

BIBLICAL PRAYER (55)

QUESTION #10 – Should New Testament believers fast?

Fasting may be defined as abstaining from something for a certain length of time in order that one may devote himself/herself to a full attention and devotion to God in order that some special, unique matter may be addressed or accomplished or resolved.

In most people's minds, the word "fast" usually has to do with a voluntary abstinence from food. However, it is better to not limit fasting or the concept of it to just an abstinence from eating. For example, the Apostle Paul used the fast concept in the context of a husband and wife praying and abstaining from physical intimacy (**I Corinthians 7:5**).

Dr. Hallesby writes: "Fasting is not confined to abstinence from eating or drinking. Fasting really means voluntary abstinence for a time from various necessities of life, such as food, drink, sleep, rest, association with people and so forth. . . The purpose of such abstinence for a longer or shorter period of time is to loosen to some degree the ties which bind us to the world of material things and our surroundings as a whole, in order that we may concentrate all our spiritual powers upon the unseen and eternal things" (O. Hallesby, *Prayer*, p. 113).

When it comes to the subject of fasting, there are two Biblical warnings we must keep in our minds and hearts:

Warning #1 - Biblical fasting must avoid habitual legalism. **Matthew 9:14-15**

It is quite evident that fasting can reach a level where it is nothing more than religious, Pharisaical, habitual legalism. Obviously when Jesus Christ was here on earth certain religious people, including John's disciples and the Pharisees, continually stressed their ritualistic fasts and they should have been cultivating a real, true relationship with Jesus Christ.

Fasting became a religious, legalistic habit, which was adhered to by many even when Jesus Christ was physically here in person. This clearly shows us that fasting does have the potential to become nothing more than religious ritual.

Warning #2 - Biblical fasting must avoid public show. **Matthew 6:16-18**

A central identifying characteristic of Pharisees is that they do religious things continually for public show. They publicly pray for show (**Matt. 6:5-8**) and they publicly fast for show (**Matt. 6:16-18**). Obviously Jesus Christ wanted us to realize that it is possible for something, even like fasting, to be done for public show.

There have always been those in history who will deprive themselves of something and let the public know about it so they will look at them as if they are really super spiritual. Truth is they are unspiritual. Our motive for abstaining from something is to draw close to the Lord and not put on some public display for people to know about or see.

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QUESTION #1 – What were the reasons for Biblical fasting in the Old Testament?

As we search through the O.T., we may discover that there were at least five main reasons for fasting:

Reason #1 - O.T. fasting was prescribed in the Law. **Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-32;**
Numbers 29:7-11

The words “humble yourselves” (**Lev. 16:29**), were interpreted by Isaiah as including a fast (**Isaiah 58:3, 5**). Obviously these verses imply that Israel was to take a day and abstain from work, but also it is implied that they abstained from food. Dr. Robert Linder said the words “humble your souls” were interpreted to mean also to abstain from food. He said, “In Judaism the day of atonement is the only public fast day prescribed by the law” (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 406). For the nation Israel there was to be a legal fast day.

Reason #2 - O.T. fasting was a sign of mourning . **I Samuel 31:13; II Samuel 1:12**

The mourning was over the loss of a king or the loss of a spiritual leader and was a mourning signal that in part cried out to God for His help. Oftentimes in the history of Israel the nation sought to draw close to God and fasting was a part of that process.

There is no question that in great times of emotional stress, most people typically forget about food. **But the fasting issue is not so much about forgetting about food as it is remembering God.**

Reason #3 - O.T. fasting was a sign of repentance . **I Kings 21:27-29 (also 17-26)**

In this context, God saw that fasting was part of a truly repentant heart of King Ahab. As a result, God demonstrated His grace and mercy to Ahab. This principle was true during the days of Nehemiah (**Neh. 9:1-2**) and also during the days of Jonah (**Jonah 3:5**). Fasting was a demonstration of true repentance.

It needs to be pointed out that **fasting was only legitimate in God’s mind when there was true repentance**. It is clearly revealed in Scripture that if there was not a true repentance of heart and mind, the fast meant nothing to God (**Isaiah 58:3; Jeremiah 14:11-12**). Even in O.T. times, fasting could be mere ritual and not a sign of real repentance.

Reason #4 - O.T. fasting was done during special times of crisis . **II Samuel 12:16;**
Esther 4:16

David fasted when the life of his baby was on the line. By the time David did this he had repented. Even though he was very spiritually-minded in this, God did not answer the prayer. Esther had become the queen of the Persian Empire and both Mordecai and Esther sensed the danger Israel was in so they fasted and prayed and God answered in a national deliverance.

We may conclude that in individual and national crisis times, prayer and fasting become a real possibility for God moving in prayer.

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Reason #5 - O.T. fasting was done during special times of confession. **Daniel 9:3-19**

Here is a true leader of Israel spending quality private time with God, confessing the sin of Israel, and asking God to bless Israel. Daniel obviously knew that the Babylonian captivity was the result of Israel's rebellion and was a form of judgment. Therefore, he spent a great deal of time confessing the national sin of Israel, requesting the blessings of God (**Daniel 9:17**).

As we analyze the O.T., it is apparent that, at times, prayer and fasting did move the heart of God. There were other times when it did not. For example in **Zechariah 7:5-14** it is stated that the fast days accomplished nothing because the hearts were not right with God. When we read **Zechariah 8:19**, it becomes prophetically evident that a day will come when fasting will be turned into feasting. The tendency for Israel, when she found herself under the chastening hand of God, was to become very religious without becoming really spiritual. She would do all kinds of external things, but her problem was internal; a problem of the heart which was not pure.

What we may conclude from this is that God first wants the heart before religious ritual. He first wants the internal before the external.

If prayer and fasting are to accomplish anything, it will only accomplish something in connection with a real spirituality. Daniel's fasting was right and acceptable to God because his heart and life were right and acceptable to God. Israel's fasting was religious and unacceptable to God because she was not right with God. **Obviously, fasting does not mean one is automatically spiritual and right with God.** Such was the case with O.T. Israel.

QUESTION #12 – What were the reasons for Biblical fasting in the New Testament?

As we search through the N. T., we discover there were about four main reasons:

Reason #1 - N.T. fasting was done prior to special times of temptation. **Matthew 4:2**

It is obvious from this text that our Lord fasted. It should be also just as obvious that if He, being God, sensed the need of fasting, we, being God's people will probably sense the need from time to time. In this context, Christ was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (**Matt. 4:1**).

We may conclude that the purpose of this fast was to draw very close to God the Father in view of the pending temptation that Christ knew He was about to receive from Satan. Apparently this fast, which was a prelude to the temptation, was an important part of Him demonstrating victory over it.

We may conclude that when a believer knows he is about to enter some great trial or pressure, fasting and prayer can be a real key to victory. J. Oswald Sanders writes: "Fasting is not a legalistic requirement but a spontaneous reaction under special circumstances" (*Prayer Power Unlimited*, p. 67).