

Fasting

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

Introduction:

A. Background and History

1. Fast in Hebrew - ta'anit, taanis, or ta'anith is a fast in Judaism in which one abstains from all food and drink, including water. A Jewish fast may have different purposes:
 - a. A tool for repentance
 - b. An expression of mourning
 - c. Supplication
 - d. Ta'anit Halom - fast over a disturbing dream
2. Jewish fast days
 - a. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the most well known and most universally practiced. Commanded in Lev. 23:26-32. It is a full fast, from sunset to full darkness the following night.
 - b. The other full fast is the Ninth of Av, Tisha B'Av. These fast days carry four additional restrictions: one may not wash his body, wear leather shoes, use oils or scents, or have intimate relations.
 - c. All other fasts are minor fasts, observed from dawn to nightfall, without additional restrictions. Minor fasts:
 - 1) Fast of Gedalia (Tzom Gedalia)
 - 2) Tenth of Tevet (Asara B'Tevet)
 - 3) Seventeenth of Tammuz (Shiva Asar B'Tammuz)
 - 4) The Fast of Esther, Ta'anit Esther
 - 5) Firstborn males were to observe the day preceding Passover as the Fast of the Firstborn (Ta'anit Bechorot)
 - 6) Lesser Yom Kippur (Katan) 29th of Heshvan, Tevet, Shevat, Adar, Sheni, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz & Av
 - 7) BaHaB - Monday and Thursday after the 1st & 2nd Sabbath of Heshvan and Iyar
 - 8) Marriage fast - bride and groom fast on their wedding day, from daybreak until the chuppah (wedding feast) and yichud (seclusion after the ceremony)
 - 9) Taanit Tzadikim - fast of the righteous ones on the Hebrew death anniversaries of great people: Fast of Pilegsh Bagiva (23rd Shevat), Fast of Moses (7th Adar), Fast of Nadab and Abihu (1st Nisan), Fast of Miriam (10th Nisan), Fast of Joshua (26th Nisan), Fast of Samuel (28th Iyar), Fast of Aaron (1st Av)

B. Studying Fasting

1. "In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the 'Golden Arches' and an assortment of 'Pizza Temples,' fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times." (Richard Foster, *The Celebration Of Discipline*, p. 47)
2. Attitudes toward fasting go to extremes

- a. "Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason, and others have utterly disregarded it" (John Wesley).
 - b. Some consider fasting unnecessary, unpleasant, or archaic, and ignore it
 - c. Others think fasting is to be bound as a matter of faith for Christians in all times and places
3. It is a sensitive matter
- a. It is personal to us; it regards food: necessary for survival, used to improve health and treat illness, facilitates social activities, helps with emotional state
 - b. It is a non-traditional subject; not a single book was published on fasting among brethren from 1861 to 1954
4. The scriptures speak of it frequently (107 times)
- a. Those who fasted: Moses, King David, Anna the aged prophetess, Elijah, Esther, apostle Paul, and Jesus Christ the Son of God, to name a few
 - b. Jesus taught more on fasting than on baptism or communion
5. Why is this subject avoided by brethren?
- a. Fasting has developed a bad reputation as a result of the excessive ascetic practices of the Middle Ages (Foster, *ibid*).
 - b. Many have simply concluded that fasting was a Jewish custom, of no important in the Christian Dispensation
 - c. We are convinced by public common knowledge that if we do not have three complete, substantial meals each day, with snacks in between, we will become malnourished (we eat, not because we need to eat. but because it's time to eat) (Foster, *ibid*).
6. As the Bible has much to say about fasting, it is imperative that we consider what it says.
- a. Withhold judgment until we have considered all the material - Prov. 18:13. We are miners of the scriptures, not manufacturers
 - b. Avoid drawing hasty conclusions - Prov. 14:29

I. FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. The Day of Atonement - Lev. 16:29-31, 23:26-32; Num. 29:7
- 1. The only fast commanded the Law of Moses
 - 2. Not called fasting; the phrase "afflict your soul" referred to fasting
 - 3. Afflict - anah - "a primitive root with the idea of looking down or browbeating; to depress literally or figuratively as follows: abase self, afflict self, chasten self, deal harshly with, defile, exercise, force, humble self, hurt, submit self, weaken in any wise (Strong's)
 - a. Psalm 69:10 - "chastened my soul with fasting"
 - b. Acts 27:9 - fast refers to the Day of Atonement
 - 4. "Afflict your soul" suggests the purpose of fasting is refinement of the soul and not the body
- B. Other Old Testament fasts: people often fasted without specific commandment in time of distress; some were collective while others were individual choice

