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Fasting

Bible Dictionary explains that the word fast in the Bible is from the Hebrew word '*sum*', meaning "to cover" the mouth, or from the Greek word '*nesteuo*', meaning "to abstain."

The Day of Atonement—also called "the Fast".

Acts 27:9,

Is the only fast day commanded by God.

Leviticus 23:27,

Other national fast days are mentioned in the Bible.

Fasting is never shown in Scripture to be the means to higher spiritual experience, visions, or special insight or awareness.

Fasting is appropriate in this age, because Christ is physically absent from the earth. But it is appropriate only as a response to special times of testing, trial, or struggle.

Fasting in the Old Testament

Fasting is appropriate during times of sorrow. When God caused the first child born to Bathsheba by David to be taken ill, David fasted while he pleaded for the infant's life.

2 Samuel 12:16,

David also fasted when Abner died.

2 Samuel 3:35,

David even fasted on behalf of his enemies.

Psalms 35:13,

On such occasions of deep grief, fasting is a natural human response. Most people do not then feel like eating. Their appetite is gone, and food is the last thing they are concerned about.

Overwhelming danger often prompted fasting.

King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast in Judah when they were threatened with attack from the Moabites and Ammonites.

2 Chronicles 20:3,

From a human standpoint they could not possibly win, and they cried out to God for help, forsaking food as they did so.

Queen Esther, her servants, and all the Jews in the capital city of Susa fasted for three full days before she went before the king to plead for the Jews to be spared from Haman's wicked scheme against her people.

Esther 4:16,

As the exiles were about to leave Babylon to return to Jerusalem, Ezra declared a fast.

Ezra 8:21-23,

When Elijah confronted Ahab with God's judgment for his great wickedness.

1 Kings 21:27,

Because of Ahab's sincerity, the Lord postponed the judgment.

1 Kings 21:29,

Centuries later, after the exiles had returned safely to Jerusalem, the Israelites were convicted of their intermarrying with unbelieving Gentiles. As Ezra confessed that sin in behalf of his people.

Ezra 10:6,

When the people of Nineveh heard Jonah's preaching, they were so convicted that they believed in God and called a great fast.

Jonah 3:5 &7,

Rather than resent the warning of judgment and damnation, they repentantly turned to God and sought His forgiveness and mercy.

Daniel fasted as he prayed for God to forgive the sins of his people.

Fasting was sometimes associated with the receiving or proclaiming of a special revelation from God. As Daniel contemplated Jeremiah's prediction of the seventy year's desolation of Jerusalem.

Daniel 9:2-3,

As he continued "speaking in prayer," he gets the answer.

Daniel 9:21-22,

A short time later, just before receiving another vision, Daniel made a partial fast-by forsaking any tasty food, meat or wine for three weeks.

Daniel 10:3,

It is important to note that, though fasting was related to the revelations, it was not a means of achieving them. Daniel's fasting was simply a natural accompaniment to his deep and desperate seeking of God's will.

Skipping a few meals might be the small price we willingly pay for staying in the Word until understanding comes.

Fasting in the New Testament

Fasting is mentioned some thirty times in the New Testament, almost always favorably.

Anna's fasting.

Luke 2:37,

The first mention of fasting in the New Testament is in connection with the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple.

Jesus' Fasting

Jesus practiced fasting when He was tempted by Satan.

Matt. 4:1-11,

Mark 1:12-13,

Luke 4:1-4,

During these 40 days of loneliness, satanic attack, and the presence of wild beasts, “He ate nothing”
Jesus was fasting during the 40 days.

Jesus fasted when faced with a time of intense spiritual need. During the remainder of Jesus’ public ministry, He kept the Mosaic Law, and this would have involved a fast each year on the Day of Atonement.

Aside from that, however, most feel there is not the slightest hint that Jesus fasted. Before Christ’s terrible struggle in Gethsemane He feasted, rather than fasted, with His disciples.

Jesus’ Instructions on Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18,

The subject of fasting was not a central issue in the teachings of Jesus. He never commanded fasting or propounded any detailed regulations concerning the practice.

Beyond question, however, Christ radically changed the way fasting was to be carried on as well as the relative importance of the practice. When He dealt with the subject, it was usually in response to the practice as observed by the Jews.

