

# BIBLICAL FASTING

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;”

Phil. 4:6 NKJV



## INTRODUCTION

Fasting is said to be a way to acquire God’s fullest blessings. Fantastic claims have been made in literature and from the pulpit as to what fasting can do. Generally, fasting is believed, and promoted, as a means for securing extra spiritual blessings or to relieve spiritual oppression.

Paul often prefaces his message with the assurance of Divine favor (grace), “**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**” Scripture assures us this declaration of grace and peace will not change during our age, the Age of Grace. Not only are God's grace and peace unchangeable, but so are all the associated spiritual blessings we have in Christ. God's faithfulness is what guarantees the unchanging nature of all we have in Christ, not our actions (works). Accordingly, fasting clearly will not change Him, but it may change us.

## PURPOSES OF FASTING

The common reasons people give today for religious fasting are shown below (ignoring the therapeutic [health] reasons for fasting):

1. Isaiah 58:3-6 declares *extra blessings* for those who fast;
2. Jesus fasted, and Matthew 17:21 implies *prayers are given extra power through fasting*;
3. It is a way of *presenting our bodies a living sacrifice* (Romans 12:1-2),

4. It is an opportunity *to confess our hunger for Jesus*; and
5. It is a way *to honor Him by keeping our bodies pure*.

### Scriptural Background

The first meal in the morning breaks our nighttime fast, thus it is called “break-fast.” However, breakfast, or skipping a meal or two, does not fit the biblical concept of fasting. Restricted or limited diets (like no meat) were

followed by Daniel and Ezekiel, but were not called fasts (Dan. 1 and 10; Ezek. 4). Similarly, abstaining from certain foods today (meat, chocolate, dairy...) has no biblical precedence for calling it a fast.

At least 77 biblical passages refer to fasting. The Hebrew root word for fast means “to cover over the mouth,” and the Greek word means “abstinence” (either involuntary from lack of food, voluntary, or for religious purposes). Biblical fasting refers to cessation of eating; it does not necessarily consider drinking. Biblical fasting carries the concept of a total cessation from eating.

“Fasting is the practice of self-denial, either as a spontaneous expression of grief before God in the face of unexpected disaster (Judges 20:26; 1 Kings 21:9; Esther 4:16; Jer. 36:9; Joel 1:14; Mt 9:15) or deliberate” (1). In the vast majority of verses, those fasting were experiencing great distress and anguish; Paul reinforces by saying, **“in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness”** (2 Cor. 11:27).

The purpose of a fast was to afflict and humble the soul, **“... that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us,”** (Ezra 8:21, KJV). In addition to fasting and prayer, those fasting generally sat in sackcloth, put ashes on their body, rent their cloths, wept (Judges 20:26), and expressed deep sorrow to demonstrate a broken heart to God. Daniel says, **“Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes”** (Dan. 9:3). It is important to remember the biblical combination of all these practices. The sincere faster’s prayers were often answered as requested; thus, fasting, and all that went with it, seems to have influenced God.

Fasting was not an act by itself that had any merit. Fasting did have merit when it was in response to distress and coupled with sincere anguish, sackcloth, ashes.... The idea behind fasting was that during a time of great distress and anguish, a person could demonstrate his or her sorrow through personal affliction. The goal was to petition God to hear and answer prayer.

## CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES (THEN & NOW)

The following four items show some differences and similarities between fasting *then* (in Old Testament and Gospel times) and *now* (Age of Grace). Understanding these differences and similarities helps us understand the cultural impact of fasting for today's world.

### 1) Natural response for a distressed soul (true then and now).

Fasting was associated with distress and anguish. Emotional upheaval and distress cause the body’s energies to be directed away from the digestive system. Fasting is only natural at such times, since the digestive system shuts down. Emotional upheaval was the probable reason Paul fasted before separating from friends and departing unto potential danger (Acts 13:2,

14:23). For a person in severe distress today, fasting is a normal response and should be coupled with prayer. There is no indication such actions will influence God's mind; but it is good for personal health.

### 2) Freeing time for prayer (true then but not now).

On the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31), the Israelites were to afflict their souls, do no work, and rest. Over time, afflicting the soul including fasting. It takes time to afflict one's soul in a way that would commend a person to God. In biblical times, occupational and household work took considerable time. Household activities related to eating included: dressing an animal, gathering food, maintaining a fire, walking to the market, grinding grain, pressing oil.... There was a need to make time

available to afflict their souls. To be truly sincere, and to maximize the time for affliction, they did not work during a fast. Fasting was a way to diminish the workload of the entire household, so that there was more time for prayer and affliction. The idea was to free up large amounts of time, not just a few minutes for a show of godliness. The idea of making more time for prayer today, by fasting, is rather disingenuous since we ignore all the other time-related items associated with fasting (no work and rest). In addition, numerous fast food options and modern conveniences greatly reduce the time for household duties.

