

Fasting

Introduction

The topic of fasting is one of those topics that people are somewhat aware of but are rather confused about. Confusion often arises because fasting is viewed differently by a variety of people and so how are we to know if what we hear is truly correct? In order to answer this question, the place that we need to turn to is the Scriptures. The only way that confusion can be eliminated is by having a solid foundation of what the Scriptures teach concerning fasting. Before moving on to our examination of Scripture, it is important to state up front that the purpose of this study is not to convict you of your lack of fasting. Sadly, this is how many articles, books, and sermons on fasting approach this topic. In contrast, the goal of this study is to provide clarity to the topic of fasting by examining the Scriptures in order to understand what role fasting should play in the believer's life today.

The Definition of Fasting

Before diving directly into what the Scriptures teach concerning fasting, it would be helpful to first establish a simple definition of fasting that we can then build off of. Fasting can be simply defined as “the voluntary refraining from eating food for spiritual purposes.”¹ This definition provides three characteristics of fasting. First, fasting is a voluntary action. This means that the reason you are not eating is a conscious choice not to do so rather than not eating because external circumstances prohibit you from doing so (for example, if you simply do not have food to eat). Second, fasting involves refraining from eating food. This does not specify to what degree you are to abstain from eating, which leaves room open to abstaining from food for just a meal, or maybe a meal a day, or all meals for a day or two. The point is not the degree but rather that to some extent you are abstaining from eating food. Third, fasting is for spiritual purposes. This means that in fasting we are not abstaining from the eating of food for some other purposes such as dieting, busy schedule, etc. Instead, fasting is to free up time for spiritual purposes, which in most cases, as described in the Bible, is prayer.

The Context of Fasting

Now that we have examined the definition of fasting, we will look at the Scriptures in order to see the context in which fasting takes place. It is through examining the examples we have in Scripture that a lot of confusion concerning fasting can be clarified. So let's take a look at some of the passages in which fasting is mentioned, starting first in the Old Testament and then moving into the New Testament.

Fasting in the Old Testament

2 Samuel 12:16

After David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, the Lord confronts David through the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1-15. Within this confrontation the Lord declares that the child that was to be born on account of David's adulterous acts with Bathsheba would die.

¹ Paraphrased from Don Green, “The Heart of Christian Fasting, Part 1: Fasting in the Old Testament.”

Then we see in 2 Samuel 12:15b that the child is born and becomes sick. This then leads up to verse 16, which states, “David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.” David continued to do this until finally the child did in fact die and upon receiving the news of the child’s death David arose washed himself, worshiped, and ate (v. 20). The reason for this behavior of David is explained in verse 21 in which David explains that the reason he fasted when the child was still alive was that he was hoping that the Lord would be gracious to him and allow the child to live, but since the child died he saw no reason to continue fasting.

Ezra 8:21–23

In these verses, Ezra is about to lead a group of Israelites out of exile and back to the land of Israel. Before they leave for their journey Ezra calls for the people to fast in order to humble themselves before God and ask that he would provide a safe journey for them. Verse 22 then gives a helpful insight into why such an extreme measure as proclaiming a fast was necessary. Ezra explains that he did not want to ask the King of Persia for soldiers or horsemen to protect them because he had essentially told the king that their God is able to protect them on their journey. So in Ezra’s mind, if they did not arrive to the land of Israel safely, then in the eyes of the Persians it would be as if their God failed and was not actually the sovereign God who is able to protect his people. Therefore, with the reputation of the Lord at stake, Ezra proclaimed a fast imploring the Lord to protect his people so that His reputation and name would not be profaned.

Remaining Old Testament Passages

The remaining passages in the Old Testament could be examined more fully like those above, but it is sufficient for our purposes here to give a brief summary of the contexts in which fasting takes place in the remainder of the Old Testament. These passages can be divided into two primary categories: imminent threat/persecution and repentance/confession. In regards to the former, there are many occurrences in the Old Testament where God’s people are faced with the threat of persecution or destruction, which cause those facing this threat to turn to the Lord in prayer and fasting in order to implore the Lord to deliver them (2 Chronicles 20:3; Esther 4:3; Psalm 69:10; 109:24). The second context in which people fasted in the Old Testament was in times of repentance. This occurred when people were confronted with the grievousness of their sin and therefore fasted in order to devote themselves to prayer as they sought forgiveness from the Lord (Nehemiah 9:1; Daniel 9:3; Joel 1:14; 2:12, 15). Sometimes these two categories are blended such as in the case of Nineveh when they are confronted with the reality that God’s judgment was coming upon them, which caused them to call for a fast and to repent (Jonah 3:5). There is also a passage where David, even though in the context of persecution, tells of how he prayed and fasted for his enemies when they were sick (Psalm 35:13).

