

Doctrine of Fasting

1. Definition and Concept:

1.1 Fasting is the abstinence from food and/or wine either in whole or in part so that a believer can better concentrate on the things of God.

1.2 There is also the mention of fasting in the Scriptures along with the wearing of a rough sack cloth, ashes and other manifest denigrations of self in order to express personal chagrin, sorrow or repentance.

1.3 Fasting in remembrance of past events, such as defeats, calamities or pestilences, are also mentioned in Scripture.

2. Background

2.1 The Gentiles of antiquity often fasted.

2.1.1 In antiquity men subsisted largely on the spontaneous production of the earth and the spoils of the hunt; and owing to the uncertainty of obtaining food, fasting was often compulsory.

2.1.2 This compulsion was soon interpreted as an expression of divine will and incorporated into many early religions as a duty.

2.1.3 The Gentiles soon concluded the gods were jealous of man and that abstinence could in fact propitiate their favor.

2.1.4 Among the gentiles fasting became a pervasive religious duty.

2.2 Israel also was instructed to fast.

2.2.1 The Hebrew word **TSUM**, meaning to fast, is not found in the books of the law, but is often found in the historical books and the books of the prophets. As we will note fasting was part of the celebration of the Day of Atonement; the Hebrew word **ANAH** was used instead of **TSUM**.

2Sa 12:16 David therefore besought God for the child; and David "**fasted**", and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.

1Ki 21:12 They proclaimed a "**fast**" and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people.

1Ki 21:13 Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death ...

1Ki 21:15 As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead."

1Ki 21:16 When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard.

1Ki 21:17 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite:

1Ki 21:18 "Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it.

1Ki 21:19 Say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood -- yes, yours!'"

Ezr 8:21 There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a "**fast**", so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.

Ezr 8:22 I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him."

Isa 58:3 Wherefore have we "**fasted**", say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your "**fast**" ye find pleasure, and exact all your labors.

Isa 58:4 Behold, ye "**fast**" for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

Isa 58:5 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?

2.2.2 The expression used in the books of the law and translated in the KJV "afflicting the soul" is a translation of the Hebrew words **ANAH**, in the piel stem as the verb and **NEPHESH** as the noun.

Lev 16:29 And this shall be a statute forever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall "**afflict your souls**," and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you:

Lev 16:30 For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the LORD.

Lev 16:31 It shall be a sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall "**afflict your souls**," by a statute forever.

Lev 23:27 Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall "**afflict your souls**", and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.

2.2.3 The Jews were required to fast on the Day of Atonement.

2.3 As Church Age believers we recognize there was a requirement under the Mosaic law to fast, however, we also recognize the epistles demand we eschew the Mosaic Law and its onerous impositions.

3. Observances:

3.1 Fasting, along with dust on the head and torn clothes, was often an act of expressing chagrin and sorrow.

2Sa 1:1 After the death of Saul, David returned from defeating the Amalekites and stayed in Ziklag two days.

2Sa 1:2 On the third day a man arrived from Saul's camp, **with his clothes torn and with dust on his head**. When he came to David, he fell to the ground to pay him honor.

3.2 Ezra proclaims a fast day in order to gain God's protection. Ezz 8:21-23

Ezz 8:21 There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a **fast**, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.

Ezz 8:22 I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him."

Ezz 8:23 So we **fasted** and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

3.3 Joel urges Israel to fast as part of a solemn repentance in order to avoid the invasion of Judah. Joel 2:15

Joe 2:15 Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy **fast**, call a sacred assembly.

3.4 After the Jews returned to the land they implemented numerous commemorative fasts. Zechariah Chapters 7 and 8

3.5 Fasts were observed in degrees, a single day of fasting meant total abstinence; however, some might simply abstain from certain food or foods.

4. To express profound mortification, fasting was often accompanied with the wearing of the sack cloth, ashes on the head and torn garments.

1Ki 21:23 And of Jezebel also spake the LORD, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.

1Ki 21:24 Him that dieth of Ahab in the city the dogs shall eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat ...

1Ki 21:27 And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put **sackcloth upon his flesh, and "fasted", and lay in sackcloth**, and went softly.

Jon 3:5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a **fast, and put on sackcloth**, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

5. In the law the Day of Atonement was the only fast demanded and was therefore called "the fast."

Acts 27:9 Now when much time was spent, and when sailing was now dangerous, because the "**fast**" was now already past, Paul admonished them,

6. The people of Israel throughout history have fasted when times were especially rough, during misfortune, bereavement or when they felt especially sorry for their misconduct.