1. During war or under threat of it - Judges 20:26; 1Sam. 7:6
 2. When loved ones were sick - 2Sam. 12:16-23; Psalm 35:11-13
 3. When loved ones died - 1Sam. 31:13; 1Chron. 10:12; 2Sam. 1:12
 4. When seeking God's forgiveness - Deut. 9:15-18; 1Kings 21:17-29; Jonah 3:4-10; Dan. 9:3-5; Neh. 9:1-3
 5. When faced with impending danger - 2Chron. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; Neh. 1:4; Esther 4:3, 16
 6. To commemorate specific disasters - Jer, 52:12-13; 2Kings 25:23-95; Jer. 41:1; 2Kings 25:1, 3-4
- C. The purpose of fasting
1. Some fasting was a natural reaction to grief
 2. But more often, fasting was done to purposely afflict or chasten the soul
Psalm 69:10
 3. To humble the soul - Psalm 35:13
 4. To solicit God's favor - Ezra 8:21-23; Isa. 57:15, 66:1-2
 - a. For forgiveness for sin, loved ones restored to health, protection from danger, deliverance from enemies
 - b. When fasting to obtain Divine favor, they would nearly always accompany fasting with prayer
- D. The nature of fasting
1. A common means of fasting involved abstaining from food but not water
 2. Occasionally the fast was partial: a restriction of diet but not total abstention - Dan. 10:2-3
 3. On rare occasions, it would be a complete fast - Jonah 3:5-10; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9
 4. Some fasts required Divine assistance - Deut, 9:9; 1Kings 19:8
- E. The length of fasts
1. Fasts were often for one day, from sunrise to sunset, and after sundown food would be taken - Judges 20:26; 1Sam. 14:24; 2Sam. 1:12, 3:35
 2. Some fasts would be for one night - Dan. 6:18
 3. The fast of Esther continued for three days and nights, possibly a special case - Esther 4:16
 4. At Saul's burial, the fast was seven days - 1Sam. 31:13; 1Chron. 10:12
 5. David fasted seven days when his child was ill - 2Sam. 12:16-18
 6. The longest fasts recorded in Scripture were forty day fasts by Moses, Elijah, & Jesus - Ex. 34:28; Deut. 9:9; 1Kings 19:8; Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2
- F. Warnings concerning fasting
1. Fasting can easily turn into an external show and ceremonial ritualism
 - a. Isa. 58; Zech. 7:1-14

II. FASTING THAT IS NOT APPROVED - ISAIAH 58

A. Isaiah 58 - Exegete text

1. Judah believed themselves righteous. They were doing many of the right things, including fasting, but it was a hollow shell of service; it appeared to be a fast, but it was missing so much. They pleaded that they could see no transgressions of which they were guilty; they were

diligent and constant in attending on God's worship; so what more did He want from them?