### **3) Impact of impurities (not true then but true now).**

In biblical times, they ate purer foods and their environment was cleaner than ours. When they fasted, they did not have to consider the release of toxins stored in their body. Today, our environment and foods are laden with toxins, which we inhale, ingest, and absorb through our skin. These toxins get stored in our bodies, mostly in fat tissue where the least harm is caused. When a person fasts today (for more than a couple meals) these impurities are released as fat is lost. If we were to fast like they did, we would release the stored toxins so rapidly our bodies could not process or eliminate them (2). The result would be a toxic build-up in our blood (dangerous) and deposition elsewhere in the body (not good either). Because of the effect of toxins, fasting today is much different than in biblical times. Today, *fasting generally takes extra time* if done correctly; it rarely creates more time for prayer.

### **4) Vulnerability to temptation (true then and now).**

The spiritual purpose for Jesus being led into the wilderness was to be tempted (Matt. 4:1-2). He fasted for 40 days and nights; afterwards, He was hungry and weak. He was led there intentionally by the Holy Spirit to suffer deprivation and seclusion. After the 40 days, He was tempted by Satan. Clearly, He overcame Satan even under these most adverse circumstances. We have to consider which of these options applies: 1) did Christ fast to make himself stronger for resisting Satan, or 2) did fasting make Him weaker, so He was more like us? The latter seems to be the case. Hebrews 4:15 says Christ can sympathize with our weaknesses, and in all points was tempted as we are, yet without sin. We must learn from this and take heed for we are more vulnerable in a weakened state. Thinking the act of fasting builds spiritual strength can be misleading; instead, consider that it is more likely to open a person to temptation.

**Cultural Perspective:** cultural differences help us realize many things that were true in the past may not be true today, and vice versa. We cannot force previous cultural practices into today's life and expect the same results. What was good back then, may not be good today; we need to be informed of the consequences of fasting today. If a person wants to fast today, it is a personal choice. However, the main issue still remains, that is, will fasting cause God to bless us any differently than if we did not fast?

## SCRIPTURAL PERSPECTIVE

### **Old Testament, Isaiah 58**

Isaiah 58 is used in reference to extra spiritual blessings for those who fast. This passage deals with those under the Law, with a form of godliness, but with hearts far from God. They had perfected the outward, religious form of fasting, but their hearts were untouched by the Lord. God wanted fasting to alert them to the afflictions and oppression they caused others. When they became

right with God, they would deal compassionately with the hungry, help the poor, and clothe the naked. God would bless them, not because they fasted, but because they abstained from oppression.

### **Jesus' Comments**

The Lord said the apostles could not cast out certain demons because of their *unbelief*. Certain kinds of

demons were apparently so powerful, exorcising them took special faith (Matt. 17:20-21). If a person fasted, with true sorrow and grief, and coupled that with sincere prayer, then their faith would enable them to do the exorcism. Of course, this was under the Law, a mute point now since exorcism is not a gift of the Holy Spirit in operation today (3)(4).

### Paul's Epistles

Paul indicates food does not commend us to God, "**But food does not commend us to God....**" (1 Cor. 8:8). While this reference is specifically dealing with foods offered to idols, we learn that God's mind is not influenced by our actions concerning food. In Romans 12, where presenting our bodies as living sacrifices occurs, there is no indication the Lord is referring to the physical realm, as fasting would be, but instead, to the realm of the mind and spirit.

### Heavenly Spiritual Blessings

Today God has, "...blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). The believer has all of God's spiritual blessing in Heaven, right now. Those spiritual blessing are noted in Ephesians 1:4-2:22 as: chosen in him, holy and without blame, predestinated to the adoption of children, accepted in the beloved, redemption, forgiveness of sins, sealed with the Holy Spirit.... These are the most important issues concerning our salvation and eternal life. These blessing establish our position in Christ, and are the essentials of the faith.

It is impossible to have more heavenly spiritual blessings than "every" blessing, and they are provided to us, by grace, the moment we place our faith in Jesus Christ. No amount of fasting or works can procure more heavenly blessings. We need to understand these blessings are immutable (will not change based upon our actions). Here is what the Bible says about the believer today:

1. Each believer is *complete* (perfect) in Christ (Col. 2:10); no amount of fasting can add to the completeness we have in Christ.
2. *The Holy Spirit is within us*, making intercession for us (Rom. 8:26-27), according to God's will. The Spirit's

ministry is not somehow enlivened or made more powerful by fasting.

3. *Fasting will not draw Him closer to us*; He is already as close as possible. The intimacy we have today was not experienced under the Law, when fasting did impact God.
4. He was afflicted for us, culminating in death. Afflicting our souls, to seek a right way from Him, seems to obscure *the right way He has already attained*.

