

Perspectives on Fasting

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Fasting is a fairly common theme in Scripture, being referred to in well over 50 passages. Contemporary Christians have little awareness, however, of biblical teaching concerning fasting. Some of this may be explained by the fact that there are relatively few—if any—didactic passages on fasting. Most of what may be learned about fasting must be gleaned either from historical accounts or prophetic pronouncements. Yet even in the light of such limitations, the prominence of fasting in both Testaments as well as in certain periods of church history make a convincing case for investigating the subject matter.

Religious Perspectives

- “Fasting, that is, complete or partial abstinence from nourishment, is an almost universal phenomenon within both Eastern and Western cultures” (Rader 5:286).
- “[I]n most cultures that ascribe to [fasting] at least three motivations are easily discernible: (1) preliminary to or preparatory for an important event or time in an individual’s or a people’s life; (2) as an act of penitence or purification; or (3) as an act of supplication” (287). Specific reasons for fasting in various religions include seeking spiritual power, preparing for ecstatic revelations, achieving higher levels of union with deities, and averting evil spirits (287; Behm 632).
- The Mosaic Law imposed on the Jews only one regular fast—the Day of Atonement (Lev 16.29ff; 23.27ff). However, it also recognized the legitimacy of private, voluntary fasts (Num 30.13). Religious and political leaders of the Jews called for widespread fasting during times of urgent national need (e.g., 2 Chr 20.2-4; Esth 4.15-16).
- As might be expected, the practice of fasting approved of by the Judeo-Christian Scriptures is both similar to and distinct from fasting in other religions. Biblical teaching concerning fasting will be outlined in the following sections.

Old Testament Perspectives

Hebrew Terminology

- *tsuwm* [6684]: to abstain from food, to fast.
- *tsowm* [6685]: fasting, fast.
- *ʿvath* [2908]: fastingly, hungrily.

Examples of Fasting in the OT

- Moses (Deut 9.9-11,18-19)
- David (2 Sam 1.11-12; 12.16-17)
- Elijah (1 K 19.5-8)
- Ahab (1 K 21.27-29)

- The inhabitants of Judah, during the ministry of Joel (Joel 1.14; 2.12-17)
- The inhabitants of Judah, during the reign of Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 20.2-4)
- The inhabitants of Nineveh (Jon 3.4-10)
- Darius (Dan 6.18)
- Daniel (Dan 9.3ff)
- Ezra and the remnant from Babylon (Ezra 8.21-23)
- The Jews in Medo-Persian captivity (Esth 4.3)
- The Jews in Shushan (Esth 4.16)
- Nehemiah (Neh 1.3-4)

Key OT Text on Fasting

Isaiah 58.1-8

1 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.

3 Wherefore have we fasted, [say they], and thou seest not? [wherefore] have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.

4 Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as [ye do this] day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

5 Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? [is it] to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes [under him]? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?

6 [Is] not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

7 [Is it] not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

8 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward.

Principles Concerning Fasting

Numerous circumstances led OT characters to carry out a fast. These included the following:

- civil war in Israel (Judg 20.24-26)
- consecration to the LORD after a generation of idolatry (1 Sam 7.3-6)
- death of a king (1 Sam 31.12-13)
- illness of a child (2 Sam 12.15-17)
- pronouncement of imminent judgment (1 K 21.27)

- military threat (2 Chr 20.2-4)
- dangers of long-distance travel (Ezra 8.21-23)
- desolation of Jerusalem (Neh 1.3-4)
- spiritual renewal (Neh 8.18-9.3)
- threat of religious persecution (Esth 4.3)
- illness of others (Ps 35.13)
- experience of divine judgment (Joel 1.13-14)

Various abuses of fasting are noted in the OT. These include the following:

- false pretense of piety (1 K 21.9ff)
- observing fasts while neglecting the law (Is 58.4-7)
- fasting in an effort to please God (Jer 14.10-12)
- carrying out fasts without inner brokenness (Joel 2.12-13)
- selfish motivation in the observance of fasting (Zech 7.5-6)

New Testament Perspectives

Greek Terminology

- *nesteuo* [3522]: to fast, to abstain from food and drink as a religious exercise; to be hungry.
- *nesteia* [3521]: a fasting, fast, whether voluntary or driven by need; hunger.
- *nestis* [3523]: empty; fasting, having not eaten.
- *asitos* [777]: fasting, without having eaten.
- *asitia* [776]: abstinence from food, whether voluntary or enforced.

Examples of Fasting in the NT

- Anna (Lk 2.36-37)
- Jesus (Mt 4.1ff)
- John the Baptist's disciples (Mt 9.14; Mk 2.18; Lk 5.33)
- Cornelius (Acts 10.30-31)
- The church at Antioch-Syria (Acts 13.1-3)
- Paul (Acts 9.8-9; 14.23; 2 Cor 6.5; 11.27)

Key NT Text on Fasting

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.