- B. God's answer: He acknowledges that they do some good
1. As far as hypocrites do can good, they were praised for that good; after all, they did have a form of godliness.
 - a. They go to church and pray, sing and participate
 - b. They are consistent in the good works that they do when others are watching, and are given credit for it
 - c. They love to hear good preaching; Herod heard John gladly; the stony ground received the seed with joy - Ez. 33:32
 - d. They seem to take great pleasure in the services
 - 1) "They delight in approaching to God, not for His sake to Whom they approach, but for the sake of some pleasing circumstance, the company, or the observance." (Matthew Henry)
 - e. They are inquisitive concerning their duty and appear to desire to know it, and they do not question their need to do it
 - f. They appear to the eye of the world as if they conscientiously do their part. They are careful to expose nothing that contradicts this
 - 1) "Men may go a great way towards heaven and yet come short; nay, many go to hell with a good reputation." (Ibid)
 2. God says that this is so far from covering their sins that it actually compounds their sins
 - a. It makes them feel justified in charging God with being unfair for not accepting their hollow service - Gen. 4:5
 - b. It leads them to boast about their service; Pharisees - Luke 18:12
 - c. They thought God should take great notice of them, and consider Himself blessed for their services.
 - d. They were angry that God had not shown His approval of them, and charge Him with injustice and partiality
 - 1) Job 21:15; Mal. 3:14
 - 2) Sinners and hypocrites consider religion as a hard, sad, unpleasant service that does them no good or profit, when in reality it does them no good because they are insincere in its practice
- C. Hollow fasts: Fast days are generally called holidays (Holy Days), and holidays became days of idleness and pleasure. In many cases the fast is turned into a feast, because they have entirely lost its purpose
1. They were supposed to give their servants the day off. They were supposed to do no work for profit: conducting business, settling accounts, paying bills, collecting on debts. They were supposed to give to the poor the food they would have eaten that day, or at least its cash equivalent; because the poor often fast because they have no food
 2. God refused their fast because it was false - Isa. 1:11-14
 3. The true nature of a religious fast is to honor God and to humble one's self - Lev. 16:29

4. What makes a fast acceptable to God?
 - a. It is not enough to put on a sad, suffering face - Matt. 6:16; Luke 18:13
 - b. It is not enough to go through the motions of a fast afflicting the body, if nothing is done about one's sins before God - Zech. 7:5
 - c. Be just to those with whom we have dealt harshly: servants, prisoners, debtors - Lev. 16:29
 - d. Be generous to those in need, providing for them on that day what you would your own family - 1Tim. 5:8; Matt. 25:40
 - 1) Give freely and cheerfully - 2Cor. 9:7
 - 2) Give abundantly so as not to tantalize, but to satisfy, the afflicted - 2Cor. 9:5-6

- D. Holy fasts produce glory for God and blessings for the righteous
 1. God will bless them with mercy after their great affliction
 2. God will honor them. Good works will be repayed with a good name
 3. They will be safe under Divine protection
 4. God will always be near to hear their prayers - Acts 10:4; 1Peter 3:12
 5. God will direct them in difficult matters
 6. God will give them honest satisfaction for their service - Psalm 63:1-5
 7. They and their families shall be a blessing to others around them and will be praised by them

III. FASTING THAT IS APPROVED

A. Fasting by first century Christians

1. What Jesus taught
 - a. He assumed His disciples would fast voluntarily, at least in the Sermon on the Mount; He said "when" not "if" - Matt. 6:16-17
 - b. He said they would fast when He was gone - Matt. 9:14-15
 - c. He taught:
 - 1) How to fast in a way that pleases God - Matt. 6:16-18
 - 2) Fasting should be done when appropriate - Matt. 9:16-17
 - 3) There were occasions when prayer needed to be accompanied with fasting - Matt. 17:20-21
2. Examples of fasting in the early church - Acts 13:1-3, 14:21-23
 - a. Done in times of great trouble, for important decisions, and when appointing elders
3. Fasts of the apostle Paul - 2Cor. 11:23-28

B. Why did Christians fast?

1. People fast today for various reasons: health, in times of grief and sorrow, or as a way to gain self-control. But these are not reasons Christians should fast in service to God - Col. 2:20-23
2. It would be appropriate for Christians to fast when seeking Divine help.
 - a. In the New Testament, the Lord and Christians fasted: when dealing with temptations (Jesus), when serving the Lord in with beginning a new work (church at Antioch), when appointing elders (in Galatia) and in times of protracted prayer

3. It must be understood that all fasting done in the New Testament was voluntary and was never made a binding matter of the faith; therefore, it cannot become a matter of doctrine that determines fellowship.
4. Fasting has the potential to help one to persist in prayer - Luke 18:1-8; Matt. 6:17-18

C. How should Christians fast?

1. Not to be seen of men - Matt. 6:16-18
2. Not as a structured ritual - Matt. 9:14-17
3. Accompanied with true, humble repentance and obedience from the heart - Isa. 58:3-9

D. Practical considerations:

1. Don't fast merely because it's something new or seems religiously cool; fast only on serious occasions when you need God's help
2. If you have never fasted before, begin slowly, and base it on sound medical counsel
3. Fast when you have time to dedicate to prayer and meditation