

Text: Lev 16.1-5, 29-34

Last week we began to answer the question about fasting with a message that gave us some definitions and a bit of a worldwide survey and a quick survey of fasting in the Bible. Our survey of the Bible wasn't comprehensive, just enough to give us a sense of it.

We will go forward working on this definition of fasting:

Fasting is a practice where one goes without food (and sometimes all liquids) for religious purposes.

I want to keep the definition simple, so that it covers all the types of fasting mentioned in the Bible, both "approved" and "unapproved" fasting in the eyes of God.

Today we want to work on this theme:

What Did God Command?

One fact that surprises when we look at fasting in the Bible is that there is only one thing described as a fast that God commanded — the Day of Atonement.

Other fasts are mentioned, some with approval, or at least no negative assessment. Some fasts are not approved, even finding condemnation by God.

Our purpose today is to grapple with God's requirements on the annual Day of Atonement. Did God require *fasting* for ancient Israel on that day? Do the requirements of that Day translate in any way to our day? How do the requirements of the Day of Atonement instruct Christians in the New Testament era?

There are other questions to settle, but today those are the questions I'm trying to address.

Let's turn to Lev 16, the command for the Day of Atonement.

Read Lev 16.1-5, 29-34

Proposition: Christians have no command to fast, but no prohibition either.

I. The ritual of the Day of Atonement (1-5 [and 6-28])

A. Context in Leviticus

1. Lev 1-7: various sacrifices described → provide background for Lev 8-10, ordination of the priests

2. Lev 11-15: laws of cleanness and uncleanness → provide background for Lev 16, Day of Atonement
3. Lev 16 directly connected to sins of Nadab and Abihu (16.1)
 - a. Nadab and Abihu offered “strange fire” before the Lord (Lev 10) → God executed them
 - b. The sins of Nadab and Abihu polluted the sanctuary
4. Day of Atonement answers pollution
 - a. Initially in Day of Atonement (first practice)
 - b. Subsequently in annual ritual (in context of laws of cleanness and uncleanness)
 - c. Sins of the people are polluting, bar access to God
 - d. Day of Atonement is cleansing, enables access to God

B. Ritual summarized

1. Preparation for the ritual (2-5)
 - a. Selection of the bull and ram
 - b. Putting on linen garments
 - c. Selection of the two goats
2. The sacrifices (6-22)
 - a. The bull is sacrificed as a sin offering for Aaron and his sons, blood sprinkled on the ark of the covenant, for their cleansing
 - b. One goat is selected as a sin offering for the people and its blood also sprinkled on the ark of the covenant, to cleanse the people
 - c. The other goat is driven away into the wilderness as a “scapegoat” — symbolizing the removal of the pollution of the sanctuary
3. The intercessory sacrifice of atonement (23-28)
 - a. Aaron changes his clothes to the priestly garments
 - b. Offers another offering in public, now interceding for the people
 - c. Other attendant rituals

II. The restrictions of the Day of Atonement (29-34)

- A. The sacrifice is to be an annual sacrifice, and a permanent sacrifice
- B. The Day is a “high holy day” – an additional Sabbath
 - 1. You shall “humble your souls” — the key word of “affliction” here
 - 2. You shall do no work, both Israelites and “sojourning aliens”
- C. The restrictions are repeated and perpetuated (31-34)
 - 1. The word of “affliction” repeated (31)
 - 2. The ritual perpetuated in the sons of the priest (32)

I go through all of this to put us in mind of the OT context for our word of “affliction” ... (for more, I can point you to my message on May 3, 2009!)

III. The fasting of the Day of Atonement

- A. The meaning of the root word
 - 1. “afflict, oppress, humble”
 - 2. Primary meaning: “to force,” or “to try to force submission,” and “to punish or inflict pain upon,”¹
 - 3. Various shades of meaning in various forms and contexts
 - a. Describes what one does to an enemy
 - 1) The way Sarah afflicts Hagar (Gen 16.6)
 - 2) What the lawless do to the defenseless (Ex 22.22)
 - 3) Pain afflicted on Joseph from fetters (Ps 105.18)
 - b. Describes how God afflicts Israel to gain repentance
 - 1) The wilderness wandering (Dt 8.2)
 - 2) The Exile (Ps 102.23, et al)

¹ Leonard J. Coppes, “1652 אָפַד,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 682.

