

Fasting For the Right Reason

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Throughout the Bible there are many examples of people “fasting” for various reasons. By examining some of these, it should become apparent that fasting can be done for both the right and wrong reasons. The end result of fasting can be affected either negatively or positively depending on whether the purpose of a fast is in accordance with the will of Almighty God.

Before going to specific examples in scripture, it is important to establish that fasting involves going without food and water for a prescribed period of time,

So he (Moses) was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water (Ex. 34:28a; NKJV throughout unless noted; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).

So they (Israel) gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the Lord. And they fasted that day, and said there, “We have sinned against the Lord.” And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah (1Sam. 7:6; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).

Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me (Esther); neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise (Esther 4:16a; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).

Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and he neither ate nor drank (Ac. 9:8-9; emphasis added).

It has been assumed, and stated by a number of Bible commentators, that fasting was introduced during the time of Moses, specifically with instructions regarding the Day of Atonement (Covering; cf. Lev. 16:29-31; 23:27, 32; Nu. 29:7). However, upon closer examination it is evident that Abraham, who lived prior to Moses, understood the importance of fasting. On the day Abraham encountered three angels he was abstaining from food and drink. Given the task the angels came to perform, and by Abraham’s reaction to one of these angels, it seems unlikely that his fasting was a mere coincidence,

Then the Lord appeared to him (Abraham) by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day (Gen. 18:1; Ed. note in parenthesis)

It is important to note that the individual referred to here as “the Lord” cannot refer to Almighty God as no one has seen or heard Him (Jn. 5:37; 6:46). Instead, Abraham encountered the Angel of the Lord who would later become the man Jesus Christ of Nazareth (1Cor. 10:1-4; Jn. 7:37-38).

So he (Abraham) lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in your sight, do not pass on by your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant." And they said, "Do as you have said" (Gen. 18:2-5; Ed. note in parenthesis).

In the next section of scripture it is interesting to note that Sarah had no bread available and according to Genesis 18:1, it was some time in the afternoon (in the heat of the day).

This is an early indication that neither Abraham nor Sarah had been eating that day because bread takes time to prepare and some should have been available in their tent as it was a staple food item,

So Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them (proof that Exodus 23:19 does not prohibit eating meat with dairy products as Jewish law requires today); and he stood by them under the tree as they ate (Ex. 18:6-8; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).

It would have been very rude and anti-social for Abraham not to eat with these angels, who appeared as men, unless he was fasting. It is clear that he stood by them but did not eat or drink anything. Again, this makes sense when the next section of scripture is examined because one reason for fasting is to make our petitions known in a sincere, respectful, yet emphatic manner, especially when a situation is serious which it was in this case. By fasting, we are showing that our petition is so important we are willing to sacrifice by giving up food and water in order to plead our case,

And the Lord said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to me; and if not, I will know" (Gen. 18:20-21).

This last section of scripture is further proof that "the Lord" who was speaking with Abraham was not Almighty God, because He is all-knowing (Isa. 46:9-10; 48:3) and would already have been aware that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were living in sin,

And Abraham came near and said, "Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would you also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from you! Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen.18:23-25).

Abraham was very respectful yet emphatic because he had deep concern for those in Sodom and Gomorrah who were trying to live in accordance with the law

and commandments of God (Ps. 119:142, 151, 155, 160, 172). His nephew Lot was living there along with his wife and children; so their lives could have been in jeopardy,

And the Lord said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes." Then Abraham answered and said, "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would you destroy all of the city for lack of five?" And he (Angel of God) said, "If I find forty-five, I will not destroy it." Then he (Abraham) spoke to him yet again and said, "Suppose there should be forty found there?" And he (Angel of God) said, "I will not do it for the sake of forty." And he (Abraham) said, "Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Suppose thirty should be found there?" And he (Angel of God) said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." Then he (Abraham) said, "Indeed now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose twenty should be found there?" And he (Angel of God) said, "I will not destroy it for the sake of twenty." And he (Abraham) said, "Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more: Suppose ten should be found there?" And he (Angel of God) said, "I will not destroy it for the sake of ten." (Gen. 18:26-32; Ed. note in parenthesis).

By fasting, Abraham was in the right frame of mind to approach Almighty God's servant on earth and ask him a number of questions. Abraham's approach was respectful but he exhibited determination and persistence (cf. Mt. 7:7-11; Lk. 11:5-13). The Angel of God knew that Abraham was fasting for the well-being of others, not for himself, and as a result the Angel of God was patient and compassionate while he addressed Abraham's repeated questions and concerns.

Again, fasting is a form of sacrifice in which a person gives up food and water which sustains them in order to seek answers, or solutions, to serious or potential problems.

