

CPC Sunday Studies
Winter Convocation, 2023

A THEOLOGY OF FASTING

1. Old Testament

1. *Expression of Confession of Sin or Mourning*

1. Judges 20:26 - *"Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the Lord and **fasted** that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord"*
2. 1Samuel 7:6 - *"So they gathered at 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 people of Israel at Mizpah."*
3. 1Kings 21:27 - *"And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and **fasted** and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly." [God commends him for this to Elijah]*
4. Psalms 69:10 - *"For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. When I wept and humbled my soul with **fasting**, it became my reproach."*
5. Nehemiah 1:4 - *"As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued **fasting** and praying before the God of heaven"*
6. Joel 2:12-3 - *"'Yet even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with **fasting**, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.'"*
7. See also: Neh. 9.1; Psalms 35.13, 109.24; Esther 4.3; Joel 1.14; Jonah 3.15

2. *Seeking the Lord's Blessing or Will*

1. Exodus 34:28 - *"So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments."*
2. 2Samuel 12:16ff - *"David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David **fasted** and went in and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. On the seventh day the child died.... Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set*

food before him, and he ate. Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You **fasted** and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." He said, "While the child was still alive, I **fasted** and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I **fast**? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

3. See also: 1Kings 19.8; 2Chron. 20.3; Ezra 8.21, 23; Esther 4.15-6; Daniel 9.3;

3. **Fasting as pretense for false spirituality and hypocrisy**

1. Isaiah 58:3-8 - "Why have we **fasted**, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it? 'Behold, in the day of your **fast** you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you **fast** only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. **Fasting** like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the **fast** that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a **fast**, and a day acceptable to the Lord? "Is not this the **fast** that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard"

2. See also Jer. 14.12; Zech. 7.5

2. **New Testament**

1. **From the Gospels (but, debatably, under the old covenant???)**

1. Matthew 6:16-8 - "And when you **fast**, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their **fasting** may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you **fast**, anoint your head and wash your face, that your **fasting** may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."
2. Jesus Temptation - "And after **fasting** forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." (Matthew 4:2)
3. Luke 2:37 - "and then as a widow until she was eighty- four. She [Anna] did not depart from the temple, worshiping with **fasting** and prayer night and day."

4. Acts 27:9 - *“Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the **Fast** was already over, Paul advised them”*

2. **Seeking the Lord’s Blessing or Will**

1. Acts 13:2-3 - *“While they were worshiping 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 after **fasting** and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”*
2. Acts 14:22-3 - *“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and **fasting** they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*

3. **Fasting now, or between cross and resurrection?**

1. Matthew 9:14-7 - *“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, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will **fast**. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” [cf. Mark 2:18ff.; Luke 5:33ff.] - compare this with Zechariah 8:19 - “Thus says 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 seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace”*
1. The type of fasting Jesus seems to be counseling, “when the bridegroom is taken away”, is the time (I think!) between the cross and resurrection because it is not consistent with the disciples in the book of Acts to fast “as if the bridegroom is taken away” - he’s not gone, but with them by the Spirit, hallelujah, and they are witnesses to the resurrection!
2. Aside from debating this text, remember the “already-not yet” truth of the Christian life.

3. **Biblical Conclusions - “When” do we fast?**

1. If a Christian fasts, we fast according to the “not yet” of the kingdom
2. There is similarity to how we ought to fast and how OT believers fasted, but there is also importance dissimilarity!

1. We don't have to worry whether God will forgive or respond.
2. We have greater assurance of forgiveness and access to God now because of Christ

4. Theological Understandings

1. **Function of Sanctification, not Justification**

1. For example - Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and our new relation to the Law
2. Seeking the Lord's blessing and will (see Acts passages above)

2. **Westminster Catechisms**

1. WLC, Q. 108 - "What are the duties required in the second commandment?
A. The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his Word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintainance thereof; **religious fasting**; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry."