Fasting in the New Testament

It is interesting that as you approach the New Testament you begin to see not as many references to fasting. There are a few passages that involve people fasting and then there are a few passages that give instruction concerning fasting. These two categories of passages will be examined below.

Occurrences of People Fasting

There are five passages that depict people fasting. One of the most popular passages is the account of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2). These accounts state that the temptation occurred after Jesus had been fasting for forty days and forty nights. There is also the brief mention of the prophetess Anna who fasted and prayed in the temple night and day and gave thanks to God when Jesus was brought to the temple as a baby (Luke 2:37). In Acts we also see the apostle Paul fasting after his conversion (Acts 9:9). Then you have some of the leaders of the church at Antioch praying and fasting as they sent off Barnabas and Saul (Paul) on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:2–3). Lastly, there is Paul, Barnabas, and the elders of the churches of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch praying and fasting as Paul and Barnabas committed them to the Lord (Acts 14:23).

Instructions concerning Fasting

The New Testament does not actually give much instruction concerning the practice of fasting. We see primarily two instances where fasting is addressed. First, Jesus instructs believers concerning fasting during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16–18). Jesus teaches that when you fast you are to do so in a way that does not seek the attention and praise of man but rather that desires to only be seen by the Lord. In other words, fasting is not meant to be a way that we flaunt our “religious devotion” but rather is a personal interaction between you and God. Second, we see people questioning Jesus as to why Jesus' disciples do not fast even though the Pharisees and the disciples of John do (Matthew 9:14–17; Mark 2:18–20; Luke 5:33–35). Jesus simply responded that it was inappropriate for his disciples to fast while he was there with them during his earthly ministry, but after his earthly ministry was complete there would come a time when his disciples would fast. Because of all that was happening and being done during Jesus' earthly ministry there was no need for the disciples to fast. This seems to make clear a connection between how Jesus himself viewed fasting and the examples we have seen in the Old and New Testaments and allows us to be able to draw some conclusions about the proper context of fasting to which we will now turn.

Conclusions from the Context of Fasting

Upon examining the contexts in the Old and New Testaments where fasting occurs, we begin to see a theme develop. From the Old Testament we saw clearly that fasting primarily occurred in times of great distress. This was distress brought about by an imminent threat/persecution, a grievance over sin and realizing the need to repent, the sickness or impending death of an individual, or even the weight felt in not wanting the Lord's name and reputation to be tarnished. In the New Testament we saw similar realities where fasting was taking place in times of such weight and importance such as before Jesus' temptation from the devil, Paul's conversion, and the committing and sending out of church leaders. We also saw in the New Testament Jesus' teaching concerning fasting, which concerned itself primarily with having the proper heart behind your fasting as well as showing that there are proper and improper times to fast. Therefore it seems from these observations that fasting, according to what we see portrayed in the Bible, occurs in times of distress or great significance where the Lord's strength, guidance,

compassion, or intervention needs to be sought. An illustration can help in making this principle more clear. It is as if a student is studying for a test so intently that they feel that they have no time to eat but need to continue to devote themselves to preparing them for their coming exam. In a similar way, fasting seems to occur when circumstances are so pressing and weighty that the individual feels that they need to devote themselves to coming before the Lord in prayer so much so that they feel like they cannot eat or do not even have the time to eat.

The Believer and Fasting

Now that the definition and context of fasting have been examined, we can bring everything together in order to summarize how the believer today should approach fasting.

Freedom to Fast or Not to Fast

It is easy to equate fasting with other spiritual disciplines such as prayer and reading the Bible. However, this equation does not seem to be a biblical one because although we are commanded to pray (Romans 12:12; 1Thessalonians 5:17) and to study the Bible (Colossians 3:16) there is no command for believers to fast. In fact as we have seen the New Testament, especially outside of the Gospels and Acts, is virtually silent about fasting. This silence seems to give freedom to the believer as to what fasting will look like in their life. It then seems fitting to make the statement that if you do not feel like fasting then you probably should not fast. Fasting, as described by Scripture, should be a natural response to circumstances and should not be something that is forced. However, at the same time if someone wants to fast simply for the purpose of being in prayer even though there are no pressing circumstances in their life they have the freedom to do that as well. The believer is free in both regards.

The Heart of Fasting

Above we looked at the brief instructions that Jesus gave concerning fasting and we saw that Jesus was focused on the heart behind fasting. If a time comes in our life where we do feel the need or simply decide to fast, we need to examine our heart behind it. Jesus calls us when we fast to not fast in a way that draws attention from others but rather in a way that is seen only by the Lord. Fasting, if not carefully examined, can end up becoming a practice that we boast in and use to make ourselves feel spiritually superior to and may cause us to look down upon other believers who do not fast. Therefore, while we have the freedom to fast or not to fast, we should never use this freedom as a means of boasting or looking down on other believers but rather fasting should be from the outflow of a heart that desires to earnestly seek the Lord in prayer.