

THE BIBLE AND FASTING

Selected Texts

INTRODUCTION: Fasting is the practice of abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. There is ample biblical evidence to show that fasting was practiced by the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments.

THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

Why did people fast?

Fasting in the OT

In the OT fasting was referred to as “afflicting the soul” (Lev. 16:29-31; Ps. 35:13; Isa 58:3-5; Zech. 8:19, etc.). David said that he humbled his soul with fasting (Psa. 69:10). The overall purpose of fasting is to express submission to God and to renounce self (Ps. 35:13; Ezr. 8:21). It is the sacrifice of personal will which gives fasting its value.

Fasting in the OT had many purposes.

- 1)** People fasted when **mourning** over a death (Judg..20:24-26; I Sam. 31:13; II Sam. 1:12; 3:33-35).
- 2)** People fasted to express **repentance** over personal sin or the sin of others (I Sam 7:6; Dan. 9:3-6).
- 3)** People fasted to express **sorrow** over calamity (Neh; 1:3-6).
- 4)** People fasted in times of **impending disaster** (Jon. 3:5-9; Est. 3:13-4:3; Joel 2:15).
- 5)** People fasted when they were **burdened** with great cares (II Chron. 20:1-4).
- 6)** People fasted when they were **seeking guidance** from God (Ezr. 8:21-23; II Chr. 20:3; Matt. 4:1-4) or during special times of **prayer** (II Sam.12:16-23; Matt. 17:21; Acts. 13:2-3).

Fasting in the NT

In the NT there are several allusions to the weekly fasts practiced by the Jews (Matt. 9:14; 11:18,19). Jesus fasted in preparation for His public ministry (Matt. 4:2). Paul also fasted (II Cor. 6:5), as did the leaders in the early church (Act. 13:2-3).

Both Jesus and Paul assumed believers would fast (Matt. 17:21). In Matthew 6 Jesus put fasting in the same category as prayer and giving. In Matthew 6:16 Jesus didn't say “ If you fast . . .” but “When you fast. . .” indicating that fasting was a common practice in His day. He also said that His disciples would fast (Matt. 9:15).

However, neither Jesus nor anyone else in the NT commands believers to fast. In fact, Jesus' disciples were criticized for not keeping the weekly fasts established by the religious leaders (Matt. 9:14). Jesus was more concerned with the motive behind fasting than the actual practice itself.

Improper reasons for fasting

Like many outward religious expressions, over time, the meaning can be lost though the form remains.

Israel was severely rebuked by the prophets for thinking that fasting was a way to gain a personal advantage with God (Isa. 58:3-7; Jer. 14:1-12; Zech. 7:5-6). In Jesus' day, the Pharisees made fasting a law that was to be practiced twice a week (Monday and Thursday - Lk. 18:12). Some people would go about with solemn faces, unkept and unwashed. Some sprinkled ashes on their heads so they appeared deeply repentant, or didn't use oil on their heads to signify deep distress (II Sam. 14:2). Their goal was to draw the attention of men, not God. Jesus condemns such hypocrisy (Matt. 6:16-18; Lk. 18:9-14).

Fasting for the wrong reasons is an abomination to God as are any other religious activities that are practiced with our own ends in mind. Fasting must always keep God at the center.

THE PRACTICE OF FASTING

How did people fast?

Fasting lasted for different lengths of time. Some fasted for just one meal, some for a day (Lev. 23:27-29; i.e. the Day of Atonement; I Sam. 7:6), some even longer (I Sam. 31:13; I Ki. 19:8). At times people fasted by abstaining from certain types of foods. At times it was the total abstinence of all foods. Sometimes liquids were also abstained from (Est. 4:16; Act 9:9). Moses fasted 40 days and 40 nights without food or water (Exo. 34:28). Since the human body cannot go without water for much more than three days, we must conclude that Moses' fast was only possible with God's miraculous intervention.

Ancient Israel practiced a number of national fasts. The fast on the Day of Atonement was commanded by God (Lev. 23:27-29), but by the time of Zechariah at least four other regular fasts came into existence (Zech. 8:19). All of these fasts were practiced to mourn past calamities. According to Jewish tradition, when the nation was in peace and prosperity the fasts would be suspended. When they were in trouble they were reinstated. However, none of these four fasts were instituted by God.

Although group fasting is beneficial, by in large fasting was done by the individual as the need arose.

Should I fast?

Fasting is not mandatory for Christians, though it is not forbidden either. As we have seen it was practiced by the early church when the need arose. It would not be inappropriate to fast for any of the reasons mentioned above. However, one should be careful not to fast to try to look spiritual to others or as a means to gain spirituality. To try to be spiritual through fasting is never proper motivation. True fasting is to express contrition, humility, and submission to the will of God. It's saying to God, "I completely – body, mind, and spirit – submit to you."

Some practical steps in fasting:

1) Always ask your doctor if you are in good enough condition to fast, and get his/her advice first on how to do so. The steps below are simply what other Christians have done, but they may not be safe for all people.

2) Determine the reason why you are fasting. Do you desire to demonstrate repentance, seek God's will in something, or are you burdened by cares (etc.)?

3) Start small. It's never wise to begin by fasting for prolonged periods of time.

- ◆ Prepare the day before by eating smaller meals and avoiding sugary and fatty foods
- ◆ Always drink plenty of water during your fast
- ◆ **Be cautious: if you are taking any medication, be aware of the effects a fast may have. If you are doing hard manual labor you may become faint. If you have a medical condition (diabetes, expectant mothers, heart problems, etc.) do not fast. Ask your doctor if in doubt.**
- ◆ Start by skipping a meal and work your way up to longer fasts
- ◆ You may have to restrict certain social and physical activities

4) Prepare yourself spiritually. Ask God to reveal Himself to you while you are fasting.

5) According to Jesus, fasting should be done in such a way that attention is not drawn to yourself or the fact that you are fasting (Matt. 6:17-18). It should be done in secret. Those who fast this way will receive reward from the Father.

6) While you fast,

- ◆ limit your activity
- ◆ prepare yourself for mental discomfort – crankiness, impatience and anxiety
- ◆ prepare yourself for physical discomfort – especially on the second day. You may have hunger pains, headaches, dizziness or the blahs. If you feel hungry drink more liquids.

7) Break a longer fast with fresh fruits, juices and vegetables.

ABOVE ALL BE CAREFUL!