

A Biblical View Of

Fasting

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Esther's life was on the line. In fact, the whole Jewish community in Shushan and the surrounding area was in jeopardy. Esther had a unique God-given opportunity to intervene, but that would require courage and tact beyond that one would expect from one so young. But Esther didn't lack wisdom. She said, 'Go, gather together all the Jews in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night and day. I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and (then) will I go unto the king.' Esther and her 'family' fasted and prayed, and the tide of history changed.

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Clarendon Press Oxford 1976 p378), amongst other definitions unrelated to this topic, we have

"to abstain from all or some kinds of foods as a religious observance or as a sign of mourning' or to simply 'go without foods."

So fasting can be abstinence from all, some or certain foods for various purposes.

There are basically four types of fasting:
Passive, Active, Interactive and Creative.

PASSIVE fasting.

Abstinence is an example of passive fasting, however, forced hunger is not a true fast.

Paul describes forced fasting in 2 Corinthians: 'Giving no offence in anything, that the ministry be not blamed; / But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, / in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings, / by pureness, by knowledge, (and) by longsuffering.' 2 Corinthians 6:3-6 and 'I speak as concerning reproach... In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.' 2 Corinthians 11:21, 27

ACTIVE fasting

This can be **redemptive, excessive, or intercessive.**

REDEMPTIVE fasting

Is to purify the mind to make one's self more aware of spiritual things.

This is the type of fast that was required by Jewish law on the Day of Atonement (the 10th day of the 7th month) as recorded in Leviticus 16:29,31; 23:31 and Jeremiah 36:6. Redemptive fasting may also be **Medicative** or **Curative** if used to cleanse the body of chemical impurities. Included in this category are fastings recommended by your physician.

EXCESSIVE fasting

Comes in several guises. It may be fasting (quote) **'to be seen of men'** as Jesus commented upon in Matthew 6:16: **'Moreover, when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.'**

Isaiah also quotes God referring to excessive fasting in Isaiah 58:4,5 **'Behold ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. / Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down the head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?'**

There may also be an **inappropriate response** to fasting such as by evil Jezebel as recorded in 1 Kings: **'And it came to pass...that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard, which was in Jezreel, next the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. / And Ahab spoke to Naboth asking him for the vineyard in exchange for another distant vineyard or for money. But Naboth refused for it was part of the family inheritance. So Ahab in his sadness went to bed and fasted, eat-**

ing no bread.’ We remember that Ahab’s wife Jezebel was persuaded by this display of fasting to take matters into her own hands and Naboth was killed. 1 Kings 21:1-4

Praying for others with fasting is **INTERCESSIVE** fasting.

In Matthew 17:14-21 we read that the disciples were unable to cast out a demon, When they enquired of Jesus why this should be so, He firstly challenged their lack of faith and then added that such miracles required also prayer **and fasting**.

As you may recall, King David committed adultery with Uriah’s wife Bathsheba and she bore a son. David further sinned against God by having Uriah killed so he could marry Bathsheba. God sent Nathan the prophet to David to give him the opportunity to repent and to tell him that the child would die. In 2 Samuel 12:15 and following we read,

‘15 ... And the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore unto David, and it was very sick.

16 David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.

17 And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth, but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them.

18 And it came to pass on the seventh day that the child died...’

And then in verse 20 we read, ‘20 Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came to the house of the LORD and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him and he did eat.

21 Then said his servants unto him, what thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread?

22 And he said, While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live?

23 But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back

again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.
24 ¶ And (then) David comforted his wife, Bathsheba...'

This passage gives us some very interesting insights into the relationship between fasting and grieving and highlights one of the major reasons for fasting.

Fasting, with prayer, is our way of telling God and ourselves *that we are really serious* about the matter for which we are praying. It doesn't persuade God; it doesn't make us more pious or holy; it doesn't even make us more religious. It does make us think about our relationship with God; it makes us think about the importance of prayer; it makes us think about our closeness to the needs in our petitions and the wonders in our praise.

INTERACTIVE fasting is the act of sharing with others in intercession, such as the record in Acts 13:2,3 of prayer coupled with fasting when Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius and Saul were seeking for guidance prior to laying hands upon Saul and Barnabas for special ministry.

There was congregational prayer coupled with fasting prior to ordaining and sending out elders to the churches as written in Acts 14:23

Furthermore, the three metaphors of Mark 2:18-22: the bridegroom, the rent garment, and the old goatskin bottles, remind us that there are occasions when fasting is proper, but that it is out of place as a regular practice to advertise one's holiness or to make a show of religion.

And lastly, fasting can be **CREATIVE**.

In Isaiah 58 the prophet firstly inscribes the Lord's condemnation of conventional fasting:

- '1 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins
- 2 Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me their ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.
- 3 ¶ Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure and exact all your labours.
- 4 Behold ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.
- 5 Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down the head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the lord?