These verses, part of the Sermon on the Mount, are part of a section in which Jesus dealt with what some have referred to as the three pillars of Jewish piety:

- almsgiving,
- prayer, and
- fasting

Having given instruction on prayer, Christ turned to the subject of fasting. Implicit in the words “And whenever you fast” is the assumption that fasting would be a part of the religious life of the disciples, but Jesus never commanded the disciples to fast. He simply assumed that they would do so.

Since the time of Moses, the Israelites had been required to fast annually on the Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 23:27). The Old Testament also speaks favorably of other special fast days in which the entire nation humbled themselves before God.

1 Samuel 7:5-6,
Jeremiah 14:12,

In fact, at least once God even commanded emergency fasting
Joel 2:12,

By New Testament times, fasting had been encumbered by additional regulations. Some Jews fasted two days each week throughout the entire year.

Luke 18:12,

Such weekly fasts were observed on Thursdays and Mondays, because according to tradition, Moses ascended Mount Sinai on Thursday and descended on Monday.

To appear humble and sorrowful these hypocrites poured ashes on their heads, allowed their hair to become disheveled, and did not wash. So, fasting, like prayer and almsgiving, was reduced to a hypocritical system. Some practiced this type of fasting as a means of seeking to gain the reputation of being godly.

In response to all this hypocrisy, Jesus said, “They have their reward in full.”

Jesus then told His followers how to engage in fasting that would meet God’s approval.

- They were to anoint their heads and
- wash their faces.

In Jewish thinking anointing one’s head and washing one’s face was not done for daily hygiene or cosmetic reasons. Rather they were reserved for joyous occasions.

So unusual religious sorrow within should be compensated for by outward signs of an opposite sort. Reality in the sight of God

rather than appearance in the sight of man must be the believer's desire.

Acts of piety such as fasting must be performed solely and exclusively for the disciples' "Father" with no concern for one's reputation before others.

God "is in secret," and He "sees in secret." emphasizes the hiddenness of virtuous acts in order to be performed for God alone.

These secret acts are noticed by God and will be rewarded by Him.

Jesus Questioned regarding Fasting

Matthew 9:14-17,

Mark 2:18-22,

Luke 5:33-39,

When John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus why His disciples did not fast, He gave them a powerful and intriguing answer. On the surface this answer seems straightforward and simple, yet more has been written on this incident than about any other New Testament reference to the practice of fasting.

- Matthew's account the questions are asked by the disciples of John the Baptist.
- Luke depicted the questions as coming from the Pharisees (**Luke 5:30, & 33**) and
- Mark wrote that the questions came from both groups (**Mark 2:18**).

In all three accounts there is the clear assumption that Jesus' disciples were doing something wrong.

The phrase "but yours," indicates a sharp contrast in conduct between Jesus' disciples and those of John and the Pharisees.

Jesus and His disciples did not conform to the common customs of traditional Judaism. Their conduct reveals a clear-cut breach with existing religious practice.

This one issue concerning fasting brought into focus the whole question of Jesus' attitude toward Jewish tradition.

Jesus responded, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?"

Then He added, "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

He viewed fasting as a sign of mourning, which is inconsistent with the joy of the bridegroom's presence.

In the Old Testament the relationship of God and Israel is often presented in terms of matrimony. However, there seems to be little doubt that those Jews who heard this parable would conclude that Jesus, as the Bridegroom, was making a veiled claim to deity.

The phrase "so long as" (Mark 2:19) indicates that the wedding condition would not be permanent. When "the bridegroom is taken away from them," there would be a time of mourning for "they will fast"

Jesus' point was clear. He presented a contrast between wedding-like joy and funeral like mourning.

- The words "then they will fast" are a prediction, not a command.
- Nowhere does the New Testament command fasting.

The main point is that fasting should not be practiced because Jewish or church tradition demands it but fasting should be practiced in times of sorrow.

Since believers today are not under the Mosaic Law, there is to be no regularly scheduled fasting. Christian fasting should not be compulsory. It may be practiced because of a felt need, not out of the requirement to observe a rigid command.

Initially the early church observed fasting as a voluntary religious practice, but soon it degenerated into a supposedly meritorious obligatory formality.