3. **Denominational Book of Church Order**

1. *Chapter 4, "The Particular Church," section 4* - "The ordinances established by Christ, the Head, in His Church are prayer; singing praises; reading, expounding and preaching the Word of God; administering the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; public solemn **fasting** and thanksgiving; catechizing; making offerings for the relief of the poor and for other pious uses; and exercising discipline; the taking of solemn vows, and the ordination to sacred office."
2. *Chapter 62 - Days of Fasting and Thanksgiving* (does *not* have constitutional authority in the PCA, but is used as a "Directory")
 1. 62-1. The observance of days of fasting and of thanksgiving, as the dispensations of Divine Providence may direct, is both scriptural and rational.

2. 62-3. It should be left to the judgment and discretion of every Christian and family to determine when it is proper to observe a private fast or thanksgiving; and to the church Sessions to determine for particular congregations; and to the Presbyteries, to determine for larger districts. When it is deemed expedient that a fast or thanksgiving should be general, the call for it should be issued by the General Assembly. If at any time the civil power should appoint a fast or thanksgiving, in keeping with the Christian faith, it is the duty of the ministers and people of our communion to pay all due respect to it.
 3. 62-4. Public notice should be given a sufficient time before the appointed day of fasting or thanksgiving, that persons **may so order their affairs** as to allow them to attend properly to the duties of the day.
4. **Second Helvetic Confession (1566)**
1. **Ch. 24** - "Now, the more seriously the Church of Christ condemns surfeiting, drunkenness, and all kinds of lust and intemperance, so much the more strongly does it commend to us Christian fasting. For fasting is nothing else than the abstinence and moderation of the godly, and a discipline, care and chastisement of our flesh undertaken as a necessity for the time being, whereby we are **humbled before God**, and we deprive the flesh of its fuel so that it may the **more willingly and easily obey the Spirit**. . . . Fasting is an aid to the prayers of the saints and for all virtues. . . . Private fasts are undertaken by each one of us, as he feels himself **withdrawn from the Spirit**. For in this manner he withdraws the flesh from its fuel. . . . All fasts ought to proceed from a **free and willing spirit**, and from genuine **humility**, and not feigned to gain the applause or favor of men, much less that a man should wish to merit righteousness by them. But let every one fast to this end, that he may **deprive the flesh of its fuel in order that he may the more zealously serve God**."
5. **John Calvin writes extensively and eloquently** on the virtues of fasting in his Institutes of the Christian Religion. He says that, "according to the need of the times, [pastors] should exhort the people either to fasting or to solemn supplications, or to other acts of humility, repentance, and faith" (4.12.14). Calvin elaborates on the "need of the times" as follows: "whenever a controversy over religion arises . . . whenever there is a question about choosing a minister . . .

whenever ... any difficult matter of great importance is to be discussed, ... or [in times of] pestilence, war, and famine” (4.12.14).

1. Calvin defines fasting as follows: “we do not understand it simply as restraint and abstemiousness in food, but as something else. Throughout its course, the **life** of the godly indeed ought to be tempered with frugality and sobriety, so that as far as possible **it bears some resemblance to a fast**. But, in addition, there is another sort of fasting, **temporary** in character, when we withdraw something from the normal regimen of living, either for one day or for a definite time, and pledge ourselves to a tighter and more severe restraint in diet than ordinarily. This consists in three things: in time, in quality of foods, and in smallness of quantity (4.12.18).
2. Basically, for Calvin this means for certain periods of time to avoid delicacies and eat more sparingly, “only for need, not also for pleasure.”
3. Calvin identifies three purposes of fasting:
 1. as a **personal spiritual discipline**, to control the appetites of the body;
 2. as preparation for **prayer and meditation**, which can either be a public or private practice; and
 3. as testimony of our **repentance** before God and our reliance on God’s provision and strength, which can also be a public or private practice (4.12.15).
4. On the idea of fasting as an **appropriate accompaniment to prayer**, he says: “Surely we experience this: with a full stomach our mind is not so lifted up to God that it can be drawn to prayer with a serious and ardent affection and persevere in it” (4.12.16). As for the notion of fasting in a time of public disaster or crisis, Calvin points to examples from scripture (noted above), concluding: “What reason is there why we should not do the same?” (4.12.17).
5. As one might expect, Calvin is highly critical of any practices of fasting that, in his view, smack of hypocrisy, superstition or works of merit. The point is that fasting is primarily the embodiment of an inner disposition — a reorientation of the heart, which includes true repentance, self-examination and humility.