

Text: Ex 34.28

An editorial in a 1999 issue of *Christianity Today* opens this way:

“In 1738, evangelist George Whitefield preached a sermon entitled, ‘The Almost Christian.’ He contrasted ‘almost Christians’ with ‘altogether Christians,’ and berated the former for their ignorance of the faith, their servile fear of being counted odd by others, and their love of money and creature comforts.

“‘Tell them of the necessity of mortification, fasting and self-denial,’ the legendary orator thundered, ‘and it is as difficult for them to hear as if you were to bid them cut off a right hand or pluck out a right eye.’

“Two hundred sixty-one years later, Christians are having less difficulty hearing the call to mortification, fasting, and self-denial. Many in North America are suddenly rediscovering these disciplines and counting it all joy. Rather than grudging the occasional missed meal, they are eagerly gathering by the tens of thousands to engage in corporate fasting and prayer. And they are buying books on fasting by the hundreds of thousands. And all because they long for revival in a land where Christian culture has been squeezed to the margins and where the mirage of Christian political influence has twice evaporated in recent memory.”¹

The article references the rise of what we could call *ritual fasting* by Christians. It is promoted strongly in some circles.

I searched at ChristianBook.com on the term “fasting” — it returned 508 hits. Many of these books seem to be from more Charismatic circles, but I noticed one by Elmer Towns, who was a man not too far removed from the kind of churches we fellowship with.

I’ll give you a brief sampling of some titles:

Elmer Towns: *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough, revised and updated: A Practical Guide to Nine Biblical Fasts*

The Hidden Power of Prayer & Fasting

¹ “Editorial: Not a Fast Fix,” *Christianity Today*, April 5, 1999, 30.

John Piper, et al: *A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer*

Fasting: Opening the Door to a Deeper, More Intimate, More Powerful Relationship with God

How to Fast Successfully

Fasting for Breakthrough and Deliverance

Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools: An Invitation to the Wonder and Mystery of Prayer (This one is due out any day now, publishing “as we speak”)

Most of these titles imply you should make a practice of fasting to some extent.

Yet, as on any topic, do an internet search and you can find any opinion you want. Some are enthusiastic for fasting, others are against. Who is right?

More importantly, though, is this: What does God think about it?

So, we will turn to the Bible to look for answers for our questions.

What is fasting? Who practices fasting? Why do people practice fasting? What does fasting accomplish?

Is it right or wrong to fast? Is it a question of right or wrong?

The subject comes up for us as one of our “Ask the Pastor” questions. Some of these questions require only a simple answer in one message. But on this subject, I think we need a more comprehensive answer (though not an exhaustive one!). I am planning a “mini-series” with the number of messages presently in flux. The more I study about it, the more possibilities I see!

One reason I want to answer thoroughly is the discomfort I feel about the topic. When people mention fasting, I have a vague memory of fasting mentions in the Bible. I know that some advocate it as a semi-regular or regular practice in their personal worship. I get the sense that maybe I should do something about it after all. But most of all,

I feel uncomfortable because I don't like going hungry!

I want a good solid biblical point of view so that whatever we think the Bible says, we have a good foundation for our conclusions. **In addition**, we can model thoughtful Bible study, which is always profitable.

With that, let's get started. I want to read the first mention of fasting in the Bible and then add in a startling passage that doesn't *seem* to be about fasting at first glance.

Read Ex 34.28

Our message today, and through much of this series, will be more teaching than preaching. We are working towards a proposition for the series, not just one message. Today we have a teaching purpose.

Purpose: We want to be clear to understand fasting in the Bible in light of religious practices worldwide.

I. What we mean by fasting

A. The first mention of fasting gives us a place to start

Ex 34.28 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.

1. Moses was with the Lord for forty days
2. He ate no bread nor drank any water

Note: this is an unusual fast, most people trying this today would risk serious health problems. Clearly, God provided for him in some way.