Fasting as Practiced and Taught in the Book of Acts

Fasting Following Saul's Conversion

Acts 9:8-11,

Possibly the first reference to fasting in the Book of Acts is in connection with the dramatic conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. After his unusual experience Saul was left blinded. He was led into the city of Damascus, where for three days he was "without sight, and neither ate nor drank".

Saul was either unable to eat or did not think about eating because he was suffering from shock.

In a time of crisis, in a time of felt need, Saul voluntarily fasted. This is precisely what Jesus practiced and taught. In this instance fasting was accompanied by prayer.

Fasting Associated with the First Missionaries

Acts 13:1-3,

Acts 13 begins by stating that the church at Antioch was served by a group of prophets and teachers. Antioch at that time was a significant city, the capital of Syria and the chief seat of eastern civilization.

The church, burdened for the needs of the world, gathered on this occasion for special prayer with fasting. As a result of their ministering and fasting, “the Holy Spirit said set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul.”

Before they were officially commissioned by the laying on of hands, there was a period of fasting and prayer. This combination of fasting and prayer was common in Judaism, but in New Testament times the two seldom occurred together among Christians. On only four occasions in the New Testament were the two linked. Two of these refer to commissioning or ordination services, one refers to the practice of the godly woman Anna (Luke 2:37), and another is in connection with Saul’s conversion (Acts 9:9-12).

To imply, as some do, that fasting is an essential ingredient in effective prayer cannot be substantiated biblically. In the New

Testament much is said about prayer but very little about fasting.

Prayer is commanded but fasting is not.

The Book of Acts refers to many instances of prayer where no indication of fasting is mentioned. In one of the most powerfully dramatic prayer meetings recorded in the entire Bible (**Acts 4:23-31**) there is not the slightest hint of fasting.

When the apostles delegated some of the affairs of the infant church, it was to enable them to devote themselves “to prayer, and the ministry of the word”

Acts 6:4,

They did not say, “We will devote ourselves to prayer, fasting, and to the ministry of the word.”

There is no record of fasting and laying on of hands in connection with the appointment of Matthias as an apostle (Acts 1:24-26).

At the appointment of men to help with the distribution of food the believers prayed and laid hands on their heads, but no mention is made of fasting (Acts 6:1-7).

Yet here (Acts 13:3) at the commissioning of foreign missionaries and again at the ordination of elders in local churches (Acts 14:23), fasting was involved.

Fasting at the Ordination of Elders

Acts 14:23,

After Paul and Barnabas completed the first officially church-sponsored foreign missionary effort, they visited each church they had established to be sure proper leadership was set in place. This became a pattern for the Apostle Paul.

In connection with the ordination of elders in each church, Paul and Barnabas, “having prayed with fasting ... commended them to the Lord”.

What was the purpose of the fasting?

Fasting was an aid to the praying.

However, if this were the case, why was fasting not mentioned in connection with the choosing of the seven (Acts 6:6) or in connection with the replacement of the 12th apostle (1:24), which was of greater significance than the ordination of elders?

If fasting is an effective aid to meaningful prayer, why then is it mentioned in the same context with prayer in the entire New Testament on only four occasions?

As has been demonstrated, fasting was in response to a felt need of some sort. Perhaps in this case Paul and Barnabas, realizing the immense problems facing these young churches and elders in a demonically dominated pagan environment, felt burdened to the point of fasting as well as praying on these occasions.

Thus, fasting is presented as an accepted observance in the church in the Book of Acts. Yet the fact that fasting is mentioned in only three chapters would seem to indicate that fasting was the exception and should not be presented as the generalized picture of the church in its early beginnings.

Fasting as Practiced and Taught in the Epistles

The New Testament Epistles say nothing about religious fasting.

Hebrews 13:16,

Even here, which mentions praise, thanksgiving, and well-doing as sacrifices pleasing to God, does not include fasting.

The absence of references to religious fasting outside the Synoptic Gospels and Acts implies that the practice was not considered significant in the church so long as the Apostles were alive. Paul did not even mention fasting as a form of religious piety.

In Romans 14 and Colossians 2, Paul discussed ascetic and ritualistic tendencies in the churches, but said nothing about fasting.

Equally significant is the fact that the General Epistles. Hebrews; James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; Jude) and Revelation make no mention of fasting.

