

Why Should Christians Fast?

by Denver Cheddie

Daniel 10

²In those days I, Daniel, was mourning three full weeks.

³I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.

¹²Then he said to me, “Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words.

¹³But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia.

¹⁴Now I have come to make you understand what will happen to your people in the latter days, for the vision *refers to many days yet to come.*”

The bible recounts many instances where people fasted. Some of these fasts were for religious purposes, some were not. The bible requires us to fast (Matthew 9:14-15), and it was a practice of the apostles to fast. The bible describes many of these fasts, the circumstances in which they occurred, and the results of them. But there is very little teaching on HOW exactly fasting works.

How does not eating food move the hand of God? We all know that people prayed and fasted in the bible and we are encouraged to do likewise, but how exactly does fasting work? What if people pray without fasting or fast without praying, what would be the effects? These are questions that interest me as a bible teacher. This article seeks to

understand the mechanics of fasting – how it works and what exactly it accomplishes.

Not all fasts are religious

Fasting is the act of refraining from food or certain types of food for a period of time. If fasting is done together with some kind of devotion to God, then the fast is religious or spiritual in nature. If there is no devotion to God, then the fast is not spiritual, just dietary. This is not the type of fast I am addressing in this article. I am discussing spiritual fasts.

There are many examples of fasting in the bible where there was no spiritual significance to the fasts. For example, people say that Paul fasted for 3 days after he met Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9). However, there is no record of him praying and seeking God during this time. More likely, Paul had just lost his appetite and did not feel like eating for 3 days. He just had an encounter with God which turned his entire worldview upside down, and he became blind. I would lose my appetite if that happened.

Another example is when Elijah fasted for 40 days (1 Kings 19:8). This was not a time of prayer and consecration for Elijah. He was going on a long journey in which there would be no food. God had given him a supernatural type meal which sustained him for the entire journey. But this was not really a religious fast.

Neither were the 2 occasions when Moses fasted for 40 days (Exodus 24:28; 34:28). The bible never said that Moses purposed to fast. He just did not have food up there on the mountain. These are examples of people who just did not eat for a period of time for various reasons. It is

difficult to draw any spiritual meaning that applies to us from these examples.

Categories of Fasts

In most books on fasting, the writers tend to categorize fasts. Typical categories include

- 1) total fast – total abstinence from food, but not water
- 2) partial fast – no food from sunrise to sunset
- 3) 3 day fast – total fast for a 3 day period
- 4) Daniel fast – only fruits and vegetables allowed for 21 days
- 5) 40 day fast – total fast for 40 days (only possible with supernatural sustenance)

There is nothing wrong with these categories. In fact, categories help us to better remember and understand things. However, although the categories are derived from biblical examples, they tend to be arbitrary. For example, why does the partial fast have to be from sunrise to sunset? Others say that in a total fast, you may drink water and juice, but not coffee or tea. Why? Who made up that rule? Furthermore, I wonder if we are missing the main point. For example, when Daniel fasted, do you think Daniel said to himself, “Hmm, I think I will do a Daniel fast”?

According to Daniel 10, Daniel did not know how long he would be fasting. He had purposed to fast until he got an answer to his prayer. It turned out that the answer took 21 days to arrive, but Daniel had no idea of this timeframe in advance. It is more likely that Daniel was preparing

to fast as long as it took, which is why he opted not to do a total fast, but only a partial one. For all he knew, he could have been fasting for 21 minutes or 21 years. He needed a fast that was sustainable. So he decided to refrain from meats, sweets and alcohol. Daniel was not following rules, but merely exercising discretion. We don't have to fast exactly like Daniel or David. We just have to do it unto the Lord, using discretion as necessary.

What fasting does not accomplish

Before we discuss the exact purpose of fasting, it is important to clarify some of the misconceptions that we have about it.

Fasting does not crucify the flesh. I used to believe this. Think about it. When you refrain from food, it weakens the body (flesh), therefore it should help you to walk in the Spirit, right? Wrong! There are different meanings for the word flesh. In Galatians 5, it means sinful nature. In Romans 14, it means meat. Elsewhere, it can refer to your body – skin/fat/muscle covering the bones. Fasting weakens the flesh (body flesh), but there is no indication that it has any effect on your sinful nature. If fasting were a means of crucifying the flesh, Paul would have mentioned it in Galatians 5. That was the ideal opportunity for him to teach that, but he didn't. And there is no other scripture in the bible that even remotely implies that fasting kills our sinful tendencies.

Furthermore, Jesus fasted, and he did not have any sinful nature to crucify. So this cannot possibly be the purpose for fasting.