Fasting for the right reason shows great outgoing concern (love) for others, and a willingness to give up something important in the hope that it will benefit others. Fasting also exhibits a humble or respectful attitude on the part of the one who is petitioning Almighty God. Once food and water is removed, it is a humbling experience because people realize how fragile and temporary their lives are, and how much they rely on Almighty God to sustain them.

In the next section of scripture there is an example of fasting being used to seek specific answers to problems that are beyond our human ability to solve,

Then some (Israelites) came and told (King) Jehoshaphat, saying, "A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, from Syria; and they are in Hazazon Tamar (which is En Gedi). And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah (2Chr. 20:2-3; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

And now, here are the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir – whom you (Almighty God) would not let Israel invade when we came out of the land of Egypt, but they turned from them and did not destroy them – here they are, rewarding us by coming to throw us out of Your possession which You have given us to inherit. O our God, will You not judge

them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You (to provide an answer) (2Chr. 20:10-12; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

Because the king and nation humbled themselves before Almighty God and put their trust in Him, He responded through His Levitical servant and promised to protect them from certain destruction,

Thus says the Lord to you: 'Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow go down against them. They will surely come up by the ascent of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the brook before the Wilderness of Jeruel. You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem! Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the Lord is with you.' (2Chr. 20:15b-17).

In the next section of scripture, Ezra and those with him fasted because, although they stepped out in faith based on their understanding of God's word, they did not want to take His protection for granted. Ezra felt that it would be presumptuous and disrespectful to do so,

Then I (Ezra) proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava (Heb. meaning "love"), that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request of the (Gentile) king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had (previously) spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him" (cf. Ps. 34:15-16). So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer (Ezra 8:21-23; Ed. notes in parentheses).

In contrast to Ezra's example, the nation of Israel was certain that their action against the tribe of Benjamin was justified and they had already made up their mind regarding the course of action they should take. However, God would soon show them that their attitude was presumptuous. So in this case, they fasted for forgiveness after the fact,

And Benjamin went out against them (the other tribes of Israel) from Gibeah on the second day, and cut down to the ground eighteen thousand more of the children of Israel; all these drew the sword. Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening (dark); and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord (Jgs. 20:25-26; Ed. notes in parentheses).

Because Israel had sinned presumptuously, they offered a sacrifice in the form of fasting in addition to animal offerings. This principle of fasting as an expression of repentance for sin applies throughout scripture and is not limited to either the First or Second Covenant. Jesus Christ pointed out that his disciples would fast after his death and resurrection. This means that they would fast even after they received God's Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Mt. 9:15; Ac. 2:1-4; 1Cor. 7:5).

During the time of Samuel, the nation of Israel fasted because they were guilty of worshipping pagan gods. This was their personal expression of sacrifice for the sin they had committed,

Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths (upright pagan phallic symbol used in the worship of Ishtar - Easter) from among you, and prepare your hearts for the Lord, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines." So the children of Israel put away the Baals (foremost pagan deity) and the Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only (1Sam. 7:3-4; ed.notes in parentheses).

So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the Lord. And they fasted that day, and said there, "We have sinned against the Lord." (1Sam. 7:6a).

Almighty God also explains in a number of scriptures, that people can fast for the wrong reasons and when this happens He is not obligated to respond,

'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?' "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day to make your voice heard on high" (Isa. 58:3-4).

The motive for fasting in this example is not to change the ways that are wrong but rather to have God condone what the people are doing and agree with their way of thinking and relating to Him, as well as with their treatment of others. God put the record straight by laying out the real purpose for fasting, which is to change what is wrong in our lives and start living in accordance with His will,

Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out (wandering); when you see the naked that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isa. 58:6-7)

When people fast for the right reasons, God promises that He will respond,

Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard (Jesus Christ; cf. 1Cor. 10:4). Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say. 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail (Isa. 58:8-11; Ed. note in parenthesis).

The real blessings that God promises are spiritual in nature more than physical. Therefore, those who fast need to focus on spiritual values even when specific physical requests are being made through prayer. Sometimes we do not receive

the response we had hoped for, but God knows what is best for us as well as those we may be fasting for (Rom. 8:28).

When people come to the realization they have sinned against Almighty God (1Jn. 3:4), change is required. This change begins with repentance (Ac. 2:38), which can also include fasting. In the case of an entire nation that has gone astray (Joel 2:12-17), Biblical history proves that fasting can result in a very positive outcome. This example is for all generations to consider,

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord (Jon. 3:1-3a).

And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them (Jon. 3:4-5ff).

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way (repented of sin; cf. 1Jn. 3:4); and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it (Jon. 3:10; Ed. note in parenthesis).