Especially amazing is the lack of any reference to fasting in Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter, which were addressed to Jewish Christians.

Again, fasting was practiced in the early church. Clearly it has a place in Christian piety, but that it had a frequent place is open to serious question.

Fasting in the Postapostolic Church

Amazingly Christianity quickly departed from the personal, inward, and spiritual emphasis found in the New Testament.

Fasting is a case in point. The earliest hints in post-New Testament writings indicate a return to the external, legalistic, ritualistic practice of fasting.

Evidently as time elapsed after the death of the Apostles, the church succumbed to the religious pressures of the Jewish and pagan world around them and fasting became a full-blown practice.

This is not to say there was no objection to such a system, but from the second century on, “there is no longer any clear awareness of the way in which Jesus viewed fasting.” Almost all the church fathers encouraged the practice of fasting.

A graphic illustration of the postapostolic church’s effort to support their excessive emphasis on fasting can be seen in the attempt to add the word “fasting” to the original text of Scripture. Most textual critics (“fasting”) was added in Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29; and 1 Corinthians 7:5 and that *‘nhsteuvwn’* (“fasting”) was added to “praying” in Acts 10:30.

These textual additions clearly indicate the church’s growing interest in the practice of fasting after the first century.

The church began to establish mandated periodic fasts. They simply took over the Jewish practice of fasting two days a week,

changing the days from Mondays and Thursdays to Wednesdays and Fridays. They observed numerous collective fasts including the Passover fasts, and they often elevated the fasts to the status of a church ordinance.

With the Reformation and its return to the Bible as the only source of faith and practice, a large section of Christendom removed itself from the estimations of fasting that prevailed during the Middle Ages.

Concerning fasting, Luther said, *“We do not, therefore, object to fasting itself, but to the fact that it is represented as a necessary duty and that specific days have been fixed for its performance.”*

It appears that Protestant Christianity today may have gone to the extreme of almost totally disregarding what the New Testament says about fasting.

Conclusion

As in almost all religions, people in both Judaism and Christianity have viewed fasting as an “self-denying exercise’ which serves to purify man and bring him closer to God.”

Closely related to this, many views fasting as a way to make their prayers more effective.

No doubt because of Christ's response to the disciples concerning a difficult case of demon possession, many say fasting makes prayer more effective.

James 5:16,

Paul reported that Epaphras was "laboring earnestly in his prayers"

Colossians 4:12,

But in neither of these nor in any other of the many New Testament passages pertaining to effective prayer is fasting discussed.

Even a cursory survey of fasting in the Old Testament demonstrates that the "widest purpose by the nation or individuals was to avert or terminate a calamity by eliciting God's compassion."

When calamity struck, a fast was proclaimed. It was a spontaneous reaction to emergencies.

In the Old Testament a fast was a means of demonstrating a humble heart, a repentant spirit. A fast without true humility and repentance was "valueless and senseless."

Since fasts in the Old Testament were in response to calamities and were to demonstrate humility and repentance, the same purpose and attitudes would hold true for New Testament believers.

Jesus hinted that this should be the purpose for fasting among His disciples. His disciples would fast after the bridegroom was taken away (Matt. 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35).

The removal of a bridegroom from his bride would normally be looked on as a tragedy that would evoke a felt need. In times of tragedy and heartache, Jesus' disciples would fast.

Fasting then is a legitimate response to dangers, trials, heartaches, or sorrows. "That which seems to characterize Christian fasting in the New Testament was abstinence during crisis experiences."

In times of physical or spiritual need Christians realize their inadequacy and in humility and repentance look to the Lord. These emotions may be demonstrated by private fasting. On the other hand, if there is no felt need of a serious nature, fasting does not seem to be required of believers.

The one who sincerely wants to please God will studiously avoid trying to impress men. He will determine not to be seen fasting by men, but by God the Father who is in secret.

Jesus does not say we should fast for the purpose of being seen even by God.

Fasting is not to be a display for anyone, including God.

Genuine fasting is simply a part of concentrated, intense prayer and concern for the Lord, His will, and His work.

Jesus' point is that the Father never fails to notice fasting that is heart-felt and genuine, and that He never fails to reward it. Your Father who sees in secret will repay you.