Fasting does not draw us closer to God – directly. Later on, I'll explain how fasting indirectly affects our relationship with God, but there is nothing that teaches that refraining from food draws us closer to God. The scriptures don't teach it, and logically it makes no sense. Logically, if

refraining from food draws us closer to God, then eating food separates us from God, which would make eating food a sin. But the bible does not teach that eating food is a sin, just a normal part of human existence.

Purpose of fasting - afflicting ourselves before God

In many of the examples in the bible, it does not really teach us how fasting works. It merely says that people repented with fasting or something like that. It did not say how fasting enabled repentance or how it worked. However, Daniel 10:12 does give us a clue. The angel said that Daniel chastened himself before the Lord (KJV). Other versions say that he humbled himself. Ezra 8:21 called a fast so that Israel might afflict (or humble) themselves before God. Fasting is a means of afflicting yourself. Not afflicting as in cutting or hurting yourself, but in denying yourself something. This demonstrates how serious you are about what you are praying for, and thus makes your prayers more effective. In other words, the effects of fasting are indirect. It enhances our prayers.

A good illustration of this is a student preparing for an exam.

Throughout the semester, he is required to study, however, closer to the time of the exam, he is more focused. He cuts out TV and video games so that he can devote extra focus and attention to his studies. Cutting out TV does not make him do well in the exam, but it enhances his study.

This is how fasting works. By itself, it accomplishes nothing of spiritual value. It merely enhances our prayer – whatever we are praying for. It gives us extra focus in our prayer. As such, fasting without prayer is meaningless. It must be done in conjunction with some sort of devotion in order to have spiritual value. We are supposed to always be praying (just like the student should be studying consistently), but there are

times when we want to give extra focus (just like the student around exam time). That is the purpose of fasting.

It does not matter so much what we deny ourselves or how long we fast. This is a matter of discretion. We know what we are trying to get God to accomplish. We need to determine how long we fast, and what we fast from. Of course, God can guide us but there are no formulas. Most of the times, fasting is a denial of food or certain kinds of food. Daniel denied himself certain foods but ate others. It can also be a denial of sex (for married couples) for a period of time (1 Corinthians 7). By extension, it can be a denial of many other things, as long as denying ourselves those things enhances our focus in prayer.

But what about Isaiah 58:3-5?

3 '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.

4 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.

5 Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the Lord?

Doesn't verse 5 teach that fasting is NOT about afflicting ourselves? Not exactly. In that scripture, the Jews were "fasting", but were not really denying themselves anything. It was just a show. They were supposedly taking time off from their business, but they had their workers working twice as hard so their profits would not diminish. So although they were

taking time off, they were not really losing anything. There was no self denial. You must lose something, otherwise your fast is not really serious.

In that scripture, God is criticizing them for just putting on a show. He is condemning the way they did things rather than the things they did. For example, God condemned their laying of sackcloth and ashes (Isaiah 58:5). However, this does not mean that sackcloth and ashes were bad? It only meant that when Israel did it on this particular occasion, it had no meaning because their hearts were not right. Similarly, God was condemning the way they were afflicting themselves. It was just a show with no real commitment to God. God does want us to humble ourselves before him, but it must be in the context of a right relationship with him. Outside of a committed personal relationship with God, it is meaningless. Within this proper context, fasting then serves to enhance our prayer.

Circumstances for fasting

Once this is understood, then fasting can apply to any circumstance. We can repent with fasting. We can petition God with fasting. We can intercede for others with fasting. We can seek a closer walk with God with fasting. We can seek God's guidance with fasting. In the bible, there are various circumstances in which people fasted. Many people fasted during times of repentance. People fasted during times of sorrow and extreme desperation, e.g. Hannah (1 Samuel 1:7-8). David fasted for God to answer his prayer to save his sick son (2 Samuel 12). Jesus fasted for extra strength during trials (Luke 4:2). The apostles fasted on a regular basis, and especially before making big decisions (Acts 13:2-3). Jesus

also taught that fasting can enhance our effectiveness in ministry (Mark 9:29). So we can fast for just about anything ranging from our walk with God to getting answers to prayer to making us more effective in ministry. We just need to understand what exactly fasting accomplishes – it simply enhances the effectiveness and earnestness of our prayer.

Conclusion

Fasting is a means of humbling ourselves before God – afflicting ourselves by denying our selves something for a time so that we can give extra focus to God. Fasting does not have to follow rules, but instead allows us to exercise discretion in how long to fast and what to deny ourselves. It does not crucify our flesh or draw us closer to God – at least not directly. Whatever we are praying for, fasting makes our prayers more effective. This can include praying for a closer walk with God, supplication, repentance, or praying for more effectiveness in ministry.

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