

# "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 we begin to deal with subject like fasting, We 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
    2. David the king
    3. Elijah the prophet
    4. Esther the queen
    5. Daniel the seer
    6. Anna the prophetess
    7. Jesus the Son Of God
    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. [Pr 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. [Pr 14:29](#)
  - c. If you have any additional information, questions or viewpoints, please feel free to share them with me - cf. [Pr 11:14](#)

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

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## I. OCCASIONS OF FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

### A. THE "DAY OF ATONEMENT"...

1. [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. [Ps 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 - [1Sa 7:6](#)

#### 2. **THEY FASTED WHEN LOVED ONES WERE SICK**

- a. David fasted and wept for his son while the boy was ill - [2Sa 12:16-23](#)
- b. The psalmist also mentions fasting for his enemies - [Ps 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 Chron 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 - [Deut 9:15-18](#)

- b. Ahab fasted to be forgiven - [1Ki 21:17-29](#)
- c. Nineveh fasted at the preaching of Jonah - [Jonah 3:4-10](#)
- d. Daniel fasted as he confessed the sins of Israel - [Da 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 Chron 20:3](#)
- b. Ezra led a fast when seeking the favor of God toward his return from exile (a journey fraught with danger) - [Ez 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 - [Esth 4:3](#)
- e. Esther and Mordecai fasted before she went before the king - [Esth 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 - [2Ki 25:23-95](#); [Jer 41:1ff](#)
  - c. On the tenth day of the tenth month was the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem - [2Ki 25:1](#)
  - d. On the ninth day of the fourth was its fall - [2Ki 25:3,4](#)

## C. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

### 1. THE PURPOSE OF FASTING...

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

### 2. THE NATURE OF FASTING...

- a. The NORMAL means of fasting involved ABSTAINING FROM ALL FOOD BUT NOT WATER
- b. Sometimes the fast was but PARTIAL - a restriction of diet but not total abstention - cf. [Da 10:2-3](#)
- c. On rare occasions there was the ABSOLUTE fast
  - 1) As in the case of the people of Nineveh, who also included the animals in their fast - cf. [Jonah 3:5-10](#)
  - 2) As in the case of Queen Esther - [Esth 4:16](#) (cf. Paul, [Ac 9:9](#))
  - 3) The absolute fasts of Moses and Elijah must have had divine assistance - [Deut 9:9](#); [1Ki 19:8](#)

### 3. THE LENGTH OF FASTS...

- a. A fast was often for ONE DAY, from sunrise to sunset, and after sundown food would be taken - [Judg 20:26](#); [1Sa 14:24](#); [2Sa 1:12](#); [3:35](#)
- b. A fast might be for ONE NIGHT - [Dan 6:18](#)
- c. The fast of Esther continued for THREE DAYS, day and night, which seems to have been a special case - [Esth 4:16](#)
- d. At the burial of Saul, the fast by Jabesh-Gilead was SEVEN DAYS - [1Sa 31:13](#); [1 Chron 10:12](#)
- e. David fasted SEVEN DAYS when his child was ill - [2Sa 12:16-18](#)
- f. The longest fasts recorded in Scripture were the FORTY DAY fasts by Moses, Elijah, and Jesus - [Exod 34:28](#); [Deut 9:9](#); [1Ki 19:8](#); [Mt 4:2](#); [Lk 4:2](#)

### 4. WARNINGS CONCERNING FASTING...

- a. Fasting CAN EASILY TURN INTO AN EXTERNAL SHOW AND CEREMONIAL RITUALISM; when it did, the prophets spoke out against it
  - b. The most vigorous attack against such fasting is made in **Isaiah 58**
    - 1) The people complained that they had fasted and God had not seen - [Isa 58:3a](#)
    - 2) But they had not been fasting for the right reason (to be heard by God) - [Isa 58:3b-4](#)
    - 3) In contrast to simply an external display of bowing one's head like a bulrush and spreading sackcloth and ashes, the Lord would rather they:
      - I. Loose the bonds of wickedness
      - II. Let the oppressed go free
      - III. Share bread with the hungry
      - IV. Bring the poor into one's house
      - V. Cover the naked
- Then they should be heard in their prayers - [Isa 58:6-9](#)

- 4) I.e. fasting without true repentance defeats the purpose of fasting: to have your prayers heard by the Lord!
- c. The same point was made about the ceremonial fasts that had been added by the Israelites to commemorate certain occasions - [Zech 7:1-14](#)
  - 1) The people wanted to know if they should fast on the special occasions as they had done - [Zech 7:1-3](#)
  - 2) The Lord responded that the fasts had not be done for Him - [Zech 7:4-6](#)
  - 3) They should have instead done the will of the Lord - [Zech 7:7-10](#)
  - 4) But because they did not, the fasting in the past was of no value - [Zech 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