

NOTES ON FASTING

And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: And I prayed unto the Lord God, and made my confession...Daniel 9:3

I. Is there a place for fasting in the New Testament?

A. Fasting was not required of the disciples of Jesus.

Matthew 9:14 “Then John’s disciples came and asked him, ‘How is it that we and the

B. But Jesus spoke of a day when there would be a place for fasting.

Matthew 9:14-15 “Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.’”

II. What guidelines are set forth in Scripture concerning fasting?

A. It is to be done in a manner of humility and secrecy.

- Matthew 6:16-18 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

B. Fasting is closely related to prayer and reading the Word.

- Nehemiah 1:4 “...When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.” Nehemiah 9:1-3 “...the Israelites gathered together, fasting... They stood in their places and confessed their sins...and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God.”
- Acts 14:23 “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders[a] for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord...”
- I Corinthians 7:5 “...that you may devote yourselves to prayer...”

C. A fast may be either absolute or partial.

Examples of absolute (complete) fasts:

- Esther 4:16 “Go, gather together all the Jews...and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. ...”
- Acts 9:9 “For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”
- Acts 27:33 “‘...For the last fourteen days,’ he said, ‘you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven’t eaten anything.’”

Examples of partial fasts (abstinence from certain foods only):

- I Kings 17 “So he did what the Lord had told him. ...The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.”

D. There is a place for both the corporate (group) and the individual (personal) fast.

Examples of corporate fasts:

- Ezra 8:21-23 “I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God...So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.”
- Nehemiah 9:1-3 “...the Israelites gathered together, fasting...”
- Joel 2:15-16 “...declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. ...”
- Acts 27:33-37 “‘For the last fourteen days...you haven’t eaten anything.’ Altogether there were 276 of us on board.”

Examples of the individual fast:

- II Samuel 12:15-23 “...He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground.”
- Daniel 9:3 “So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting...”

III. Fasting in itself is of no spiritual value

Isaiah 58 “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists.”

A. Only fasting that is done with the right motive, that of glorifying God, can be pleasing in His sight.

- Isaiah chapter 58 “Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it?’...Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please... Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife...You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high...Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice...to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them...”

B. The same Bible that teaches abstaining from foods (as God leads) also warns us against testing the Lord (Matthew 4:7).

- To deny the flesh of its natural desires may cause us to be more “in tune” to hear the voice of the Lord (Deuteronomy 9:18, 25, etc.), but it also places us in a realm more easily prone to the attack of the enemy. It was when Jesus had been fasting for 40 days that He was faced with the greatest Satanic attack (Matthew 4:1-3; Luke 4:1-2).

C. Scripture warns that in the last days there will be many “forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats,” etc. (I Timothy 4:1-3). We are to test the spirits, to see whether they be of God (I John 4:1).

IV. How long should I fast?

A. Bible personalities fasted and sought God diligently until they obtained from God what they desired (see the examples of Hannah, I Samuel 1:6-8, 17-18; and Paul, Acts 9:9,17-19)—or until the Lord made it evident that what they requested simply would not be obtained (as in the case of David, II Samuel 12:15-23).

B. The length of a fast may vary:

1. One night (Daniel 6:18)
2. One day (I Samuel 7:6; II Samuel 1:12, 3:35; Judges 20:26)
3. Three days and three nights (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9, 17-19)
4. Seven days (I Samuel 31:13, I Samuel 12:16-23)
5. Fourteen days (Acts 27:33-34)
6. Twenty-one days (Daniel 10:3-13)
7. Forty days.
 - Moses at two different times (Exodus 24:18, 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18, 25-29; 10:10)

- Elijah (I Kings 19:8)
- Jesus (Matthew 4:2; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2)

V. When should I fast?

Many occasions for fasting are recorded in Scripture.

A. The ordination of elders and commissioning of apostles to ministry

- Acts 13:3 “So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

B. Intercession for the people of God

- Exodus 24:18 Deuteronomy 9:8-9, 12-20, 23-27
- Ezra 10:6
- Daniel 9:3-4 Joel 2:12-14, 17-18 Jonah 3:5-10

C. Humbling and chastening of oneself.

- I Kings 21:27-29 “Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me?”
- Psalms 35:13 “...and humbled myself with fasting...”
- Psalms 69:10 “When I weep and fast, I must endure scorn...”

D. Seeking the Lord and His way

- 1 Chronicles 20:3 “Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.”
- Ezra 8:21-23 “I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king...to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king...The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him...So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.”

E. Repentance and confession of sin

- Nehemiah 1:4-7 “When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”
- Nehemiah 9:1-3 “...the children of Israel were assembled with fasting... and stood and confessed their sins...one fourth part of the day...they confessed...”

F. Receiving healing

- I Samuel 1:5-11, 18-20
- II Samuel 12:15-16, 22-23
- Isaiah 58:8
- Acts 9:9, 17-19

G. Petitioning God to withhold His hand in judgment

- Deuteronomy 9:18-25 “Then once again I fell prostrate before the Lord...I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed...because the Lord had said he would destroy you.”

H. Preparation to receive word from God

- Deuteronomy 9:18-25
- Isaiah 58:9

I. Spiritual deliverance

- Isaiah 58:6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?”
- Mark 9:29 “He replied, ‘This kind can come out only by prayer.’”
- Matthew 17:21

J. Seeking assistance in time of fear

- II Chronicles 20:3 “Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.”

K. Mourning another’s death, out of concern for another’s safety, or when faced with threats on one’s own life

- II Samuel 1:12; 3:35
- Daniel 6:18
- Esther 4:3; 9:1-3

L. Seeking protection

- Ezra 8:21-23

M. Lacking material provision; in need

- II Corinthians 11:27 “...I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food...”

VI. Fasting is an extremely valuable and important facet of the Christian life; but it is not an infallible means of “getting what we want” from God.

Jeremiah 14:12 “Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry...”

Example: II Samuel 12:15-23 (David’s son died anyway.)

Obedience is better than sacrifice (I Samuel 15:22).

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