

What About Fasting

(A Biblical Perspective)

By

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Introduction:

In recent years, interest in fasting has renewed. Pentecostalism and many within the Charismatic movement have revived this Old Testament tradition, both privately and in organized groups. Within today's religious environment, several organized efforts have sought to reestablish this practice, especially in light of Islamic expansion. Therefore, we are prompted to examine fasting from Scripture so we can respond to this movement properly.

Fasting was an Old Testament tradition. The word "fasting" is translated from the Hebrew word "tsoon," meaning "to cover," as in covering one's mouth. The word "atonement" is translated from the Hebrew word "kaw-far," which also means "to cover." The distinction is that "kaw-far" refers to a protective covering, while "tsoon" emphasizes restraint or prohibition.

Fasting was not part of the Mosaic Law, but it developed as a Jewish tradition associated with repentance. On at least one occasion, God instructed the people to fast. Jesus also addressed the proper way the Jews were to fast. So, what about fasting? Let us examine it from God's Word.

Fasting In The Old Testament

1. Fasting was an Old Testament tradition which was always associated with sorrow or mourning, and generally associated with repentance.
2. The Feast of Atonement came to be referred to as "The Fast" because it was a time of repentance preceded by 10 days of reflection concerning one's actions during the past year and a time of mourning and atoning for the sins of the past year. However, there is no commandment concerning fasting in the establishment of the feast.

3. A fast was observed before battle in Judges 30:26.
4. Samuel led Israel in a fast along with a call to repentance I Samuel 7:6.
5. The valiant men of Jabesh-Gilead fasted for seven days after burying King Saul (I Samuel 31:13).
6. Israel observed a fast upon the death of King Saul (II Samuel 1:12).
7. David fasted and prayed that God would spare the child (II Samuel 12:16-22).
8. A fast was proclaimed by Jezebel in order to have Naboth killed so Ahab could have his vineyard (I Kings 21).
9. Ahab fasted after being called to repentance by Elijah (I Kings 21:27).
10. The Chronicles account of the valiant men of Jabesh-Gilead fasting for seven days after burying King Saul.
11. Jehoshaphat ordered a fast when being attacked by the Moabites, and Amomonites. (II Chronicles 20:3).
12. Ezra proclaimed a fast as they returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and secure it following the captivity. The purpose of the fast was *“that we might afflict ourselves before our God”*. (Ezra 8:21-23).
13. Nehemiah fasted when he heard about the condition of Jerusalem during his captivity (Nehemiah 1:4).
14. Nehemiah led a fast after returning to the Land and reestablishing the Feast of Tabernacles (Nehemiah 9:1).
15. The Jews fasted when Haman plotted to have them all killed (Esther 4:3).
16. Esther requested a fast before she went to present herself to the king. (Esther 4:16)
17. David mentioned his fasting when threatened by his enemies (Psalms 35:13; 69:10; 109:24).
18. Isaiah mentions fasting in a call to repentance to Israel (Isaiah 58:3).
19. Jeremiah speaks of the fasting of the people being in vain (14:12; 36:9).
20. The lord instructed Joel to call for a fast (1:14; 2:28-3:21).

21. The people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast upon hearing the preaching of Jonah. (Jonah 3:6).
22. God questioned the motive of the fasting of the people when they were in captivity (Zechariah 7:5).
23. God instructs the people to turn fasting into feasting (Zechariah 8:19).

Fasting In the New Testament

Fasting is mentioned 25 times in the New Testament. On this side of the cross there is no need for that annual tradition because atonement was replaced by regeneration. We, believers, have become the 'sanctuary of God' and have been given I John 1:9 to restore broken fellowship. All our sins, past-present-future, have been removed from us as far as the east is from the west. The idea of 'a covering - atonement' is an Old Testament concept and not to be adopted by us as Christians. We are not to be in a state of mourning and self affliction - we have God's Righteousness credited to our account.

Let's examine fasting as it is found in the New Testament Scriptures. There are two nouns used in the Greek text: 'nesteia', which refers to the abstinence from food, either voluntarily or involuntarily; and, 'nestis' which refers to the lack of food. There is one Greek verb, 'nestueo' which means to abstain from eating. There is one Greek adjective, 'asitos' which means without food. There are five words used in the King James English text; **Fast; Fasted; Fastest; Fasting; and, Fastings.** We will begin by looking at the Scriptures in which each English word is used.

Fast:

Matthew 6:16-18

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. 17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18 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.

This is spoken to the Jews and is clear evidence that organized fasting was not to be practiced but private fasting was practiced.

9:14-17

14 Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? 15 And Jesus said unto

them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast. 16 No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. 17 Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.

Jesus indicated that there was a change in dispensations (depicted by his illustrations) and that there was no longer any need for His disciples to mourn (He interpreted fasting as mourning) . There was a time coming when they would mourn for a period of days (between the crucifixion and the resurrection).

