 - e. There were also no set principles governing the length or nature of fasting
2. We shall now examine “**Fasting In The New Testament**”, as taught and exemplified by:
 - a. Jesus
 - b. His church
 - c. The apostle Paul...in an effort to determine whether Christians can or should fast today!

[We begin by considering...]

I. FASTING IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

A. JESUS FASTED FORTY DAYS IN THE WILDERNESS - Mt 4:1-9; Lk 4:1-2

1. He was led into the wilderness “to be tempted” (**Mt**)
 2. He was “tempted for forty days by the devil” (**Lk**)
 3. “in those days He ate nothing” (**Lk**)
- **Throughout this forty day period of temptation, Jesus felt it appropriate to fast**

B. JESUS TAUGHT ON FASTING IN HIS “SERMON ON THE MOUNT” - Mt 6: 16-18

1. Jesus said “when”, not “if”; assuming his disciples **would** fast
2. When done properly a person would be rewarded by the Father...
 - a. Suggesting that fasting was like prayer and giving alms

- b. I.e., an act of righteousness done to please the Father
- **Fasting appears to have a place in the righteousness expected of those who would be citizens of the kingdom of heaven**

C. WHEN QUESTIONED BY JOHN'S DISCIPLES - Mt 9:14-17; Mk 2:18-20; Lk 5:33-39

- 1. Jesus described a time when his disciples would fast
- 2. But it is inappropriate to fast when the occasion does not call for it
- **Fasting would have a place in the disciples' lives, but only on appropriate occasions (not as a ceremonial rite)**

D. THE COMBINED POWER OF PRAYER AND FASTING - Mt 17:14-21; Mk 9:14-29

- 1. There are times when faith alone is not enough
- 2. At these times prayer joined with fasting is necessary
- **Fasting joined with prayer may accomplish things which normal faith may not**

[Now let's take a look at...]

II. FASTING IN THE LORD'S CHURCH

A. THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH - Ac 13:1-3

- 1. They were fasting as a group while ministering to the Lord
- 2. They fasted and prayed in preparation to sending out Barnabas and Saul
- **Fasting, when accompanied with prayer, can done as a group when involved in serving the Lord**

B. THE CHURCHES IN GALATIA - Ac 14:21-23

- 1. Again, an example of fasting and prayer as a group; this time, in conjunction with the serious task of appointing elders
- 2. Notice that this was done "*in every church*"
 - a. Not just in one or two churches
 - b. Not just in what might be consider Jewish churches where fasting might be considered "just a Jewish custom"
- **Again, fasting can be a group activity in the work of a local church**

[Now let's examine...]

III. FASTING IN THE MINISTRY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

A. FASTING WAS A MARK OF HIS MINISTRY...

- 1. We have already noticed where he fasted with several churches
- 2. But notice also:
 - a. **2 Co 6:4-10** (cf. verse 5)
 - b. **2 Co 11:23-28** (cf. verse 27 where fasting is mentioned separately from normal hunger and thirst)

-- **In both of these passages, Paul mentioned fasting as a mark of his ministry and of his good standing as a minister of Christ!**

B. HE ALSO TAUGHT THAT FASTING MIGHT HAVE A PLACE IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS...

1. Cf. **1 Co 7:5**
2. The only time husbands and wives may deprive one another is when by consent they devote themselves to fasting and prayer for a specific period of time

CONCLUSION

1. Though not actually Christians at the time, we also have other examples of those who fasted and were blessed by God...
 - a. Anna - **Lk 2:36-38**
 - b. Saul - **Ac 9:9**
 - c. Cornelius - **Ac 10:30-31**
2. As a summary, then, here is what we have seen in this study...
 - a. Our Lord fasted in time of temptation
 - b. He taught His disciples about fasting on several occasions
 - c. He foretold of a time in which His disciples would fast
 - d. There are times when the combination of fasting and prayer might be more efficacious than prayer alone
 - e. The early church fasted in their service to the Lord
 - f. Paul regarded fasting as a mark of his ministry
 - g. Prayer and fasting often go hand in hand, utilized whenever there was a strong desire for God's blessing and guidance

-- **In view of such things, I can only conclude that fast does indeed have a place in the lives of Christians today**

In our third and final lesson on this subject, we will consider some thoughts concerning the **why**, **when**, and **how** of fasting, as found in the New Testament...

Fasting

Fasting By Christians Today

INTRODUCTION

1. Our two previous lessons sought to educate us on the subject of fasting as found in the Old and New Testaments
2. In this final lesson, we shall directly address the questions that brought up this subject:

“Should Christians fast today? If so, why? When would they do it, and how?”

[Starting with the first of these questions...]

I. SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST TODAY?

A. YES! BECAUSE OF THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS...

1. He assumed his disciples would fast (“when,” not “if”) - **Mt 6:16-17**
2. He said they would fast when He was gone - **Mt 9:14-15**
3. He taught His disciples...
 - a. **How to fast** so as to incur God’s favor - **Mt 6:16-18**
 - b. That when done properly, fasting **would** incur God’s good favor - **Mt 6:18b**
 - c. That fasting should be done only when the occasion properly calls for it - **Mt 9:14-17**
 - d. That there would be occasions when prayer joined with fasting might be needed - **Mt 17:20-21**

B. YES! BECAUSE WE HAVE EXAMPLES OF THE CHURCH FASTING...

1. The brethren at Antioch - **Ac 13:1-3**
 - a. Fasting in their service to Lord
 - b. Fasting and praying when they send out Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey
2. The churches in Galatia - **Ac 14:21-23**
 - a. There was fasting in every church
 - b. When appointing elders to watch over the flock

C. YES! BECAUSE PAUL FASTED AS A MINISTER OF CHRIST...

1. He listed fasting among those things which proved him as a minister of Jesus Christ - **2 Co 11:23-28**
2. Are we not commanded to imitate him, even as he imitated Christ? - **1 Co 11:1** (and they both fasted in their service to God!)

[At the very least, we can say that **it would not be inappropriate** for Christians to fast today. Unless there are medical reasons not to fast, we have very good examples to motivate us to utilize fasting in our service to the Lord!

But to ensure that we fast for the right reason, consider our next question...]

II. WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST?

A. PEOPLE FAST TODAY FOR VARIOUS REASONS...

1. Some purposefully, for health reasons
2. Some without thinking, in times of grief and sorrow
3. Others, in an effort to gain some kind of self-control
- **But these are not the reasons Christian should fast in their service to God - cf. Co 2:20-23**

B. CHRISTIANS SHOULD FAST, FOR THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE ARE NEED OF DIVINE HELP...

1. This is consistent with the majority of fasting in the O.T.; they fasted...
 - a. In times of war or at the threat of it (Israel)
 - b. When loved ones were sick (David)
 - c. When seeking God's forgiveness (Ahab, Daniel)
 - d. When seeking God's protection (Ezra)
2. This is consistent with the examples of fasting in the N.T.; they fasted...
 - a. When dealing with temptations (Jesus)
 - b. When serving the Lord (Antioch)
 - c. When beginning a work for the Lord (Antioch)
 - d. When selecting and appointing elders (Galatia)
3. Such fasting is should be done in conjunction with prayer
 - a. For fasting, when done properly...
 - 1) Humbles the soul - **Psa 35:13**
 - 2) Chastens the soul - **Psa 69:10**
 - b. And the prayers of a humble person are more likely to be heard! - cf. **Ezr 8:21-23**

[If fasting does have a part in the Christian life, then let's look more closely at...]

III. WHEN SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST?

A. WHENEVER OCCASIONS REQUIRING DIVINE HELP SHOULD ARISE...

1. These may be occasions on an individual level
 - a. When faced with difficult temptations
 - b. When faced with the serious illness of a loved one
2. These occasions might be on a congregational level
 - a. As when appointing elders
 - b. As when sending out missionaries

B. WHATEVER OCCASIONS CALL FOR PERSISTENT PRAYERS MIGHT CALL FOR FASTING JOINED WITH PRAYER...

1. Are we not taught that God is more likely to answer our prayers if we are persistent? - cf. **Lk 18:1-8**
2. And also if we fast in the proper manner? - **Mt 6:17-18**

[So whenever there is a matter requiring much prayer, fasting in conjunction with prayer would seem appropriate. Finally, let's take a look at...]

IV. HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST?

A. NOT TO BE SEEN OF MEN...

1. Cf. **Mt 6:16-18**
2. Whether fasting as individuals or with others, it is important that we not do it "for show"

B. NOT AS SOME REGULAR RITUAL...

1. Cf. **Mt 9:14-17**
2. It should be done only when the occasion calls for it
3. Such as situations where you would be spending much time in prayer

C. NOT WITHOUT TRUE REPENTANCE...

1. Cf. **Isa 58:3-9**
2. All the praying, all the fasting, is of no avail if not accompanied with penitent obedience

D. SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS...

1. Don't go out and fast just because it sounds like a neat thing to do
 - a. Take the subject seriously
 - b. Fast only when the occasion is a serious one
 - c. One in which you desperately desire God's help
2. If you have never fasted before...
 - a. Start slow, fasting only for brief periods of time
 - b. End slow, gradually breaking your fast with fresh fruits and vegetables in small amounts
3. Fast when you have time to spend in prayerful meditation
 - a. Remember the purpose for fasting
 - b. To humble oneself in God's sight
 - c. To seek favorable answer to prayer for some important plea

CONCLUSION

1. There is probably much more that could be said on the subject of fasting
2. But I hope that this is enough to stimulate our thinking on a subject which has often been neglected in both study and practice
3. As with any subject, the Word of God is the last word, and I hope that this study has shed some light on what His Word says on the subject of fasting