

## Fasting and the Bible

### I. An Introduction to Fasting

- **Definitions of Fasting**
  - The most inclusive definition used by many today is summed up well by Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones, “abstinence from anything that is legitimate in and of itself for some special spiritual purpose.” This can include technology, sugar, and even sex — as we see in I Corinthians 7:5.
  - However, there is a narrower definition of fasting that refers to “voluntary abstinence from physical nourishment — food and drink — for special spiritual purposes.” This is the type of fasting we see in the Scripture.
- **Fasting in the Old Testament**
  - The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29, 21, 23:27-32; Numbers 29:7)
  - After the Exile (Zechariah 8:19)
  - Occasional Fasts (II Samuel 12:22; Judges 20:26)
  - Fasting gave expression to . . .
    - Grief (I Samuel 31:13; II Samuel 1:12, 3:35; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:3; Psalm 35:13-14)
    - Penitence (I Samuel 7:6; I Kings 21:27; Nehemiah 9:1-2; Daniel 9:3-5; Jonah 3:5-8)
    - Humility (Ezra 8:21; Psalm 69:10)
    - Neediness (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9; II Samuel 12:16-23; II Chronicles 30:3-4; Ezra 8:21-23)
- **Fasting in the New Testament**
  - Day of Atonement (Acts 27:9 [Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:27-29; Numbers 29:7])
  - Pharisees (Luke 18:11-12; Matthew 9:14)
  - Anna (Luke 2:36-37)
  - Jesus (Matthew 4:1-4)
  - Disciples (Matthew 6:16-18)
  - Church Leaders (Acts 13:2-3, 14:23)
  - Paul (II Corinthians 6:5, 11:27 [Acts 9:9; I Corinthians 7:5])

### II. The Components of Fasting

- **The Degree of Abstinence**
  - A Normal Fast is abstinence from all food and drink. (Esther 4:15-16; Ezekiel 10:6; Acts 9:8-9; and Deuteronomy 9:9)
  - A Partial Fast abstinence from certain foods and drinks. (Daniel 1:12)
- **The Number of Participants in the Fast**
  - Privates Fasts involve one yourself. (Matthew 6:16-18)
  - Small Group Fasts involve more than one person. (Acts 13:1-3)
  - Congregational Fasts involve a larger group of people. (Esther 4:16; Nehemiah 9:1; Joel 2:15-16)
- **The Lengths of the Fast**
  - The Scriptures teach us about fasts that cover part of a day (Judges 20:26-28), one day (Jeremiah 36:6), three days (Esther 4:1, Acts 9:8-9), seven days (I Samuel 31:13), ten days (Daniel) twenty-one days (Daniel 10:2-3), and even the three different forty day fasts of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus (Deuteronomy 9:9, I Kings 19:8, Matthew 4:1-2).

### - The Frequency of Fasts

- Regular Fasts happen on a regular basis. The Day of Atonement is a good example of that (Leviticus 16:29-31). And the Pharisees in Luke 8:12 congratulated themselves for fasting twice *every* week.
- Occasional Fasts are motivated by perceived needs. Mosts fasts in the Bible fall under this category.
- Continuous Fasts involve abstaining from certain foods and drinks for long portions of time including one's whole life. (Samson, the Nazarites, John the Baptist [Matthew 3:4])

## III. Should Christians Fast?

### - The New Testament sets divine expectations for our food and drink.

- I Timothy 4:1-5; Romans 14:3-6; I Corinthians 8
- Generally speaking, food and drink are part of God's good creation and from which we are not meant to abstain *if* it is received with *thanksgiving*.
- It seems that Paul is eager to warn against a kind of asceticism that exalts fasting in such a way that God's goodness in the gift of food is overlooked or distorted.
- This leads us to conclude that Christian fasting is not some form of asceticism. In Colossians 2:20-23, Paul warns against that kind of severe lifestyle. He says that it dishonors Christ by rejecting the sufficiency of His person and work.

### - Fasting is nowhere **commanded** in the New Testament, yet it is abundantly clear in Scripture that Jesus **assumed** His followers would fast.

- Nowhere in the Bible are New Testament Christians *commanded* to fast, but everywhere that fasting is discussed, it is assumed that New Testament Christians — Jews and Gentiles — *would be fasting*. And this is significant for two reasons.
  - God doesn't command fasting because living in this fallen world sometimes requires people to eat. Some of you have health issues that would make it dangerous to stop eating even for a portion of the day. Jesus recognized that modern individuals would have health issues not experienced by most in the New Testament times. And had He directly commanded that we *had* to fast, many of you would be in a conflict of conscious. But it's not commanded, and — likely — for this very reason.
- The obvious assumption is that Christians *will* obviously fast. In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus Himself gives us a negative command, a positive command, and a promise.
  - The negative command is that we should not look somber *when* we're fasting — like we're suffering as we fast.
  - The positive command is that no one should be able to tell by your appearance *when* you're fasting. The only observer of your fast should be God.
  - The promise is that "*your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*"
- Jesus gives no specific command about when, how often, or how long we should fast. Just like all of our obedience, fasting is not to be a legalistic routine. Instead, it's a *privilege* and an opportunity to seek God's grace.
- Therefore, The Celebration of God believes we should use fasting as much as possible as part of our worship of God. Fasting *is a powerful tool* to use in our celebration of God, and the burden falls on us to know, understand, and utilize this glorious resource.
- Matthew 9:14-17 — Who is the bridegroom? Jesus. When was He taken away from His disciples? When He ascended into Heaven. (II Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23)