1Sa 1:7 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**.

1Sa 1:8 Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?

1Sa 31:11 And when the inhabitants of Jabeshgilead heard of that which the Philistines had done to Saul ...

1Sa 31:13 And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and **fasted** seven days.

Ezr 10:2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing ...

Ezr 10:6 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.

7. As earlier mentioned, there were many post-exile fast days established. For example

Zec 8:18 And the word of the LORD of hosts came unto me, saying,

Zec 8:19 Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The **fast** of the fourth month, and the **fast** of the fifth, and the **fast** of the seventh, and the **fast** of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace.

7.1 July 17 was a fast to remember the capture of Jerusalem

Jer 52:6 And in the fourth month, in the ninth day of the month, the famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people of the land.

Jer 52:7 Then the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled, and went forth out of the city by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, which was by the king's garden; (now the Chaldeans were by the city round about:) and they went by the way of the plain.

7.2 On 15 August there was a fast to remember the burning of the Temple. 2Ki 25:8

2Ki 25:8 And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, which is the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem:

2Ki 25:9 And he burnt the house of the LORD, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire.

7.3 On 7 Oct there was a fast to remember the death of Gedaliah.

Jer 41:3 Ishmael also slew all the Jews that were with him, even with Gedaliah, at Mizpah, and the Chaldeans that were found there, and the men of war.

Jer 41:4 And it came to pass the second day after he had slain Gedaliah, and no man knew it,

7.4 On 10 January there was a fast to remember the beginning of the attack on Jerusalem.

2Ki 25:1 And it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he, and all his host, against Jerusalem, and pitched against it; and they built forts against it round about.

2Ki 25:2 And the city was besieged unto the eleventh year of king Zedekiah.

7.5 There was also a special fast to remember Esther going before the King of Persia to plead the cause of her exiled people.

Est 4:16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

8. Due to the pervasive legalism of the Pharisees, the fast became more frequent; the fast became a pious exercise of religiosity. The Pharisees fasted on the second and fifth day of every week.

Mat 9:14 Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees **fast oft**, but thy disciples **fast** not?

Mat 9:15 And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they **fast**.

Luk 18:12 I **fast** twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

Luk 18:13 And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

9. Early New Testament

9.1 In the Kingdom Age teachings of the Gospels the Lord did provide for fasting and often rebuked the scribes for their hypocritical fasting.

9.1.1 There was recognition on the part of our Lord that fasting was a part of the Jewish religion.

Mat 6:16 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 ...

Mat 9:14 Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees **fast oft**, but thy disciples **fast not**?

Mat 9:15 And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.

9.2 Fasting is mentioned as a mechanic to enforce discipline and concentration in the Gospels and accordingly was said to be a requirement for exorcising certain demons.

Mar 9:28 And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out?

Mar 9:29 And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and **fasting**.

9.3 Mention is made of fasting in the early Church Age, or Interim Age as we are prone to call it.

Acts 13:2 As they ministered to the Lord, and **fasted**, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

Acts 13:3 And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Acts 14:20 Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe ...

Acts 14:23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with **fasting**, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

9.4 Paul in his early writings to the Church at Corinth, in about A.D. 56, speaks of fastings.

1Co 7:5 Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to **fasting** and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.

2Co 6:5 In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings;

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

9.5 It can therefore be concluded that fasting in the early Church Age was a common practice, a means of dedicating the mind to the service of the Lord.

9.6 There is no mention of fasting after A.D. 56; therefore, we can conclude the completion of the Canon might have rendered fasting as obsolete.

10. The Church Age

10.1 In the Church Age the two power options seem to have replaced fasting.

10.2 There is nothing wrong with fasting if indeed it is done to assist in the concentration on the Word.

10.3 In the early Church, Wednesday and Friday were half days of refusing to eat meat in commemoration of Jesus' work during the Passion Week.

10.4 The early Church did this in conformance with the Words of our Lord in Mat 9:15: "Can the children of the bride chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast."

10.5 There are some who think that the observance of the Lord's Table also supplanted fasting.

10.6 Since we have no indication of fasting in the later epistles, fasting, like water baptism, is a questionable "ordinance" but then again, if fasting helps you to become closer to God then by all means fast.

10.6.1 The final answer rests on the interpretation of Mat 9:15 shown above.