- c. Self-affliction “expressing contrition and often accompanied by fasting”²
- 1) The Day of Atonement is one of these uses
 - 2) Similar: Messiah submitting to affliction to atone for his people (Isa 53.7)
 - 3) Psalmist afflicts himself out of sympathy for an enemy (Ps 35.13)

Ps 35.13 But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting, And my prayer kept returning to my bosom.

Note: here the word for fasting is connected with but distinct from the word for affliction (humbling)

B. The connection of Day of Atonement affliction with the practice of fasting

1. Fasting isn't inherent in the word for affliction
2. The instructions of affliction repeated elsewhere
 - a. Lev 23.26-32 — emphasizes significance: non-compliant are cut off
 - b. Num 29.7-11 — adds additional burnt offering and emphasizes sacrifices

“Israel highlighted the importance of the Day of Atonement by combining elements of purification, self-denial, Sabbath rest, distancing evil, and mourning.”³

3. History

- a. Qumran community (Dead Sea Scrolls)
 - 1) 1QpHab 12 offers a prayer for the Day of Atonement.

² Coppes, 682.

³ Trent C. Butler, “Day of Atonement,” in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

- 2) 4Q265 forbids bathing and laundering on the Day of Atonement, but supports fasting.
- 3) 4Q365 calls for a trumpet shout on the Day of Atonement.
- 4) 11Q19 2510 speaks of a day of rest and a call to humble oneself. Those who do not practice humility will be excluded from the people of Israel.⁴

b. Acts 27 calls the day “the fast” (Ac 27.9)

4. Questions from other observers

“However, this annual event was not specifically designated a fast. That is, the verb צָיַם and related words are not employed, nor is there any explicit reference to abstaining from food. Instead, a broader term is used (which may have included fasting as an understood application), and people were commanded to ‘afflict,’ ‘deny,’ or ‘humble yourselves.’ Jewish tradition, however, required fasting on that day, as evidenced by the Targums (which actually used the Aramaic cognate of צָיַם), the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the New Testament (Acts 27:9).”⁵

“In the pre-exilic period there is no record of specific fast days in the annual calendar (except the Day of Atonement), although some Bible critics even conjecture that this, too, was originally an emergency rite and was fixed on the tenth of Tishri only at the end of the First Temple.”⁶

C. Christian conclusions

1. The OT examples are given for our learning, not for our commandment

⁴ These and a couple of other examples in Butler.

⁵ Kent D. Berghuis, “A Biblical Perspective on Fasting,” ed. Roy B. Zuck, *Bibliotheca Sacra* : Dallas Theological Seminary 158, no. 629 (2001): 89.

⁶ “Fasting & Fast Days,” accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/fasting-and-fast-days>.

2. The primary teaching of the Day of Atonement has to do with the universal access to God provided by our Lord Jesus
 - a. The OT Day of Atonement cleansed the temple so anyone could approach God (without it, no one could approach God)
 - b. Jesus is our propitiation, who makes God open to the pleas of penitent sinners — anywhere, anytime
3. There is a connection between coming to God in humility and the practice of fasting
 - a. There remains a question whether the Day of Atonement specifically required fasting
 - b. But the historical practice of it as a fast by many Jews makes fasting tightly connected with approaching God in humility
 - c. To me, this points to fasting as an option for Christians, but not a requirement for Christians

Conclusion:

Proposition: Christians have no command to fast, but no prohibition either.

Next week is communion, but our next message in this series will talk about “What Did Israel Practice?” — to see what we can glean from the records of fasts mentioned in the Old Testament.