

Fasting

(Jewish Mourning)

Fasting in the Bible is the Jewish expression of mourning. Nowhere in the Bible were people ever told to fast by God.

The origin of the practice is in response to God requiring the people to “humble your souls” in preparation for the Day of Atonement. They choose to include the concept of fasting.

*Lev 23:27 (NASB) "On exactly the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you, and you shall **humble your souls** and present an offering by fire to the LORD.*

As with many other practices this fasting was out of control by the time Jesus came and the Jews were fasting twice a week to show how pious they were. Jesus and his disciples did not participate in this practice.

*Mat 9:14-15 (NASB) Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot **mourn** as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.*

The original intent of fasting, to humble their souls had been perverted and Jesus criticized their practice and exposed it for what it was hypocrisy.

Mat 6:16-18 (NASB) "And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

If fasting is to be done – it is to be done so as not to be seen by men – in secret.

Note above in Matthew 9:14-15 Jesus clearly associated fasting with mourning. Other scripture helps to justify the belief that fasting was Jewish mourning.

*Ezra 10:6 (NASB) Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did **not eat bread, nor drink water, for he was mourning** over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.*

*Dan 10:2-3 (NASB) In those days I, Daniel, had been **mourning for three entire weeks**. I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all, until the entire three weeks were completed.*

*2 Sam 1:12 (NASB) And they **mourned and wept and fasted** until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the people of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.*

*Est 4:3 (NASB) And in each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was **great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes.***

The fact that the Jews choose fasting as an expression of mourning may also be tied to the physical phenomenon where you can become so engaged in something that eating is the last thing on your mind. This may be times of great grief, joy or total involvement in a task, where some outside observer may even have to remind you to eat. But these occasions are not planned as a fast, but naturally happen.

Once the Jews choose fasting, God demanded that the expression be valid.

Zec 7:5 (NASB) "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?'

Isa 58:4-5 (NASB) "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high. "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed, And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD?"

Jer 14:12 (NASB) "When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence."

Several examples of fasting in the bible are associated with the recognized sin of the people.

Judg 20:26 (NASB) Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept; thus they remained there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD.

1 Sam 7:6 (NASB) And they gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah.

1 Ki 21:27 (NASB) And it came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently.

Neh 1:4 (NASB) Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Neh 9:1 (NASB) Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them.

Some fasting was clearly supernatural – don't try this at home.

Moses

*Exo 34:28 (NASB) So he was there with the LORD **forty days and forty nights**; he did not eat **bread or drink water**. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.*

Jesus

*Mat 4:2 (NASB) And after He had fasted **forty days and forty nights**, He then became hungry.*

Elijah

*1 Ki 19:8 (NASB) So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food **forty days and forty nights** to Horeb, the mountain of God.*

Sometime the fasting was the normal expression of grief that we experience in the loss of a loved one and not really directed to God.

1 Sam 31:13 (NASB) And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

1 Chr 10:12 (NASB) all the valiant men arose and took away the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons, and brought them to Jabesh and buried their bones under the oak in Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

When it comes to the New Testament, our guide to faith and practice, we find fasting only mentioned in the historical documents. If this practice was to be followed in the Church it would seem logical that the epistles would contain sufficient information for us to carry out the practice.

Fasting in the New Testament is mentioned as follows:

Jesus went without food and water for forty days prior to his temptation by Satan.

Mat 4:2 (NASB) And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.

This is clearly not the norm and only accomplished by Moses at the receipt of the ten commandments and Elijah.

The disciples of John asking why Jesus and his disciples did not fast.

(Parallel passages Mark 2:18-20, Luke 5:33-35)

Mat 9:14 (NASB) Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Mat 9:15 (NASB) And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

The passage emphasizes that Jesus and the disciples did not fast, and that after Jesus was gone his disciples would then mourn (fast). There is no indication that this would be the norm for the Church. The prediction is that the disciples (Jews) would mourn for the loss of their leader as was typical, with a fast.

The Jewish widow in the temple.

Luke 2:37 (NASB) and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. And she never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers.

The residual practice of the Jews.

The Pharisee praying.

Luke 18:11-12 (NASB) "The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

An excellent example of hypocrisy – something not to be followed..

The failure to cast out demons.

Mat 17:21 (NASB) <"But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.">

Mark 9:28-29 (NASB) And when He had come into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."

This may be a spurious verse, not found in the best manuscripts and the parallel passage of Mark does not include the word fasting.

This leaves us with the historical book of Acts – not necessarily a good doctrinal guide since several incidents recorded here are historical fact but not necessarily good doctrine. (Previously covered – casting lots to make decisions, Paul's Nazarite vow of shaving his head, the sign gifts in full use, receiving the Holy Spirit before baptism, etc.).

Setting apart of Barnabas and Saul

Acts 13:1-3 (NASB) Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

Appointing elders

Acts 14:23 (NASB) And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Mention of a Jewish fast during Paul's journey

Acts 27:9 (NASB) And when considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them,

Of these three occurrences in Acts, one of them, the mention of the fast being over provides no justification for continuing the Jewish practice. The other two could provide some grounds for assuming it was intended for continuation in the Church. In both cases, individuals were set aside for service by fasting and praying. Was this a continuation of a "neutral" Jewish practice? Neutral from the standpoint that God would accept this action as legitimate but was not required. Or was this the mandate for how elders and

evangelists were set aside? Since the 21 epistles are replete with details about practice in the Church and never mention fasting, one could conclude that these two events were a carryover of a Jewish practice.

There are other doctrinal statements in the New Testament that seem to deemphasize fasting, particularly:

*Rom 14:17 (NASB) for the **kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.***

*1 Cor 8:8 (NASB) **But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.***

These state fairly clearly that God is not interested in our eating or not eating but being righteous.

Fasting is not unique to Christianity. The attached material lists some religions that are involved in fasting and why. It is important to remember that fasting came into Christianity primarily through the Roman Catholic Church where fasting was a penance, a way to pay for committed sin.

If fasting is to be done by Christians today we are without scriptural guidance on how, when and why. The extra-Biblical material available today on fasting seems to be pure speculation.