Principles Concerning Fasting

Several circumstances led NT characters to carry out a fast. These included the following:

- preparation for ministry (Mt 4.1-2)
- regular discipline of service to God (Lk 2.37)
- desire to know God and his will (Acts 10.1-4, 30-31)
- ministry activities in a growing local church (Acts 13.1-2)
- commissioning local church leaders (Acts 13.3; 14.23)

Various abuses of fasting are noted in the NT. These include the following:

- publicizing the fact that one is fasting (Mt 6.16; Mk 18.12)
- practicing fasting without joy (Mt 6.16)
- fasting for public recognition rather than spiritual reward (Mt 6.16-18)
- taking pride in one's habit of fasting (Lk 18.11-12)

There is some biblical evidence that fasting is a means of seeking spiritual power (Mt 17.18-21; Mk 9.25-29). However, there is some question regarding the validity of the manuscripts that mention fasting in these passages (Harrison 2:284; Wallis 108-09).

The NT seems to teach that fasting is a normal Christian practice. Several arguments support this claim:

- When asked why his disciples didn't fast, Jesus gave indication that they would when he was no longer with them (Mt 9.14-15; Mk 2.18-20; Lk 5.33-35). His statement implies that fasting is an acceptable—and perhaps even expected—Christian activity.
- Fasting, like prayer, is a means of serving God (Lk 2.37).
- Jesus grouped fasting along with prayer and charitable giving as practices that his followers could reasonably be expected to observe (Mt 6.16-18; cf. 6.1-8).
- Several early church leaders—most notably Paul and his associates—practiced voluntary fasting (Acts 13.1-3; 14.23; 2 Cor 11.27).
- Fasting is named in the epistles as a normal Christian discipline, a practice that should be accompanied by prayer (1 Cor 7.5).

Historical Perspectives

Highlights from Church History

- The early Christians practiced fasting due to the influence of Jewish customs as well as their understanding of Jesus' approval of the practice.
- By the end of the first century, it was fairly common for Christians to fast two days a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays. This custom constituted both an endorsement and a rejection of Jewish custom, which prescribed fasting twice a week, though not on the same days (Hinson 344; Achelis 4:281).
- In the early centuries of church history the practice of fasting was formalized, with various fast days and periods being established in various areas of the world. Initially, fasting practices differed significantly from place to place (4:282; Maclean 5:765-69), but gradually they came to

some consensus. One of the controversies concerning fasting emerged between the Montanists of Phrygia and the remainder of the Christian world (5:766).

- The fasts celebrated by most Christian communities in the early centuries of church history included the weekly fasts; Lent (observed in the weeks preceding Easter); and the Advent fast (observed in the weeks leading up to Christmas) (Achelis 4:281-83; M'Clintock 3:490-91).
- In the Middle Ages, when Christianity was divided into Eastern and Western camps led by the Greek and Roman churches, respectively, fasting practices developed in each group (3:491; Hinson 344). The prescriptions of the Greek Church were so strict that the calendar came to call for half the year's days to be spent in fasting (Achelis 4:283).
- The mode of fasting has not been uniform through church history. A normal fast is currently understood to be complete abstinence from food but not from water. This conception of fasting was not shared by early and medieval Christians, however. Achelis notes that "fasting was generally understood abstinence from all food till evening, or one meal a day; and this was to be as simple as possible" (4:283). The forty-day fasts of medieval Christianity seem more reasonable in the light of this loose definition of fasting.
- With the association of the Catholic faith and the Roman Empire there emerged "a much greater stress on form, ritual, and liturgy. Fasting thus became increasingly linked with a legalistic theology and the concept of meritorious works" (Linder 406).
- The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers repudiated the use of fasting as a means of earning God's favor, but did not condemn its private or public practice provided that it expressed the genuine sentiments of the heart (407; M'Clintock 492-93). John Calvin stated that "it were far better that fasting should be entirely disused, than that the practice should be diligently observed, and at the same time corrupted with false and pernicious opinions" (qtd. in M'Clintock 493). The *Westminster Confession* approved of the appropriate use of "solemn fastings" (493).
- The Anabaptists of the Reformation "relegated fasting once more to the private sphere, leaving it up to the individual believer to determine its appropriateness for enhancing self-discipline and prayer" (Linder 407).
- Since the Reformation, most mainline denominations have generally adhered to a liturgical approach to fasting, prescribing specific fast days and laying down explicit restrictions and permissions (Achelis 283-84). However, "fasting is not made imperative as a term of membership in the Church, but is generally recommended as a Christian duty . . ." (M'Clintock 491).
- Fasting has been emphasized to varying degrees in modern Christian circles. John Wesley not only practiced it himself but imposed it on his followers (Wallis 34). Some contemporary charismatics regard fasting to be of considerable importance to spiritual life (Linder 407). Overall, however, fasting seems to be neglected by most Christians today (Wallis 10-11).

