

Fasting
A Study of a Biblical Doctrine

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Fasting

Fasting is a biblical doctrine. It is found in both the Old and New Testaments and was practiced by Jesus. In present times, fasting is generally not practiced by professing Christians and is largely left in the province of fringe or radical activities. Muslims famously practice fasting during Ramadan. Some who practice fasting claim significant benefits from it and recommend it to others.

The follower of Jesus should study what the Bible says about fasting and should apply the truths discovered to his or her own life. If it is a command, we must obey. If it is a suggestion with positive benefits we should consider practicing it but must not require it of others. If it is a throwback to Judaism and an “earned” approach to salvation, we should reject it.

Fasting, for our study, is the deliberate deprivation of food, water or both, for a period of time for spiritual purposes. While fasting does have medical benefits, such is beyond the scope of this study.

Biblical Example

Fasting was common in the Old Testament dating from the period of the Patriarchs through the Mosaic age. Fasting was both an individual and a community event. In all cases, fasting is found linked to some request for divine help or assistance.

Old Testament

The first fasting recorded in Scripture is associated with the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16:29-31 instructs the Israelites to “afflict” themselves as part of the solemn ceremonies.¹ Obviously, this is linked to a spiritual purpose as the people prepared to meet God. This is the only case of Biblically commanded fasting. Other fasts would arise but only the Day of Atonement has the weight of a Biblical command (Hendriksen & Kistemaker, 1978).

Other fasts soon arose. A case of national fasting is in Judges 20:1-36. Here, the Israelites have gone to battle against one of their own tribes. The Israelites are defeated on both the first and second day of the battle. After the second defeat, they come before God weeping and fasting. The seeking for divine help is accompanied by national fasting.

1 Samuel 7:6 offers fasting as part of repentance. God’s people have acted sinfully and are enduring the wrath of God’s punishment. As a people, they gather to pray, repent and fast.

A notable case of personal fasting is in 2 Samuel 2:15-23 when David seeks God’s favor for his ill son. The infant is dying because of David and Bathsheba’s sin. David fasts while asking God to spare the life of the child. When the child does die, David stops his fast

¹ Most scholars believe the term “afflict” means to fast.

and returns to his daily activities. This sort of fasting is perhaps most common today although we cannot know for sure.

Beyond these there are 24 additional examples of fasting found in the Old Testament (Rishel, 2002).

It is not difficult to conclude that Old Testament fasting was for a specific spiritual purpose and was always done in conjunction with prayer and usually with repentance.

Apocryphal Writings

Although not accepted by Christians as canonical² the books commonly known as the Apocrypha do offer some insight into the thinking of their authors who lived during the 400 years of history between the testaments. These books were penned during that era and some are good historical accounts of Inter-testamental events. These historical texts are a bridge between the ancient post-exilic prophets and the Gospels. In these books we see a continuation of fasting.

2 Esdras 5:20 and 6:35 records fasting commanded by an angel over the condition of Israel. Judith 4:13 and 8:6 record God's blessings after the people fasted. Baruch 1:5 notes continuing fasting by Israel and 1 Maccabees 3:7 speaks of more fasting. The Apocrypha suggest a continued interest and practice of fasting.

² The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church accept these books as inspired and worthy of inclusion in the church canon. While this author does not, they were mentioned here to show the probable continuity of practice of fasting.

New Testament

Fasting remained a part of Jewish life into the first century AD. The original Christians practiced fasting too. For our study it seems wise to divide these passages into two groups: Judaic and Christian.

Judaic Fasting

The New Testament opens fully enmeshed in Judaism. Christianity is still three decades into the future. Judaism is withering. Herod the Great, an Idumean, is the King in Jerusalem. Elite religious groups have developed and the people chaff under the political control of Rome.

Despite the condition of their faith, they still kept the commanded holy days and still practiced the regulations of the Mosaic Law. Inasmuch as Christians are not bound to the Mosaic Law, we must carefully examine each passage and make sure we keep it in its proper context and time period.