As fasting is a form of sacrifice, and as ancient Israel's priesthood performed a sacrifice on behalf of those who sinned unintentionally or in ignorance, God was teaching the nation of Israel the importance of sacrificing to help others see their errors and sins, with the hope they will repent and be reconciled to God,

Thus says the Lord God: "In the first month, on the first day of the month, you shall take a young bull without blemish and cleanse the sanctuary. The priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering and put it on the doorposts of the temple, on the four corners of the ledge of the altar, and on the gateposts of the gate of the inner court. And so you shall do on the seventh day of the month for everyone who has sinned unintentionally or in ignorance. Thus you shall make atonement for the temple (Eze. 45:18-20).

As blood was applied to various aspects of the temple, and as the temple pictured the entire household of God (1Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2Cor. 6:16), this sacrifice was done in order to reconcile everyone within the nation. As the Second Covenant includes the Gentile nations, this action that was taken on the seventh day of the first month now applies to all nations; not just those physical descendants of Israel (Rom. 11:17-24). As Jesus Christ fulfilled the animal sacrificial system (Mt. 7:17), spreading the blood of an animal on a physical temple is no longer recognized by God. Instead, those who have genuine concern for the people of any nation should consider fasting, as their personal sacrifice, on the seventh day of the first month. This should be done in the hope that Almighty God will reveal His truth to them and they might be led to repentance, which is the first step toward reconciliation with God (Mt. 13:14-17).

Jesus Christ used two parables to describe a different approach during the Second Covenant that would still fulfill all the principles of the First Covenant. He

pointed out that this new approach would be difficult for some to deal with because they were entrenched in the culture of First Covenant animal sacrificial system. Christ pointed out that his disciples would fast as their expression of sacrifice because the entire animal sacrificial system would come to an end after his death and resurrection. Therefore, the fasting of Christ's disciples would take on a very different meaning than the fasting of the Jewish religious leaders of his day,

Then the disciples of John came toward him (Christ), saying, "For what reason do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, "**The sons of the bridal chamber cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, but the days will come when the bridegroom will be lifted up from them, and then they will fast.**"¹⁶ "**But no one puts a patch of new cloth on an old garment; for the replacement lifts away from the garment and *the* tear becomes worse.**"¹⁷ "**Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are destroyed. But they put new wine into new wineskins and both are kept safe**" (Mt. 9:14-17; RNT; Ed. note in parenthesis).

Jesus Christ practiced what he preached when he fasted for forty days and forty nights on behalf of others. He did this because of the seriousness of the mission he was given by his Father in heaven. If he failed, he could not be a sacrifice for the sins of the world (Jn. 1:29). In essence, he was willing to lay down his life prior to being murdered on a stake. No one can get closer to death than fasting for this length of time. Christ placed complete trust in his Father to strengthen him and provide the ability to overcome the Adversary, which was a pre-requisite to his actual death on a stake (Jn. 16:11),

Then Jesus was led up into the wilderness by the spirit to be tempted by the Devil.² And after having fasted forty days and forty nights, he became hungry.³ And the Tempter came and said to him, "If you are the son of God, command these stones that they would become bread."⁴ But he answered and said, "**It has been written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'**" (Mt. 4:1-4; RNT; O.T. quote in bold).

There are other Biblical examples of individuals willing to lay down their life on behalf of others through fasting for an extended period of time,

And I (Moses) fell down before the Lord, as at first, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your (Israel's) sin which you committed in doing wickedly in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the Lord was angry with you, to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me at that time also (Deut. 9:18-19; Ed. notes in parentheses).

In serving and witnessing to the rebellious nation of Israel, the prophet Elijah fasted for forty days and forty nights,

And the angel of the Lord came back a second time, and touched him (Elijah), and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you." So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God (1Kgs. 19:7-8; Ed. note in parenthesis).

It is likely that God's servants will be fasting for the nations of this world leading up to the return of Jesus Christ because Almighty God says He will cut short the destruction that otherwise would occur,

And except those days had been cut off, all flesh would not be saved. But on account of the chosen those days will be cut off (Mt. 24:22; RNT; cf. Mk. 13:20).

Consequently, those who practice true love for their fellowman fast for their repentance of sin in the hope they will be restored to Almighty God.

Fasting is all the more important now as this present evil age (Gal. 1) increases in the transgression of God's law and commandments (cf. 2Thes. 2:7-7; cf. 1Jn. 3:4; Jn. 15:10; Rev. 12:17).

This document is the collaborative work of individuals who believe God's truth should be given freely (Mt. 10:8; 1Cor. 2:12; 2Cor. 11:7; Rom. 10:14-21) and the message of the one true God should be made available to all nations (Mt. 24:14) as a prerequisite to the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings (Mt. 17:10; 19:17; Mk. 9:11; Lk. 1:17; Rev. 19:11-16).

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