

# **BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #128:**

## **WHAT ABOUT FASTING?**

**By John Temples**

**Fasting** is deliberately abstaining from food and/or water for a period of time. It was practiced in Bible times (both Old Testament and New Testament), and continues to be widely practiced today by both individuals and religious institutions such as Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. Since fasting is mentioned in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, many Christians wonder: should (or must) I fast? Is fasting part of my Christian service to God? This article will deal with that question.

### FIRST: SOME FACTS ABOUT FASTING:

The Bible mentions fasting some 78 times. At least 35 different people in the Bible were said to have practiced fasting. The shortest fast in the Bible is the one associated with the Day of Atonement--it only lasted for 24 hours, from sundown to sundown. The longest fast recorded in Scripture is 40 days. The longest known non-religious fast was in 1971, when a 27-year-old Scottish man survived on water and supplements for 382 days and shrank from 456 to 180 pounds. In 1981, several men in an Irish prison refused food for more than 60 days. Most of them died.

### THE NATURE OF FASTING

As we said earlier, fasting involves choosing to go without sustenance. Two factors are of interest to our discussion--the reasons for fasting and the time period involved in fasting. People might fast for several reasons: to lose weight, to detox the body, or to protest something. However, for the purposes of this article, fasting means voluntary abstinence from food for purposes of spiritual self-discipline. Fasting as we use the term is a Biblically-authorized spiritual exercise connected with our walk with God.

There is always a time factor in fasting. As stated above, the Jewish fast connected with the Day of Atonement lasted only one day, from one sundown to the next. Paul, after encountering the Lord, fasted for three days, ending with the

arrival of Ananias who told him to get up (stop fasting) and be baptized to wash away his sins (Acts 22:16). Forty-day fasts were done by Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Moses' fast is remarkable because he went without food AND water for 40 days (Exodus 34:28). He must have had supernatural help to do this, because a human cannot survive in that state for much more than five days.

SO WHY DID PEOPLE FAST IN BIBLE TIMES? Here are some reasons:

- *Because it was commanded by God (Leviticus 16:29).* The Jews were told, "In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all; whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord. It is a sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever" (Leviticus 16:29-31). Practically all scholars take the words "afflict your souls" to be a reference to fasting.
- *To develop or cultivate self-control.* David said, "I chastened my soul with fasting" (Psalms 69:10).
- *To accompany deep personal sorrow.* David and his servants fasted upon hearing of the death of Saul, 2 Samuel 1:12.
- *Fasting was often done when a loved one was critically ill.* David fasted when his son was dying (2 Samuel 12:16). Obviously, when you're keeping a vigil at the bedside of a critically ill loved one, you're not thinking much about eating.
- *As a natural, instinctive accompaniment to intense prayer.* Anna was an 84-year-old widow who, according to Luke 2:37, "did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day."
- *As a sign of contrition and mourning over sins.* The people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast to express sorrow for their great sin (Jonah 3:5). Likewise, Paul spent three days abstaining from food or drink after meeting Jesus and being made aware of his sins (Acts 9:9).

- *Fasting was practiced in connection with great religious events or when important decisions were to be made.* Moses fasted while he was receiving the Law (Exodus 34:28). Christ fasted prior to being tempted by the devil in the wilderness, Matthew 4:1. The leaders of the Antioch church fasted before sending out Barnabas and Saul on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3).

## WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT FASTING?

Surprisingly, Jesus did not put a lot of emphasis on fasting, either in His teaching or in His practice. In fact, His enemies slanderously accused Him of being “a glutton and a wine-bibber,” Luke 7:34. In all of Jesus’s teaching, He only mentioned fasting twice:

- In Matthew 6:16-18, where the Lord said, “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” On that occasion, He rebuked the Pharisees for making fasting a show for public approval. But notice: Jesus said “when” you fast, not “if” you fast. He assumed that there might be times when it would be natural and appropriate for His followers to fast.
- In Matthew 9:14-15, which reads, “Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the day will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.’” Here, Jesus made the point that His presence with His disciples was like a wedding feast. At a wedding, people are rejoicing and eating, not mourning and fasting. It would be appropriate to fast when He would be taken away from them. “There is a time to mourn, and a time to laugh.”

## SO SHOULD I FAST?

In making a decision to practice fasting, a Christian needs to consider some things fasting is NOT for:

- *Fasting is not (should not be) a means of punishing one's body.* "I ate too much today, so I must be punished." Not so! If we fast to the point of damaging our health, we are not doing God's will. "Do yourself no harm" is the operative principle (Acts 16:28). Remember, David chastened his *soul* with fasting, not his body.
- *Fasting is not a way to "earn points" with God, to impress Him, or to get Him to do what we want.*
- *Fasting is not a public display to flaunt one's religious dedication before others.* Jesus said in Matthew 6:16-18, "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."
- *Fasting is not something to be done for political or manipulative reasons* (e.g., hunger strikes, starving oneself to force other people to do what we want, etc.).
- *Fasting is not a substitute for personal godly living, or a way of easing one's conscience over not obeying God.*

There is no Scriptural command or requirement for Christians to fast. The New Testament does not demand fasting at all, but it depicts it as a voluntary spiritual exercise. An anonymous Internet writer says: "Scripture does not command Christians to fast. God does not require or demand it...At the same time, the Bible presents fasting as something that is good, profitable, and beneficial...[Fasting takes] your eyes off the things of this world to focus completely on God. Fasting is a way to demonstrate to God, and to ourselves, that we are serious about our

relationship with Him. Fasting helps us gain a new perspective and a renewed reliance upon God."

Moderate fasting might be done by a Christian simply as a means of purifying the body, or as a spiritual exercise to help you gain self-control and keep your priorities straight. You might be in the middle of a deep study of God's word or involved in a study with a lost person when dinner time rolls around. Obviously, you would want to put off eating at such a time.

## CONCLUSION

The bottom line is, fasting for Christians is completely an individual choice. The New Testament does not require it of us, but we might wish to do it as part of our walk with God or to strengthen our bodies for service to God. If you don't need to fast to be strong in the faith, then you don't have to. If you do choose to fast, do it to God and for yourself, not for show. And do not fast to the point of damaging or weakening your body. --John Temples