

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

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No: 57

FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Introduction

Fasting has been out of vogue for at least 150 years. In the twenty first century church, the idea seems alien to us. Yet God's Word assumes that fasting will be a regular part of a Christian's life. But for most of us, it is not. In this three-part study, we will first explore the concept of fasting in the Old Testament.

What Biblical Fasting is Not

A Manipulative Tool -- Sometimes fasting is viewed as an attempt to twist God's arm or to win His approval. But God doesn't respond to pressure. One group of people in the book of Acts tried to get God on their side by manipulative fasting: (Acts 23:12,14). But God did not hear their prayer and their plan did not work.

Using fasting in a manipulative way was done by the people in Jeremiah's day too. God said, "Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry (Jeremiah 14:12). Fasting didn't move God one iota.

We must never think of fasting as a hunger strike designed to force God's hand and get our own way! We don't need to strong arm God. God is good and eager to answer our prayers. He is generous (James 1:5) and eager to give us 'good things' (Matthew 7:11). Don't use fasting to try to push God into a corner. Maybe God would rather let you starve and join Him in heaven!

A Hypocritical Religious Exercise -- By Jesus' time fasting had become a very important part of the Jewish life. Based on Luke 18:12a, we know the Pharisees fasted twice a week. The Talmud tells us that this was on the 2nd and 5th day (Monday and Thursday). Why those days? According to the Pharisees it was because Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to get the Law on the 5th day and returned on the 2nd. At least that's what they said. But if you look closely into Jewish history, you find another possible reason for the Pharisees fasting on Monday and Thursday. Market day in the city of Jerusalem was on the 2nd and 5th day! Everyone from the countryside came to town on those days. It was on these two days that the Pharisees chose to hold their fasts.

They would walk through the streets with their hair dishevelled; they would put on old clothes and cover themselves with dirt; they would cover their faces with white chalk in order to look pale; and they would dump ashes over their head as a sign of their humility!! Fasting had become a "look-at-how-spiritual-I-am" exercise. That was hypocrisy.

A Physical or Psychological Discipline -- God never tells people to fast as a purely physical discipline, i.e. dieting for the purpose of making the body beautiful or for some other physical benefit. (I am not saying dieting is wrong) - - but when the Bible uses the term "fasting" it has spiritual goals in mind - - something very different than Weight Watchers or Low Carb diets.

Biblical fasting is not a manipulative tool. It is not hypocrisy. It is not a physical discipline.

- What are your views on fasting and what is fasting generally concerned with?
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But the Scriptures have so much to say about fasting.

- The list of Biblical persons who fasted becomes a "Who's Who" of Scripture: Can you name some of them?
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- What would account for this almost total disregard for a subject so frequently mentioned in Scripture?
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OCCASIONS OF FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. THE "DAY OF ATONEMENT"... Lev 16:29-31; 23:26-32; Num 29:7. This was the only fast commanded by the Law, to be observed on the tenth day of the seventh month. Though not called fasting", the phrase "afflicting one's soul" was understood to refer to fasting. Compare Ps 69:10 ("chastened my soul with fasting") and Acts 27:9 (where the term "Fast" refers to the Day of Atonement).

- What does the use of the phrase "afflict one's soul" to refer to fasting suggest as to the PURPOSE of fasting?
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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 private individuals.

- What were the reasons for fasting in the following passages?

Judges 20:26: _____

2 Samuel 12:16-23: _____

1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:12: _____

Deuteronomy 9: 15-18: _____

1 Kings 21:17-29; Jonah 3:4-10; Daniel 9:3-5: _____

2 Chronicles 20:3: _____

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. The Purpose of Fasting

Some fasting was a natural reaction to grief over the loss of a loved one (like the men of Jabesh-Gilead and David). But more often, fasting was done to purposely (a) "afflict the soul" - Lev 23:26-32 and (b) to "chasten the soul" - Ps 69:10. The purpose of such affliction or chastening was to "humble" the soul (Ps 35:13), and not for any effect it might have on the body. Evidently, they felt that by so humbling themselves they would more likely incur God's favour - cf. **Ezra 8:21-23; Is 57:15; 66:1-2**. So they would fast when they needed: Forgiveness for sin (Moses, Ahab, Daniel); Their loved ones restored to health (David); Protection from danger (Ezra); Deliverance from their enemies (the Israelites).

Because they were seeking God's favour, FASTING WOULD ALMOST ALWAYS BE ACCOMPANIED WITH PRAYER.

B. The Nature of Fasting

The NORMAL means of fasting involved ABSTAINING FROM ALL FOOD BUT NOT WATER. Sometimes the fast was PARTIAL - a restriction of diet but not total abstention -cf. **Dan 10:2-3**. On rare occasions there was the ABSOLUTE fast; as in the case of the people of Nineveh,

who also included the animals in their fast—cf. **Jonah 3:5-10**; as in the case of Queen Esther - **Esther 4:16** (cf. **Paul, Acts 9:9**).

C. The Length of fasts in the O.T.

A fast was often for ONE DAY, from sunrise to sunset, and after sun-down food would be taken - **Judges 20:26**; **1 Samuel 14:24**.

A fast might be for ONE NIGHT - Daniel 6: 18

The fast of Esther continued for THREE DAYS, day and night, which seems to have been a special case—**Esther 4:16**

David fasted SEVEN DAYS when his child was ill - **2 Sam 12:16-18**.

The longest fasts recorded in Scripture were the FORTY DAY fast by Moses, Elijah, and Jesus—**Exo 34:28**; **Deut 9:9**; **1 Kings 19:8**; **Mt 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**. The people complained that they had fasted and God had not seen—**Isa 58:3a**. But they had not been fasting for the right reason (to be heard by God) - **Isa 58:3b-4**.

The Lord would rather 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 would be heard in their prayers—**Isa 58:6-9**.

FASTING WITHOUT TRUE REPENTANCE defeats the purpose of fasting: to have your prayers heard by the Lord!

Conclusion

1. At this point we have not tried to establish whether fasting is for Christians today or not. Rather, we have just considered the practice of fasting as found in the O.T., in order to have a better understanding of why people of God fasted. We have learned That **Only one fast** was specifically commanded in the O.T. (The Day Of Atonement).

The purpose of the fast was to humble themselves by "afflicting their souls" They believed such humiliation would be pleasing in God's sight (and it often was). However, fasting was fruitless when it was done for the wrong reason and when it was done without true repentance. 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.