In the English Standard Version there are 14 references to fasting in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke). There is no reference to fasting in John.³

The first account of fasting in the New Testament is that of the Jewish prophetess Anna in Luke 2:36-38. Anna, a widow, is a devout woman who is described as “worshipping with fasting and prayer night

³ The American Standard Version of 1901 is the only major translation that uses the word “fast” in John. In John 21:12, 15 all other translations speak of eating the last meal, in this case, breakfast, which they had missed. A different word is used to speak of fasting.

and day.” Because this is prior to the coming of the church and is under a previous covenant, we are not surprised to find her engaging in such an activity. It fits well within the examples of Old Testament fasting but gives us little help in deciding if fasting is a Christian habit or function.

Jesus taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:16-18. The discussion is part of a larger context of spiritual purity and intimacy with Jehovah God. In verses 16 - 18 Jesus teaches that fasting is not for show or for public applause. Instead it is a deeply personal and private connection to God. Like so many teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, this one, offers important principles for our lives even today.

The Gospel accounts occur in a Jewish world, among Jewish people, practicing Jewish customs and keeping the Jewish (Mosaic) faith. We cannot assert fasting as a Christian custom based only on the Jewish practices. However, we do not need to make such a claim or assertion. There are approving examples of fasting among Christians long after the establishment of the church. We now turn to a review of those passages.

Christian Fasting

If we are to claim some authority for fasting we must seek a command or approved example from Scripture. Acts provides important help. But before Acts, examine the transition statements of Jesus.

And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees,

but yours eat and drink.” And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.” (Luke 5:33-35)

Let us observe that the questioners speak of both the fasting done by John’s disciples and by the Pharisees. The Pharisees are fasting as part of their Jewish devotion and dedication to the Law of Moses. John’s disciples, although Jewish, are pursuing a course that will eventually lead away from Judaism and toward Christianity. The Pharisees would become the foremost critics of Jesus while the disciples of John would, in time, follow Jesus.

The fasting of the disciples and the Pharisees is identical, at least enough so that the questioners group the two together. Fasting was common among the Jews and remained so among John’s followers.

This passage also offers a contrast between the disciples of Jesus and those of John and the Pharisees. Jesus’ disciples do not fast. Is this a break in doctrine? Does Jesus here end fasting as a spiritual practice? No. Notice the text.

Fasting was temporarily suspended only while Jesus was actually present on earth. *“Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them”* Jesus asked. Obviously, they cannot for it is a time of joy. Jesus, the bridegroom (John 3:27-30; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7) is with them and they must not be afflicted in his presence. However, the fasting will resume once he is taken away. It seems self-evident that the phrase, *“when the bridegroom is taken away from them”* (vs. 35), speaks of the conclusion of his

physical ministry. At that point, once Jesus is no longer physically with them, the fasting will resume. On this point, it is asserted this removal is both “unnatural” and “ominous” (Nolland, 2005). It is a prediction of his death (Dorris, 1950).

The real question here is whether the new period of fasting is limited to the brief period of Jesus’ entombment or to the entire period of the church age. Does Jesus mean that fasting will resume only while he is in the tomb or does he mean that fasting will resume when he is taken away from the earth, i.e. at his ascension?

The idea that only the three days in the tomb is in view is a rather awkward position to support. First, it would be exceptionally limited in scope. Second, there is no reference to the apostles or disciples fasting during Jesus time in the tomb. Third, we are left with the fasting done by the church years after the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Lord. On this point there is some controversy and there are weighty arguments offered both in favor of his death and in favor of his ascension as the return of fasting.

If the taking away is his ascension instead of his death we then have a better argument which takes into account all facts given in the record.

Bock argues that the importance is not so much the timing as the nature of the fasting. He argues that the church would fast for guidance and not because of mourning (Bock, 1994). This comports well with the accounts in Acts which always report fasting in the context of seeking God’s guidance on some significant issue.