Lessons from Church History

- Throughout Christian history the church has suffered from both the inappropriate and insufficient practice of fasting. According to Arthur Wallis, in our rejection of medieval asceticism, "[w]e have not yet recovered the spiritual balance of New Testament Christianity" (11). In seeking to achieve this balance, we can learn several useful principles from church history.
- Institutionalized fasting has historically led to the violation of biblical teaching:
 - by exaggerating the significance of fasting
 - by measuring spirituality by outward exercises rather than inward commitment
 - by causing unnecessary divisions among believers
 - by binding Christians' consciences in an area of personal liberty
 - by attempting to legislate spirituality
 - by creating cultural forms that exceed biblical prescriptions and conferring upon them the status of divine mandates

- The recent de-emphasis of fasting has likely hindered Christians from living holy lives and praying effectively.

An informal survey was administered to 21 members of the Young Marrieds class at West Division Street Baptist Church. The survey revealed the following:

- 48% of respondents had voluntarily gone without food for a spiritual purpose at some time in the past.
- Respondents who had never fasted generally had not given the practice serious consideration.
- Among those who had fasted, most normally fasted for 4 to 6 meals or less. Only 3 of the 10 respondents who had fasted had done so for 7 or more meals at a time.
- 71% of respondents said they had been exposed to teaching, preaching, or reading on the subject of fasting.
- Respondents who had fasted had done so for various purposes, including seeking spiritual direction, praying for the sick, seeking resolution of specific problems, and praying for revival.
- Respondents who had fasted named renewal, spiritual growth, and encouragement as personal benefits of the practice.

Practical Perspectives

- The comparative study of religion reveals that fasting is usually carried out with one of three motivations: preparation, purification, or supplication (Rader 5:287). These three purposes are visible in the Christian discipline of fasting.
 - Jesus fasted prior to beginning his earthly ministry (Mt 4.1-2). Paul fasted in anticipation of direction from the Lord (Acts 9.6-9). The early Christians fasted before commissioning church leaders (Acts 13.2-3; 14.23).
 - There are numerous biblical examples of fasting as a demonstration of genuine repentance. Among those who fasted for purification one finds Ahab (1 K 21.27-29), the city of Nineveh (Jon 3.4-10), and Ezra (Ezra 9.5ff).
 - David prayed and fasted for the healing of his sick child (2 Sam 12.16-17). Nehemiah fasted and prayed that his vision of restoring Jerusalem to its former glory would be fulfilled (Neh 1.3-4). Anna maintained a regular discipline of fasting and prayer (Lk 2.36-37).
- Fasting is a balanced spiritual discipline that lies between the excesses of indulgence and asceticism. It stands in contrast to the carnality of gluttonous desire (Wallis 77-87) and the error of punishing the body for supposed spiritual gain (88-93). Scripture condemns both the former (Prov 23.1-3; 1 Cor 6.12-13) and the latter (Col 2.20-23; 1 Tim 4.1-5).
- Both Scripture and history attest to the fact that fasting and prevailing prayer are often closely linked. However, it is improper to view fasting as a means of *forcing* God to do what we ask him to do. God is sovereign, and we cannot suppose that we are stronger than he. Fasting is a useful discipline to the extent that it helps us to discern and obey God's will. It should not be used in an attempt to impose our selfish interests on God's program.
- What is the purpose of fasting, then? Fasting is really a means of freeing ourselves to get in touch with God's plan for our lives. While it is probably true that prayer—not fasting—brings about spiritual results, it is also apparent that fasting enables our prayer lives to reach new heights of

devotion and power. The impact of fasting on our spiritual lives is difficult to measure with precision. But there is evidence that it is associated with positive outcomes.

- It is imperative to remember that while fasting is a spiritual discipline, it is also a physical act. (In fact, some people fast solely for health reasons.) As a physical act it should be carried out with respect for truth in the nutritional realm. The Creator and Sustainer of our bodies gains no glory from a discipline that diminishes our health. It seems reasonable to assume that some people (such as expectant mothers and diabetics) should not fast.
- Wallis suggests a number of practical guidelines to be observed before, during, and after a fast (106-17, 142-46):
 - Accustom yourself to short fasts (one day or less) before attempting longer ones.
 - Make a point to drink generous amounts of water during the fast.
 - Expect some physical discomfort during the fast. Fasting allows the body to eliminate toxins from its systems, a somewhat unpleasant process.
 - Resume normal eating habits gradually after breaking a fast, especially if you have fasted for several days. Drink fruit juices until your body is ready to accept solid food. Avoid meat until your body has adjusted to fruits, vegetables, and starches.

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