

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON FASTING

Isaiah 58:1-12

Introduction:

“Fasting” means “to abstain from food and/or drink.” Our English word “breakfast,” being the first meal of the day, simply means breaking (or ending) our all-night fast.

The Biblical meaning of the word “fast” is “to voluntarily abstain from food and/or drink for a set period of time for religious or spiritual reasons.” See Esther 4:15-17.

Fasting may be practiced partially or fully (water only, with no food, etc.); for various periods of time (one meal, one day, etc.); privately or in conjunction with a group.

Health concerns sometimes dictate the advisability or frequency of fasting.

I. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF “FASTING” IN THE BIBLE

Fasting was practiced in connection with the observance of the Hebrew “Day of Atonement” (Lev. 16:29-31). (When David is said to fast in Psalm 35:13-14 he uses the same language “humbling his soul”; Ezra also said he and the people “humbled ourselves” in connection with fasting, Ezra 8:21).

- A. Special days of fasting were called for in times of crisis (Jer. 36:1-9).
- B. Regular days of fasting were observed by the Jews (Zech. 8:18-19).
- C. “Humbling” oneself by fasting in the Old Testament was sometimes accompanied by unusual clothing and other practices (I Kings 21:27-29; Neh. 9:1).
- D. By New Testament times some of the Jewish leaders had distorted fasting into a ritualistic display of self-righteousness (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus denounced such hypocritical fasting (Matt. 6:16-18).
- E. The disciples of John the Baptizer fasted, and Jesus taught that His followers also would someday practice fasting (Matt. 9:14-15).

II. BIBLICAL REASONS FOR FASTING

- A. People fasted before some great undertaking (Moses before receiving the Ten Commandments, Exodus 34:27-28). Jesus fasted before experiencing the three great temptations (Matt. 4:1-3a).

- B. People fasted in times of great anxiety (upon learning of a king's decree to destroy the Jews, Esther 3:12-13; 4:3). A fast was proclaimed when Judah was threatened by an invasion (II Chron. 20:1-4).
- C. People fasted (along with prayer) when faced with critical illness (David's infant son, II Sam. 12:15-16, 21-23.). David fasted over the illness of his enemies (Psalm 35:13-14).
- D. People fasted when seeking God's leading in the face of imminent danger (as Israelites returned to Jerusalem from captivity, Ezra 8:21-23).
- E. People fasted in times of extreme grief, sorrow or mourning (Nehemiah fasted when learning that the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruin, Neh. 1:1-4). Israel fasted seven days in mourning the death of King Saul (I Sam. 31:11-13). Jesus indicated that mourning was accompanied by fasting (Matt. 9:14-15).
- F. People fasted as an expression of sorrow for sin or in connection with repentance (the people of Nineveh, Jonah 3:4-8). Israel fasted when repenting of idolatry (I Sam. 7:3-6). Daniel led the Israelites in fasting and repentance (Dan. 9:3-6). When the prophet Joel called for repentance it involved fasting (Joel 1:13-15; 2:12-15). Ezra fasted in sorrow for Israel's idolatrous marriages (Ezra 10:1-6). Israel fasted as they confessed their sin of mixed marriages (Neh. 9:1-2).

III. HOW FASTING APPLIES TO CHRISTIANS TODAY

- A. Jesus specifically predicted that after his ascension, His followers would fast (Mark 2:18-20). See also Matt. 9:14-15; Luke 5:33-35.
- B. Early Christian leaders fasted as part of their ministry and worship of God (Acts 13:1-2).
- C. Christian leaders fasted in connection with sending people out on an evangelistic mission (Acts 13:3).
- D. Those participating in the appointment of elders fasted as they committed these men to God (Acts 14:23).
- E. The apostle Paul fasted often (II Cor. 11:27). (The "often without food" suggests voluntary fasting, since involuntary "hunger and thirst" are mentioned separately).

IV. HOW FASTING WORKS

- A. It focuses a greater dependence on God. It causes people to see their need of God to sustain them in every way.
- B. It sharpens ones senses and helps a person to have a greater awareness of his life and circumstances.
- C. It affords an opportunity to experience humility in a physical as well as a spiritual way. (Ezra 8:21; Psa. 35:13).

Discussion questions:

1. What occasions do you feel call for fasting?
2. What has been your experience in fasting?
3. Why do you think people neglect fasting today?