

Text: Isa 58.1-14

Review:

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

The only commanded fast in the OT is the Day of Atonement, a ritual that doesn't include the word for fast in any of its instructions.

The specific word for fasting occurs in 37 verses in the OT. Some occurrences denote a specific season of fasting. Others are sort of commentaries or mentions of fasting as a thing one does.

In this message we want to survey the fasts in the OT to see what patterns we can discern from the various mentions.

Proposition: Fasting is a legitimate spiritual exercise but take care that it doesn't become hypocritical attempts at manipulating God.

I. Fasts and fasting in the OT

A. Specific fasting instances mentioned

1. First actual fast (word not mentioned) is when Moses was on Mt Sinai the second time to receive the covenant and commandments a second time (Ex 34.28)

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.

2. First mention of the word "fast" is when Israel met to consider what to do about Benjamin following the terrible abuse of a woman in a Benjamite city (Jdg 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.

3. Israel fasted under Samuel, when they came together and repented of idolatry and began to throw off oppression by the Philistines (1 Sa 7.6)

4. The men of Saul fasted seven days after they buried Saul and his sons (1 Sa 31.13, 1 Chr 10.12)
5. David and his men fasted and mourned after the death of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sa 1.12)
6. David fasted and prayed when his son with Bathsheba was stricken ill and died (2 Sa 12.16, 21, 22, 23)
7. Jezebel counseled Naboth to proclaim a fast where she would hire two worthless fellows to accuse Naboth so Ahab could obtain Naboth's vineyard (1 Ki 21.9, 12)
8. Ahab fasted and mourned after hearing Elijah's message of judgement against him, for which God postponed his judgement (1 Ki 21.27)
9. Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, fasted and prayed when confronted by a large invading army (2 Chr 20.3)
10. Ezra proclaimed a fast with his company of returning exiles, just before they set out from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezr 8.21, 23)
11. Nehemiah fasted and prayed when he heard the condition of the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 1.4)
12. The returned exiles gathered to fast and pray and hear the scriptures from Ezra and the other priests as they re-established their home in Judah (Neh 9.1)
13. Mordecai and the Jews in the Persian empire fasted and prayed when the plots of Haman became known to them (Est 4.3)
14. Esther and the Jews of Susa fasted and prayed as she prepared to go unbidden into the king's court (Est 4.16)
15. Jehoiakim proclaimed a fast during Jeremiah's ministry when the Babylonians had sacked a Philistine city nearby (Jer 36.9) — at this time Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, read a message from Jeremiah (Jer 36.6), which Jehoiakim subsequently burned in a fire pit
16. Daniel fasted and prayed when he discerned the time was almost up for Jeremiah's prophecy of the exile (Dan 9.3)

17. The people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast when they heard Jonah's message (Jon 3.5)
18. Specific fasts in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months are mentioned by Zechariah as "fasts of the exile" in Zechariah (Zech 7.5, 8.19)

Commemorating "the day of the beginning of Nebuchadrezzar's siege in the tenth month, the day of the capture of the city in the fourth month, the day of its destruction in the fifth month and the day of Gedaliah's murder in the seventh month"¹

B. Other mentions of fasting in the OT

1. David three times describes fasting as part of his personal spiritual life
 - a. David fasts during the sickness of his enemies (Ps 35.13)
 - b. David's fasting earns him the mockery of his enemies (Ps 69.11) [a messianic psalm]
 - c. David fasts when pursued by enemies (Ps 109.24)

These are the *only* uses of the word for fasting in the Psalms.

2. Joel calls the nation to repent and fast as he preaches a coming invasion (Babylon) (Joel 1.14, 2.12, 2.15)
3. Isaiah rebukes hypocritical fasting (Isa 58.3, 4, 5, 6)
4. Jeremiah gives a prophecy where God refuses to be moved by fasting (Jer 14.12)

Jer 14.11-12 ¶ So the LORD said to me, "Do not pray for the welfare of this people. ¹² "When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence."

¹ Geo. B. Eager, "Abstinence," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 24.

II. Positive reasons *for* fasting as we observe Biblical precedent

Note: “precedent” means an example, not a command or a requirement

- A. A sign of sorrow
- B. A sign of repentance and seeking forgiveness (“probably grew out of the Jewish understanding of fasting as a means of humbling oneself”²)
- C. An aid in prayer
- D. An aid in experiencing God’s presence
- E. An act of ceremonial public worship
- F. In preparation for ministry

III. Isaiah’s stern sermon against hypocritical fasting (Isa 58)

- A. God announces transgressions (1)
- B. People plead religion (2-3a)
 - 1. They seek God daily
 - 2. They do righteousness
 - 3. They ask for just decisions
 - 4. They wonder why God does not see their fasts (3a)
- C. God’s answers (3b-
 - 1. You find what you want when you fast (3b)
 - 2. You “fast for contention” (4)
 - 3. Is this a fast God would choose? [relying on proper form alone] (5)
 - 4. Isn’t this the fast God wants (6-7)
 - a. To fast from wickedness (6)
 - b. To divide bread with the hungry (7)

² Kent D. Berghuis, “A Biblical Perspective on Fasting,” ed. Roy B. Zuck, *Bibliotheca Sacra* : *Dallas Theological Seminary* 158, no. 629 (2001): 92.

5. God is willing to answer the second fast (8ff.)

“In general, in the OT, fasting was abused. Instead of a sincere act of self-renunciation and submission to God, fasting became externalized as an empty ritual in which a pretense of piety was presented as a public image. Hence, the prophets cry out against the callousness of such hypocrisy. Jeremiah records the Lord as saying, ‘Though they fast, I will not hear their cry’ (Jer 14:12, rsv; see Is 58:1–10).”³

Conclusion:

Proposition: Fasting is a legitimate spiritual exercise but take care that it doesn't become hypocritical attempts at manipulating God.

God wants your heart more than the affliction of your body.

That doesn't mean you should never fast, but from the OT we see no prescription for any specific fast (and we won't in the NT either), and we see warning about a wrong approach to fasting.

Fasting *isn't* a way to get something from God, even if all you are after is attention.

Fasting *is* a way of getting closer to God, if it is accompanied by humility, prayer, worship, and devotion.

³ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 478.