

Fasting – What Does the Bible Say?

By Bob Young

Introduction

People have questions about fasting. Some Christians fast regularly and testify that they find fasting to be helpful as a source of spiritual awareness to focus attention and make major decisions. Other Christians have seldom if ever fasted as part of their spiritual regimen. What does the Bible say?

Some churches seldom mention fasting. Other churches encourage fasting for no particular reason, almost as though the church needs to experience and practice fasting, just in case fasting is ever needed. Some churches fast for specific reasons. What does the Bible say? What are biblical reasons for fasting?

This is a brief study of an obscure practice that is often misunderstood, misapplied, and misinterpreted. The purpose of this study is to set forth what the Bible says. The study does not deal with personal experience or testimony in contemporary Christianity.

Outline

To develop an understanding of what the Bible says, the study has four parts: (1) fasting defined, (2) surveying the biblical references, (3) biblical reasons for and the importance of fasting, and (4) instructions for the practice of fasting today.

1. Fasting Defined

Fasting defined: the OT verb is *tsoom*; the NT verb is *nesteuo*, both meaning “to abstain from food.” The NT word includes the idea of emptiness. Literally, the basic meaning of the Bible words for fasting is “to go without food.”

The concept of fasting has been expanded in modern times to include other forms of abstinence, but these expansions reflect human additions and are not included in the definition of the biblical words for fasting.

2. Biblical Teachings

OLD TESTAMENT

In the OT, there are 18 passages or contexts in which the specific word is used. (When fasting is mentioned in two or three consecutive verses, the context is being counted as one biblical passage or context.) With over 900 chapters in the OT, contexts that mention fasting occur less than once in every 50 chapters!

In the OT, one fast per year was commanded on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29,31; 23:27-32). This fast was a fast of mourning, sorrow, and repentance.

In later Jewish history, other fasts were instituted (Esther 9:31; Zech. 8:19).

All OT fasts besides the Day of Atonement were additions to God’s instructions about fasting – the added fasts were personal, corporate, and voluntary. Note that in the OT, God’s people fasted more often than God required.

Most of the OT passages about fasting relate to situations of sorrow.

Several OT passages about fasting speak about the misuse or misunderstanding of fasting, as in Isa. 58.

OT texts of importance: Joel 2:12, return to Lord with fasting/weeping/mourning, repentance; Jer. 14:12, you cry out to the Lord, but he will not hear.

NEW TESTAMENT

The OT contained one specific command to fast; the NT contains no explicit command for Christians to fast. In the NT, twelve passages refer to fasting. Only two passages deal with the practice of the early Christians after the day of Pentecost.

Verb form. The verb form appears in seven passages.

-1- Jesus fasted at the temptation (Mt 4:2). Was this fasting the natural outcome of diligently seeking God and seeking God’s power?

-2- In the Sermon on the Mount we have instructions about proper fasting. These instructions were given in the context of Judaism (Mt. 6:16-18).

-3-4-5- Jesus assumed his disciples would fast after his departure (the parallel texts are Mt. 9:14-15; Mk. 2:18-20; Lk. 5:33-35; each passage is counted separately even though they are parallel texts). This context describes the question of the Jews about Jesus' disciples not fasting according to Jewish tradition. It is not clear whether the reference to his disciples' future fasting relates to Judaism or to their sorrow at his departure.

-6- Jesus referenced the Jewish practice of fasting in the story of the publican and the Pharisee (Lk. 18:12).

-7- Paul participated in fasting in Acts 13:2-3, preparing to send out missionaries. (The noun form appears in 14:21-23 with reference to naming church leaders—see below. The noun form in Acts 27:9 is a reference to the Day of Atonement.)

Noun form. The noun form appears in five passages.

-1- Mt. 17:21, transfiguration and healing, God's intervention is the result of prayer and fasting

-2- Mk. 9:29, transfiguration, a parallel passage to Mt. 17.

-3- Lk. 2:37, Anna, was fasting and praying according to Jewish practice in the temple

-4- Acts 14:23, selection of leaders in the newly established churches (see comment above regarding Acts 27:9.)

-5- 2 Cor. 6:5, "fasting," not a reference to the spiritual practice of fasting, usually translated "hunger" [in the same book, parallel passage, see also 11:27 where the same usage occurs]

When we survey the NT passages, we should be impressed with how little information is in the NT!

Further analysis. Look carefully at the two lists above—study the occurrences of the verb form and the noun form; read the dozen passages. Most of the passages relate to the pre-resurrection context of Judaism, with teachings that are found in the Gospels. In the context of early Christianity and the practice of the early church, there are only two passages that clearly refer to fasting as a spiritual practice of the early church—sending out missionaries and selecting leaders (Acts 13, 14).

That's it!! The existence of only one passage would make fasting important, but one should be impressed with the scarcity of mention both in the OT and the NT.

3. Why people fasted in the Bible—Reasons for fasting, the importance of fasting

Sorrow for sin, 1 Sam 7:6; Dan 9:3-5; Ezra 10:6; Neh. 1:3-4; sorrow for certain situations

- Mourning, fasting, praying; fasting was often natural, as at times of death

Seek God's intervention, Esther 4:16; protection, involvement; Ezra 8:21-23, God's care; Mt 4:2

Committing to a work, something new, a new situation, Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-23

- The two examples are in the context of a decision and guidance. The two cases of fasting after Pentecost are focused on God's service, not in the events of everyday life. There is no record of the early Christians fasting for illness. In the two NT texts, fasting was coupled with prayer, for the purpose of sending missionaries and appointing leaders.

4. The practice of fasting today

Should Christians fast? What are reasons for fasting?

Often, fasting is natural. Fasting occurs naturally at times of great activity, intense concern, new situations, at times of mourning.

-1- Fasting at times of mourning, sorrow, repentance, change

- I was visiting friends who were struggling with cancer. When they offered us a meal, we responded, "No, we do not need to eat, we can do without, we are here for a different reason."
- Food at funeral occasions, the family usually eats together when the funeral is over

-2- Fasting at times when you are seeking God's intervention, protection

-3- Fasting when you are beginning or are involved in a new project, or at times of extensive commitment, for the Lord

- Jan called and asked me a question: “Are you coming home for supper?” I was at the church office, studying, involved in an extensive project. To accomplish certain tasks, it is normal to diminish normal food intake, go without sleep, eating, or other normal activities.
- Fasting is not for external matters, fasting occurs naturally. No, I’m not going to eat; I can do without that snack that makes me sleepy or lethargic, this is a time to be alert; I can do without
- I am seeking God, new work, new commitments

Biblically, fasting is often followed by feasting, a part of the normal rhythms of life.

Conclusion

Some Christians fast to get their undisciplined lives back under control. Is there a place for proving to ourselves that we have self-control and self-discipline? Probably so, but some people who fast successfully show little self-control in other areas of life.

Is there a place for fasting today as outlined in Part Four above – in times of sorrow or difficulty, when seeking God, in finding your way in new projects? Certainly, there is nothing wrong with fasting when one desires or seeks greater spiritual awareness. Fasting more often than the Bible teaches is not condemned.

A final word of caution: when we fast, are we practicing a “form of religion” without power? (2 Tim. 3:5) Let us not fast just to be fasting. Let us have purpose, let that purpose be biblical.