And then from verse 6 onwards, Isaiah recounts what the Lord really desires in fasting. I have taken the liberty of calling this **creative fasting**:

- 6 It not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?
- 7 Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?
- 8 ¶ Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward.
- 9 Then shall thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee

the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity;
10 And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness as the noonday:
11 And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and a spring of water, whose waters fail not.'

Isaiah 58:1-11

**God desires of us
a realistic motivation to fasting
when appropriate;
and realistic, appropriate fasting
when motivated.**

Creative fasting is three dimensional:

1. **A day** of fasting & Christian piety doesn't make up for **a week** of Christian neglect,

2. God is more interested in the spirit, the tone and the temper of the fast than pedantic and meticulous fastidiousness *and*

2. when you fast, consider giving the food you would have eaten or it's monetary equivalent to those in need around you.

If you desire to fast, then please note these eight
PRACTICALITIES of fasting.

Practicality number 1 - **FLUIDS**

Water taken in abundance during a fast will aid the body in the elimination of accumulated waste and serve to prevent dehydration, one of the major complications of indiscriminate fasting.

Practicality number 2 - **GLUCOSE** added to your fluid intake or in the form of barley sugar confections may be recommended for those who must undertake physical labour during a fast. Some people choose to have a teaspoon of honey in a cup of caffeine-free herbal tea.

Practicality number 3 - **MEDICINES**

If it essential that medications be taken **with a meal** due, for example, to their effect on the stomach, then there are a number of options available.

If you fast regularly, then many medications are available in a format that allows for fasting - for example: slow release capsules, certain types of enteric coated tablets, medication by injection, etc. Your GP may be able to recommend a substitute. If you fast only occasionally, for example, for prayer & meditation, then fasts may be scheduled to avoid you having to miss taking your medication. For example, a day of fasting from sunset to sunset would still allow an evening meal with your medication before the fast commences, and again the following night when the fast is broken.

Alternatively, if your fast allows and your physician approves, your medication may be taken with milk, a glucose drink or a banana during the fast. As we have noted already today, *God is more interested in the spirit of the fast than fine print perfectionism.*

Practicality number 4 - **DIETS**

Persons with diabetes, bowel or stomach disorders or other medical conditions associated with digestion and metabolism are usually not prevented from fasting provided it is done under the supervision of a physician. In fact many people with these conditions are often recommended to adhere to a controlled fast occasionally as part of their curative or health management process.

Fasting is not an appropriate or practical method of losing weight, and fad diets which recommend fasting for this purpose ought to be avoided. If for any reason your fasting causes a dramatic loss in weight or affects other areas of your lifestyle, for example, menstruation, then you ought to cease fasting immediately & seek medical attention.

Practicality number 5 - **ENERGY**

As mentioned earlier, those undertaking physical labour or strenuous work during a fast may need a glucose supplement to balance energy requirements and prevent fatigue, exhaustion or collapse.

Practicality number 6 - **DURATION** - How long do I fast for?

1 Corinthians 7:5 tells us that husbands and wives may give themselves to fasting and prayer **for a short time only**, and then come together again. This phrase, 'for a short time only' may be hard to define, as Moses, Elijah and Jesus all fasted for forty days and nights (Eg. Matthew 4:2).

Luke 2:36,37 recalls that *'There was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age... / And she was a widow of about 84 years, she departed not from the temple but served God with prayers and fastings day and night.'* - so Anna fasted almost continually; we remember that King David fasted for seven days and in the urgency of her situation, Esther recommended a three day fast.

Is there a rule of thumb about duration? There surely is - for as a rule, fasting should not adversely affect our health. We saw this earlier in Isaiah 58:8 - When you fast as God desires, He promises: *'Thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily.'*

Prolonged **partial** fasting may be considered under medical advice if green vegetables are permitted and consumed as these provide necessary vitamins, help in the movement of the bowels and allay feelings of hunger.

Hunger, incidentally, does not usually constitute a serious problem in fasting. It is a minor inconvenience during and after the first day, but after the second it is hardly noticeable.

If a fast of more than two days is planned, then medical specialists recommend nowadays, especially for those accustomed to the rich western diet, that a prior consultation with a physician is in order.

When your fast is broken, the consumption of food should at first consist of light meals eaten slowly to allow for your body to re-adjust to eating & digestion.

Practicality number 7 - PUBLICITY

On the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 6, Jesus said,
*'16 Moreover, when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.
17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head, and wash thy face;
18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly'* (Matthew 6:16-18).

The Pharisee recorded in Luke 18:12 bragged that he fasted twice each week.