Today we have the Lord Jesus Christ in us and we are in Him - there is no need to mourn!

Mark 2:18-20

18 And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? 19 And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days. 21 No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse. {new cloth: or, raw, or, unwrought cloth} 22 And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles.

This is Mark's account of what Matthew recorded in the previous passage above.

Luke 5:33-35

33 And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise [the disciples] of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? 34 And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? 35 But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days. 36 And he spake also a parable unto them; No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was

[taken] out of the new agreeth not with the old. 37 And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. 38 But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved. 39 No man also having drunk old [wine] straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better.

This is Luke's account of the issue Matthew and Mark explained in the previous passages

18:12

11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men [are], extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. 12 I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

This was an Old Testament tradition based upon the attitude of mourning and self affliction professing repentance until the Messiah would come.

Acts 27:9

9 Now when much time was spent, and when sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past, Paul admonished [them], {the fast: the fast was on the tenth day of the seventh month}

The 'Fast' is a reference to The Day of Atonement

Fasted:

Matthew 4:2

2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.

This marked the beginning of His public ministry and indicates his preparation for the ministry to follow.

Acts 13:1-3

3:1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work

whereunto I have called them. 3 And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid [their] hands on them, they sent [them] away.

Remember these were Jew who were in a transition from their old traditions into the new concept of grace.

Fastest:

Matthew 6:17-18

*17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;
18 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.*

The setting for this passage is in the old dispensation and Christ makes it clear even then it was to be a private matter.

Fasting:

Matthew 15:32

32 Then Jesus called his disciples [unto him], and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way.

This simply means ‘without any thing to eat’.

17:21

19 Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? 20 And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. 21 Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

Jesus’ reference to the crowd fasting was simply a reference to their doing without food, and had nothing to do with religious practice.

Verse 21 is not found in the older Greek manuscripts but was a latter addition. Jesus did not make that statement.

Mark 8:3

3 And if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from far.

Mark's account of Jesus not wanting to send the crowd away without anything to eat.

9:2

29 And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.

This verse is not found in the older manuscripts but was added at a later time.

Acts 14:23

23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

Again it is important to note that these were converted Jews in a period of transition from Judisim to Christianity.

I Corinthians 7:4-5

*4 The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.
5 Defraud ye not one the other, except [it be] with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontineny.*

The word '*fasting*' is not found in the Greek text. The Greek text simply says '*prayer*'.

Fastings:

II Corinthians 6:5

4 But in all [things] approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, 5 In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings;

It is clear in the context that this was involuntarily doing without food as Paul lists fasting in with the afflictions which he had experienced as

a servant of Christ. The Greek word simply means going without food.

11:27

27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

As in the previous verse it is clear in the context that this was involuntarily doing without food as Paul lists it in with the afflictions which he had experienced as a servant of Christ.

Biblical Position on Fasting Today

1. Fasting was a display of repentance and sorrow in the Old Testament.
2. Because Jesus was with his disciples during His earthly ministry there was no need for fasting (mourning).
3. Jesus being arrested and crucified (taken from them) was a proper time for the disciples to fast.
4. Under the concept of the Law self-affliction became associated with repentance and fasting was a part of their tradition.
5. In the Old Testament even their tradition of self-affliction had become only an outward pretense.
6. In that transition period from the 'Age of The Law' to the 'Age of The Church' there are some examples of the Jewish converts fasting. However those were isolated practices that were never intended to establish a pattern for us. There is no epistle authority for fasting.
7. Today we are in union with the Lord Jesus and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This is no time to mourn but rejoice.
8. On this side of the cross we are in the sphere of grace and self affliction is an affront to the completed work of Jesus Christ on the cross.
9. Under grace there should be no attempt to get God's attention or favor by self deprivation or affliction.
10. The single passage of Scripture giving any instruction to fast (II Corinthians 6:5) in the King James text is without out support in the Greek text - the word, 'fasting' not being found in the Greek text.

11. **The king James record of Jesus indicating that fasting was required along with prayer in order to cast out certain demons is not found in any of the older manuscripts (Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29).**
12. **On the contrary the major use of the word 'fasting' in the New Testament is a non voluntary doing with out food (i.e.. Paul's hardships).**
13. **Becoming so involved in prayer and study of God's Word that one neglects to eat is a form of legitimate fasting today. But, to plan or organize such an event has no biblical basis.**

Conclusion:

The tradition of fasting intended to attract the attention of God and emphasize one's sincerity and sorrow. It was most often associated with repentance to get God to change the way he was dealing with those who were fasting.

In the biblical perspective for the church, not even the asking of forgiveness is commanded. No where in the commands to the church is the believer commanded to seek forgiveness. The instruction to the Church Age believer is to confess our sin (homolego - name or identify what we have done). On the cross Jesus Christ paid for all our sin. Therefore, self affliction, penitence, and fasting are not prescribed.