B. The first use of the Hebrew term for fasting comes in Judges 20.26

Jdg 20.26 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. The occasion was the terrible story at the end of Judges where a woman was killed
2. The nation came together in mourning and decided to punish the tribe of Benjamin

C. The Bible words for fasting

1. *tsum* – the main Hebrew word, means “to fast, to abstain from eating”

2. *`anah* – a secondary word, primary meaning is “to force,” when used in fasting it means “to force one’s self, to afflict one’s self, to humble” – significant because it is the word used in Lev 16, the law of the Day of Atonement
3. *nesteuo* – “to go without eating, to fast” (NT word)

D. Definitions

1. “A ritual of abstaining from food and/or drink for a predetermined period”²
2. Not merely ascetic abstinence, but “It may be defined as a self-discipline which consists in the habitual renunciation, in whole or in part, of the enjoyments of the flesh, with a view to the cultivation of the life of the spirit.”³
3. “Spiritual fasting entails setting aside activities as well as reducing the intake of food and replacing these activities with the exercise of prayer and preoccupation with spiritual concerns.”⁴

“Three types of fast are generally recognized: *normal*, in which there is no intake of food for a prescribed period of time, though there may be an intake of liquids; *partial*, in which the diet is limited, though some food is allowed; and *absolute*, in which there is a total abstinence from food and liquids in all forms.”⁵

II. Cultural comparisons: fasting around the world

A. We often think of fasting in terms of our own context

1. The Christian church
2. Judaism

However, the practice of fasting crosses almost all cultural lines.

² “Fasting” in John D. Barry et al., eds., *Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³ Geo. B. Eager, “Abstinence,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 24.

⁴ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 478.

⁵ Elwell and Comfort, 478.

“**FASTING**, that is, complete or partial abstinence from nourishment, is an almost universal phenomenon within both Eastern and Western cultures.”⁶

B. World religions and fasting

1. Ancient world: both Greek and Roman religions had times of fasting
2. Eastern world
 - a. Hinduism
 - b. Jainism
 - c. Buddhism
 - d. Taoism (taught “fasting of the heart” rather than physical fasting)
3. Americas
 - a. Incas
 - b. Some native populations of Mexico
4. Islam – the fast of Ramadan
 - a. Arabic word is *sawm* – related to Heb. *tsum*
 - b. The fourth of the five pillars of Ramadan
 - c. Muslims fast during the daylight hours of Ramadan, then have a meal at night
5. Bahai’s have something they call the Nineteen Day fast
6. Judaism and Christianity
 - a. More later, but Judaism has a tradition of many fasts (one article listed 25 specific fast days)
 - b. Additionally, Pharisaism taught fasting twice a week
 - c. The NT mentions fasting, more on this later, but fasting as a “church-wide event” took time to develop in the history

C. Motivations for fasting

1. Mourning
2. Penance
3. Prayer

⁶ “Fasting | Encyclopedia.Com,” accessed October 22, 2022,

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/other-religious-beliefs-and-general-terms/religion-general/fasting>.

III. Surveying the Bible: introducing the subject in the Bible

A. There is only one command to fast in the Bible: the Day of Atonement (Lev 16)

1. The normal word for fasting isn't used
2. The word that is used is the word for "afflicting oneself, humbling oneself" we mentioned earlier
3. The Day of Atonement is called "the Fast" in Acts 27.9, amid Paul's voyage to shipwreck

Ac 27.9 ¶ When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul *began* to admonish them,

4. Also mentioned as a fast in the Targums and the Dead Sea Scrolls

B. Various public and personal fasts are mentioned throughout the OT

1. Fast of Moses, fast of Israel over the sins of Benjamin, prev. mentions
2. Samuel led the people to fast while preparing for a battle with the Philistines
3. Mourning over the burial of Saul
4. David and his men mourning over Saul and Jonathan
5. David fasted before his child with Bathsheba died
6. Daniel fasted when seeking to understand Jeremiah's prophecy about the seventy-year captivity (Dan 9)
7. Jesus fasted in the wilderness before temptation
8. Elders of Antioch fasted when sending out Paul and Barnabas (Ac 13.2-3)
9. Paul and Barnabas fasted when they ordained elders in churches (Ac 14.23)

C. Zechariah mentions four regular fasts, commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon

Zech 8.19 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth *months* will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace.'

D. Bible teaching on fasts

1. Isaiah criticizes improper fasting (Isa 58)
2. Jesus criticizes improper fasting (Mt 6.16-18)
3. Jesus is questioned on why he and the disciples don't fast (Matt 9:14–15; Mark 2:18–20; Luke 5:33–35)

Conclusion:

What are we to make of all this? I've tried to give a broad overview:

- Fasting is a cross-cultural phenomenon (not exclusively Judaeo-Christian)
- Fasting is at best only commanded once in the Bible, for the OT Jews
- The NT gives us no commandments concerning fasting

Now, there is much more to say on this topic. I want to go through carefully and step by step so that we have a firm grasp of the Biblical teaching.