



Biblical Fasting

Isaiah 58:5-6 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?

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.

- The Hebrew word for FASTING means “to cover the mouth”
- The Greek word for FASTING means “to abstain”
- In early ages men ate sporadically, according to production of the earth and success of the hunt. Thus, fasting was often compulsory and looked on as the will of the gods. Men in almost every culture came to believe that willing abstinence from food would please their gods.
- The Jews were commanded by God to fast; this illustrated their submission to His will.
- The word FASTING is not found in the Pentateuch, but often occurs in the Historical Books and the Prophets. In the Law, we find instead the expression “HUMBLE (AFFLICT) YOUR SOULS” implying the sacrifice of personal will. This gives to fasting all of its value!
- The Jews abstained from all food during a single day of fasting (evening to evening), but might abstain only from certain types of food during a prolonged personal fast.
- In manifesting their repentance, it was not unusual for them to put on sackcloth, rend the garments, and scatter ashes over the head.
- The Mosaic Law prescribed only one public occasion of strict fasting each year, on the Great Day of Atonement (“the fast” - Acts 27:9).

· **However, the Jews were in the habit of fasting spontaneously on other occasions as well:**

1. Whenever they were in hard and trying circumstances, misfortune and bereavement.

1 Samuel 1:5-7 5 But unto Hannah he gave a worthy portion; for he loved Hannah: but the LORD had shut up her womb. 6 And her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the LORD had shut up her womb. 7 And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, so she provoked her; therefore she wept, and did not eat.

2. Whenever they faced the prospect of threatened judgments of God.

2 Samuel 12:15-16 15 And Nathan departed unto his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. 16 David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.

3. Whenever they had fallen into grievous sin.

Ezra 10:6 6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of

Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

4. Whenever they wished to avert heavy calamity.

Esther 4:1-3 1 When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry; 2 And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. 3 And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

· Other fasts were eventually instituted in memory of the capture of Jerusalem, the burning of the Temple, etc. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees fasted on the second and fifth day of every week, but it was just an ordinary pious exercise. The prophets (Isaiah 58) and Jesus (Matthew 6) certainly show us that fasting was very much abused.

· In the apostolic church, fasting was always voluntary (distinguished from involuntary “hunger and thirst” mentioned in 2 Corinthians by Paul)

2 Corinthians 11:27 27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

· **THUS, FASTING IS “ANY SELF-IMPOSED APPETITE-DENYING DISCIPLINE”**

· FASTING IS “NEGATIVE” FOR THE FLESH BUT “POSITIVE” FOR THE SPIRIT!