### Earthly Blessings

While we already have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, there are *earthly blessings* (spiritual, soulish, and physical) that we may or may not have. Paul prayed for such earthly spiritual blessings, "... **do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding**" (Col 1:9). Such earthly blessings are the substance of many prayers, for example, a prayer for a Church service to be uplifting, or Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19. However, there is no evidence these earthly blessings are influenced by fasting. Fasting may promote a *change in us*, not His blessing of us. A change in us can be by: 1) drawing us closer to Him, 2) helping us to have a more receptive heart, and 3) cleansing our body (the temple of the Holy Spirit) of impurities.

### Instructions on Prayer

Most Christians today realize that afflicting ourselves by fasting (along with sackcloth, ashes, tearing clothes, and not working) is something belonging to the Law Age. Paul made references to fasting in his early epistles, but not the later epistles. Adult Studies 20 through 22 show that the gifts of the Spirit were also referenced in his early epistles, but in his later epistles those gifts had passed away. Similar to the gifts, as the Age of Grace matured, the references to fasting are lacking. With no specific instruction from the Lord on this topic, the safe thing is to presume we are a liberty to do as directed by the Holy Spirit.

In the Age of Grace, the Spirit of God directs us, according to Phil 4:6: "**Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with**



**thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God."** The three items God specifically mentions are prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving. God does not suggest that fasting should be part of making our requests to Him.

If the purpose of fasting is to make more time for prayer, we must be honest and admit we generally have plenty of time for prayer. We cannot trick God into thinking we are sacrificing of ourselves for prayer time. In reality,

except in rare cases, we have plenty of time for prayer, so why try to fool God. The average Christian spends less than 15 minutes a day in prayer (probably closer to five minutes). The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) takes only one-half minute to pray. Jesus' prayer in John 17 took a little over two minutes. Consider all your prayers and those in church services; rarely are any over several minutes long. We should not be disingenuous with God by suggesting that fasting is needed so that we have more time for prayer.

## CONCLUSION

Five purposes for fasting were given at the beginning of this study. The five items are addressed here, to clarify what is true today in the Age of Grace.

1. *Extra blessings*: we can rejoice in the fact we have all the heavenly spiritual blessings possible. Fasting in the Age of Grace will not compel God to change His mind or bless us any differently than He already has. From an earthly perspective, if fasting changes anything, it would be our attitude toward God.

2. *Prayers are given extra power*: God already answers our prayer, according to His perfect will (Rom. 8:26-27). There is no evidence fasting will influence His response to our prayers. God asks for prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving; He does not mention fasting.

3. *Presenting our bodies a living sacrifice*: the context of Romans 12 makes it clear that presenting our bodies as living sacrifices has nothing to do with fasting. This passage is referring to renewal of the mind and transformation, which have no connection with fasting.

4. *To confess our hunger for Jesus*: we all have times when we feel overwhelmed with problems or have a

desire to do more for Him. We confess our hunger for Him in prayer and by devouring the Word. We should not fool ourselves into thinking that fasting is a spiritual exercise; it is not. Fasting is a physical action with food, and that does not commend us to God.

5. *Desire to honor Him*: the impact of afflicting one's soul by fasting has diminished, if not disappeared. In the Age of Grace, religious works do not commend us to God or give Him honor. From Scripture (Col. 3:10; 2 Cor. 4:16; Rom. 12:2), we learn that any spiritual change within us is the work of the Holy Spirit, not our works.

There is no biblical injunction to fast or not to fast in the Age of Grace; we have liberty in this area. Our liberty should be informed, so that our expectations are in accordance with the Word. It would seem Colossians 3:23 applies to fasting, **"And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men."** Fasting will not impact the way God sees us, or blesses us, because we are seen as complete in Christ already. When we pray (humbling ourselves in sincerity), our spirit is more tender toward the things of the Lord. Fasting may help some people to be more humble and sincere before God; if so, fasting is a matter of personal choice and liberty.

## ENCOURAGEMENT

The blessings we have from God are immutable (unchangeable). Our actions can change us and draw us closer to Him, but His blessings toward us remain steadfast. His grace and peace are entirely dependent upon His predetermined plans for the Age of Grace. His message continues to be one of grace and peace; this cannot be improved upon or influenced one iota by something as non-spiritual as food.

To be perfectly clear, fasting will not change us spiritually; it may foster better physical health or impact our attitude toward God. If we feel complacent or disconnected, have a prayer life that is dry and laborious, or feel we are far from Him, then we must consider these spiritual voids may be the result of our having moved away from Him. We will be drawn to Him and grounded in His love as we feast on the Word.

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