Now let us look closer at the implications of this transitional teaching. We say “transitional” because Jesus is already looking ahead to the coming of the new covenant which is the church age. There will be an important melting away of the Mosaic covenant and later (in Acts 10) of the Patriarchal covenant. This teaching is like a tightly focused beam illuminating coming truth.

Jesus is taken away from the disciples at his ascension which occurs just 10 days before the church begins in Acts 2. (C.f. Acts 1:3, Leviticus 23:15, 16). This is really the only time that adequately fits the description of the bridegroom being taken away. Thus Jesus acknowledges that fasting was not appropriate during the time of his presence on earth but would again be appropriate in the future.

But it is also important to note that Jesus does not command the practice of fasting but simply assumes it will resume. This is similar to his approach in Matthew 6 when he warned against hypocritical, Pharisaic-type fasting. Fasting is just assumed by Jesus to be a part of the spiritual landscape. As Wayne Jackson notes, fasting is voluntary (Jackson, n.d.). This is important. Because the fasting is not commanded we must not command it either. We must not bind upon others that which the Lord has not bound. However, to oppose this voluntary fasting places one on tenuous grounds as it is clearly practiced by the church.

Fasting in Acts

The book of Acts is the history of the original Christians. We find their conversions, their worship, their manner of life, their assemblies, their martyrdom and even their errors and failings. Because the original Christians enjoyed the presence of the apostles and the presence of those possessing miraculous abilities, we can be assured that their practices, when approved tacitly or specifically, are suitable for Christians today.

There are but two examples of fasting occurring after the beginning of the church on Pentecost in Acts 2.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:2-3)

It is noteworthy that this period of fasting occurred in the context of the church worshipping and during a period of deep devotion. During this time a direct revelation from God is received.⁴ Fasting is found both before and after the divine instruction and suggests their string dedication to discover the will of God and to be guided along that path.

The appointment of elders in each congregation is deadly serious business. So many churches have been failed by weak elders who fail to

⁴ We do not suggest that men fast today in order to receive some direct message from the Holy Spirit as such would be far beyond what Scriptures reveal. We do not live in an age of miracles today.

hold to the truth of Scripture. Certainly Paul recognized the seriousness of appointing elders and then leaving the newly planted churches in their care. After appointing elders in Asia Minor we find these words:

“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23)

It was time for Paul and Barnabas to head east. These churches would be entrusted first to the God and then to the elders they had appointed. Prayer, together with fasting, are used by Paul to beg for their strength.

In the first case from Acts 13, we find the church fasting for a purpose. In Acts 14 we see an essentially individual case of fasting. Both are approved by God.

Conclusions

We began this study by declaring that fasting is a Biblical doctrine. We have sustained that claim. We would now further conclude that voluntary fasting for Christians today is appropriate and fully acceptable. In Acts 13 and 14 fasting was coupled with prayer. We may reasonably conclude that fasting is useful as we call on God for his providential care.

There is an important caveat however. Fasting is not to be viewed or practiced as some sign of superior faith, Jesus sternly rebuked the practice of the Pharisees who wanted everyone to know of their

struggle and affliction of fasting. It need not be secret, as Acts 13 and 14 show, but it is private and personal and not something from which we seek glory.

Appendix

Suggestions for Fasting

1. Fast with a clear purpose or need in mind. There is no value in fasting just for the sake of fasting.
2. Fasting should be coupled with prayer. Biblical fasting always occurs with prayer.
3. Fast at a pre-selected time and a defined length of time. Fasting cannot be accidental. It is a deliberate action before God.
4. Begin to practice fasting slowly. Fast for no more than 6 hours at first. You can build up over time. Consider beginning with a food-only fast. Drinking fluids can help.
5. Fasting will place a burden on your body. Learn to listen to your body and end a fast before you get into trouble.
6. Consult your physician and ask if fasting is harmful due to your specific health condition. Remember, fasting is voluntary and not commanded.
7. Break your fast gently and with wholesome foods.

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