Zechariah Chapters 7 & 8 are all about fasting. For 70 years the Jewish Nation had been fasting on the 4th, 5th, 7th and 10th month (8:19) mourning the destruction of the Temple. Now that it looked like they were going to have a temple again, the question arose as to whether these fasts should be continued. In reply, Zechariah reminds them that there had been good reason for their fasts, in penitence for their disobedience and consequent affliction; but now their fasts had become a mere outward pretence of exhibiting their own holiness, and their religious feasts were for their own pleasure.

Then, following prophetic custom of alternating scenes of present distress with scenes of future glory, Zechariah draws a picture of an age when fasts shall be joyful feasts. (8:19)

The Jews, once a mighty nation, with traditions from old that they had been designed of their God to be the leading people of all the world, were now a remnant - insignificant and despised, existing in their own land only by the permission of the Persian kings. Zechariah tried hard to encourage them by repeating over and over that it would not always be like this; that by and by the mighty empire that ruled them would be broken, and God's people could come into their own.

Jesus referred to the modern parallel of this hope when, as recorded in Mark's Gospel:

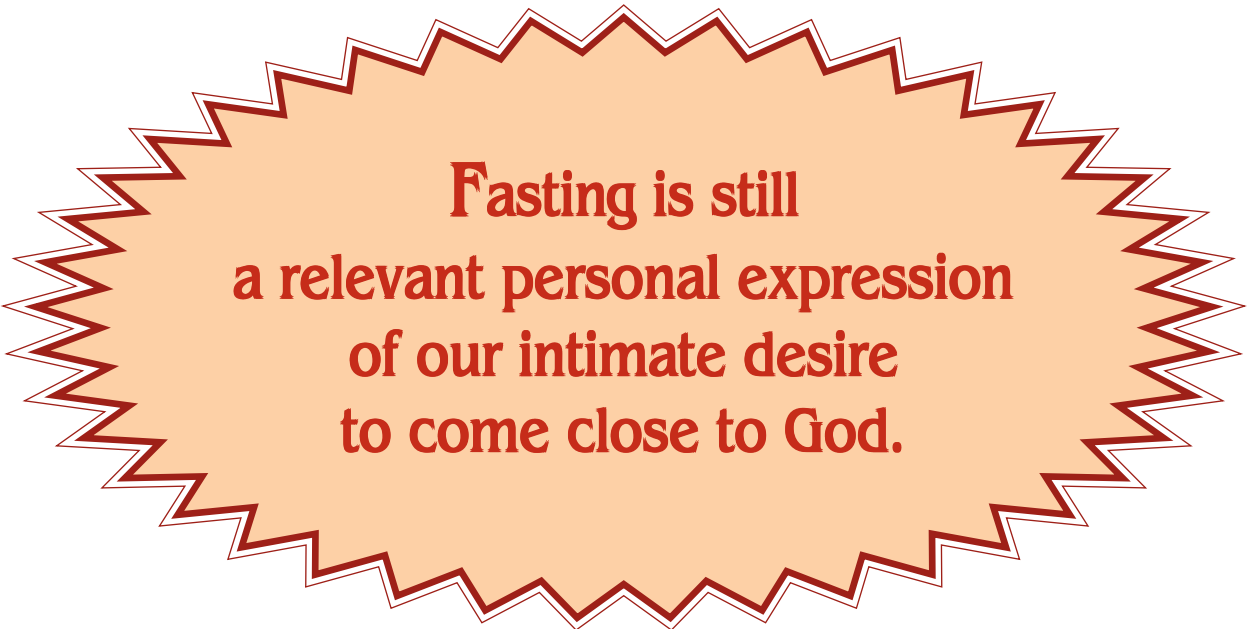
'18 And the disciples of John and the Pharisees used to fast; and they come and say unto him (Jesus), Why do the disciples of John and the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?

19 And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bride-chamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom, they cannot fast.

20 But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then they shall fast in those days.'

Mark 2:18-20

We earlier made mention of the occasion when the disciples were unable to cast out a demon and Jesus said that such miracles required prayer and fasting. (Matthew 17:14-21).



**Fasting is still
a relevant personal expression
of our intimate desire
to come close to God.**

Practicality number 8 - Personal questions.

There are many other practical considerations to take in hand when contemplating a desire to fast.

One is how we will cope with the preparation of meals for other family members who are not fasting.

A second consideration is the abstinence from other things during the fast, for example tobacco, alcohol, television, or confectionary. 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 talks about abstaining from sex during a fast when Paul tells us, quote '**Husbands and wives, do not deprive one another of sexual relations except by mutual consent for a short time so that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer, and then come together again.**'

Another consideration is how the fasting time will be spent. Do we consider hourly prayer times, Bible study, devotional or inspiration reading, sharing with others, or simply life as usual?

Again, do I tell anyone I am fasting?

And finally, is fasting the best way I have of telling God and myself that I am really serious about the matter for which I am praying. What is my reason for desiring to fast?

These are questions only you can answer.