

New Covenant Fasting

While it is clear that the early church fasted, there is no indication that they viewed fasting as a religious “discipline” or a mandated practice. There is also no instruction in the New Testament about fasting such as to how and why. To understand the topic, we must draw our conclusions based on the practices of the disciples. From these we can first deduce that just as New Covenant prayer is different than Old Covenant prayer, so New Testament fasting is different than Old Testament fasting.

One reason fasting in the Old Testament took place was because the people were afraid of an enemy and fasted together so that God would move on their behalf (**2 Chronicles 20:1-4**). Another reason they fasted was because they were horrified or disgusted with something that happened (**Nehemiah 1:1-4**). It was also common to fast in order to seek direction from the Lord (**Ezra 8:21**). Esther and her maids fasted so that God would give her mercy and favor with the king (**Esther 4:16**). In other instances, whole cities would fast because they knew they deserved judgment and they wanted to express to God their willingness to change and to ask for His mercy (**Joel, Jonah 3:4-6, Daniel 9**). Daniel fasted as a means of mourning (**Daniel 10**). In **Isaiah 58**, we see that the Children of Israel had adopted perverted reasons for fasting.

We know that Jesus fasted 40 days before he began His ministry. However, He did not instruct his disciples to do the same. In fact, nowhere did Jesus nor the apostles instruct believers to fast for any certain length of time, and although it is possible some of them fasted for 40 days, this is not recorded¹.

While Jesus was with His disciples, they did not fast. This was quite upsetting to the Pharisees (**Mark 2:18**) because they fasted regularly. Yet, even though His disciples did not fast when He was with them, Jesus gave clear and corrective instruction about fasting in **Matthew 6:16-18**.

“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly”.

Obviously, the Pharisees, referred to here as the “hypocrites” made a public display of fasting. They walked around with a sad and disfigured expression (perhaps a hungry look) so that others would know they were fasting. It was likely to give the impression that they were righteous. Jesus told the people to wash their faces and anoint their heads. They were to appear as if they weren’t fasting. So, when we fast, we fast before the Lord, not to impress others.

This is not to say that we have to lie to someone to hide the fact that we are fasting. If someone invites you to dinner while you are fasting, it is ok to just tell them you are fasting. What Jesus is trying to correct is fasting for the *purpose* of impressing others with how spiritual you are.

¹ *There is a school of thought among Christians that if you are really spiritual or if you are “serious” about seeing God “move”, you will go on a 40 day fast with water only. This was not set forth as a spiritual ideal in the New Testament. Do not allow others to impose this view upon you. Neither should you be impressed with someone who has gone on a 40 day fast (they have a way of letting you know about it), nor should you feel inferior in your Christian walk if you don’t.*

The disciples did fast after Jesus was resurrected, but if you look carefully at the practice, it was nothing like we are commonly taught today. There is a reason for this. When Jesus died and rose again two things happened which forever altered the purposes for fasting.

1. Because of our belief in Jesus, we do not live under fear of judgment. We are not in danger of the wrath of God (as is so often taught). If we sin, our sin is already forgiven. We do not need to do some external ritual to receive forgiveness or to cleanse ourselves. We do not need to cover ourselves in sackcloth and ashes in order for God's mercy to come upon us. It is already abounding toward us due to Christ's sacrifice.

John 5:24

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

1 Thessalonians 5:9-10

For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.

1 John 1:7

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

2. Secondly, Jesus death and resurrection overcame the power of the enemy. There is the concept in the church today that by fasting we can fight the works of Satan. This is not provable in the New Testament. Fasting is not even mentioned as a weapon of our spiritual warfare, and there is no record of anyone fasting to defeat the enemy. There are no evil forces that can interfere when we pray because Jesus has defeated all enemies. Our prayers are heard and answered immediately (unlike as in the book of Daniel). This is very good news.

We do not need to fast to try and make things happen in prayer. It is not as if we keep fasting until we finally have fasted enough and prayed enough until our prayers are finally answered. The New Testament way of receiving from God is to ask believing, and receive. No amount of grunting and groaning on your part is going to accomplish more than Jesus did on the cross.

He has already done it all. We simply walk in the victory He has won by submitting ourselves to His Lordship, availing ourselves of the weapons He has given us, and resisting the devil. Praise God. Take a deep breath and thank God for His rest.

Colossians 2:15

Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

Ephesians 6:11-13

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole

armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Romans 8:38-39

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Philippians 2:9-11

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

James 4:7

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

SO WHY FAST?

Fasting is not a requirement of the Christian walk. Jesus did not give instructions to his disciples to fast. He only said that they would fast after he rose from the dead². Neither did Paul or any of the other New Testament writers advocate that we fast. You could go your whole life without fasting, and God is not going to love you less or be disappointed in you.

That being said, it is clear that the disciples fasted. To understand the purposes for fasting in the New Testament, it is important to observe the few incidents recorded in which the disciples fasted. These are recorded in the book of Acts.

In the following records, we aren't given the purpose for fasting. In these records, it is as if we enter the story while they are fasting and praying. It is unclear whether fasting brought about the results or if these events simply happened *while* they were fasting.

However, we need to take note that in all of these incidences, a ministry decision was being made, specifically the sending out of certain persons for a ministry. On the other hand, there are other records of ministry decisions being made without fasting being involved (or without mentioning it). For this reason I believe that fasting is an option but not a requirement in the process of selecting leaders for ministries. What is more notable in these scriptures is that the leaders were in agreement about the decisions that were being made and that there was a belief that the Holy Spirit was directing them.

Acts 13:2

As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the **Holy Spirit** said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

Acts 14:23

So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 6:2-5

Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. ³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; ⁴ but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

² Some teach that Jesus only meant that they would be so sad after he died they would fast.
C.D. Hildebrand

Acts 15:27-28

*We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the **Holy Spirit**, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.”*

We get another glimpse into the practice of fasting from a scripture in one of Paul's letters. He instructed husbands and wives not to deprive each other physically. However, with the consent of one's partner for a period of time agreed upon by both, one could give himself to fasting and prayer. From this one verse, we can see that believers did fast from time to time, but again, no purpose is given. However, this is not an instruction to fast, just an observation that it was common for people to fast³. What is more amazing is that married couples were to consider each other in the area of physical intimacy. One could not abstain from the act of marriage to fast without the permission of his partner, and this had to be for “a time”, with the express instruction to get back together afterwards.

1 Corinthians 7:5

Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Paul mentions another type of fasting. Christian writers differ in their points of view on this topic, but it appears that often in the ministry of Paul, he fasted involuntarily as part of suffering for Christ (notice the context in which fasting is listed).

2 Corinthians 6:4-5

*But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, ⁵ in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings. (See also **2 Corinthians 11:25-28**).*

Please, if you do want to fast, talk to your doctor. There are certain health conditions which do not mix well with fasting. Especially if you plan on going on an extended fast, you need to make sure you are in good enough condition to do so. Your doctor can also give you information on how to do a fast, and more importantly, how to come off of a fast. People have died from coming off a fast too quickly. Remember, too, when you fast, to drink plenty of water. Without water, one can live only a few days.

³ Most fasts consisted of water only. Water only fasts can leave one with little energy to engage in such activities.