

# Fasting

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Fasting is one of those forgotten practices of the dedicated Christian life. It is not something that is commanded by God, but something that is the natural result of those who have a deep seated desire to depend on God. In this essay are some examples of fasting that we read about in the New Testament. In your studies of these contexts, maybe there is something that will encourage you to fast and pray.

## **FASTING OF ANNA** **(Luke 2:36,37)**

**2:36 Anna ... of the tribe of Asher:** Asher was one of the tribes of the northern ten tribes of Israel that were taken into Assyrian captivity in 721/722 B.C. (Ja 19:24). A remnant of these tribes returned from captivity when Cyrus released those captives who wanted to return to their homelands in 536 B.C. Therefore, a remnant of Asher, as well as a remnant of all twelve tribes of Israel, were now in Palestine for the establishment of the promised new covenant. It was the new covenant that God was about to make with the new Israel of God that would include all nations (See Jr 31:31-34). It was this remnant that was fasting and praying for the coming of the Messiah of Israel. **Lived with a husband:** Anna had married and lived with her husband for seven years before he died. At the time of the events recorded here, she was an older woman who had given herself to the ministry of the Lord in the temple. Her ministry was fasting and prayer. This is certainly a ministry that we must restore in the church today. Where are our older women who give themselves for fasting and prayer.

**2:37** Depending on the translation of this verse, Anna was either a widow unto her age of eighty-four, or she had been a widow for eighty-four years, thus making her at this time ninety-one years old. **Served God with fastings and prayers:** Anna had given herself to the ministry of the Lord. Her service to God was in fasting and prayer. Thus, fasting is a service to God. Older brothers and sisters who cannot give themselves to the physical demands of some ministries, can at least give themselves to the ministry of fasting and prayer. These are services that older brothers and sisters should be rendering on behalf of the saints.

**2:38 Redemption in Jerusalem:** See vs 25; At 28:20. Faithful Jews came to Jerusalem every year for Passover and Pentecost. When they came there was much discussion concerning the coming of the Messiah. They came looking for the redemption of Israel. It was a common belief that God would bring forth the Messiah in Jerusalem since this city was the center of Jewish religion. Our fasting and prayer today would be for the coming of Jesus to deliver us from this world. We are ready for heaven, and thus we should be fasting and praying that God send Jesus in order to redeem us from this world (See Rv 22:20).

## **FASTING OF JESUS BEFORE HIS TEMPTATION**

**(Matthew 4:1-3)**

(Mk 1:12,13; Lk 4:1-13)

**4:1** When God starts great movements, His messengers are called to the desert. Moses, John the Baptist, Paul and Jesus all went to the desert before going to the people. In Jesus' case, it was God's will that He be placed in a situation that would allow Him to be tempted in all ways as those He would save (Hb 4:15). He was thus taken to the desert for forty days of fasting that was followed by the temptations of Satan. **Led by the Spirit:** Luke mentions that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit at this time, and thus, had received at His baptism the miraculous power of the Spirit so as to do the works of the Father throughout His ministry (Lk 4:1). Matthew emphasizes the fact that God was taking Jesus to the wilderness for this period of fasting. This was a good example for all of us. We must take times to go to "desert" places in order to fast and pray. We must separate ourselves from our normal environment in order to be alone with God. Many people fast while carrying on with their regular schedule. The problem with this is that we are distracted from the One on whom we are to be focusing when we are fasting. Go to a "desert" place and be alone with God. **Devil:** Herein is mentioned for the first time in the New Testament, the accuser and deceiver of all men (See 13:19; Lk 22:31; Ep 6:11; 1 Th 2:18; 2 Tm 2:26; 1 Pt 5:8,9; Rv 20:7-10). Behind the scenes in Jesus' ministry, Satan worked to deter Jesus from His work. This period of fasting would begin the temptations of Jesus. The temptations would not cease until the earthly ministry was completed. One must keep in mind, therefore, that when fasting, Satan will seek to stop your fast. He will seek to take your mind off that for which you are fasting and place it on the physical craving for food. We must keep in mind that the purpose for fasting is to focus on our spiritual goals, not on our physical needs. In fasting we are training our minds to focus on the spiritual.

**4:2 Fasted forty days and forty nights:** Jesus went without food for forty consecutive days and nights (Mk 1:12,13; see Ex 34:28; 1 Kg 19:8; Mt 6:16-18; 9:14; Lk 2:36,37; At 13:1-3; 2 Co 6:4,5). We are not told why He fasted forty days, unless there is some significance to the forty years the nation of Israel wandered in the wilderness of Sinai because of their refusal to take the land of promise. To me, the forty days means a long period of time. One can fast for a day, but in my experience, unless one goes beyond three to four days, he or she will not enjoy the spiritual experience that one has when the body's desire for food is conquered. Those who have fasted for five to seven days will witness to the fact that lengthy fasting works. However, one must keep in mind that one cannot go without water for great lengths of time. Jesus was inactive during his forty day fast, but He had to take water, for the body cannot go without water for several days without dying.

**4:3** Because He was vulnerable during and after His days of fasting, Satan continually tempted Jesus in order to make Him turn from His ministry (Mk 1:13). It was at the end of such a fast that Jesus would be most vulnerable to any temptation. In the same manner as he tempted Eve in the garden of Eden (Gn 3), Satan

tempted Jesus after the lust of the eyes and flesh, and the pride of life (1 Jn 2:16). However, even at this time when Jesus would have been most vulnerable to yield to temptation, He did not give in to the lure of Satan's temptations. The purpose of fasting is to place one in a vulnerable situation in reference to the lust of the flesh. If one can prove to himself that he can conquer the lust of the flesh, then one gains great confidence in disciplining the body.

## **JESUS'S TEACHING ON FASTING**

**(Matthew 6:16-18)**

These are the first words Jesus makes concerning fasting. Fasting was a common practice of the religious behavior of the Jewish culture, and thus, it is only natural that He would explain the nature of fasting in reference to the disciples' response to His lordship in their lives.

**6:16 *When you fast:*** It is not if the disciples would fast, but when they do fast. Fasting is an understood practice of the disciples of Jesus. Fasting is the natural response of those who respond with discipleship to the Lordship of Jesus. It is the response of those who depend upon God's work in their lives, for in fasting one is calling on God. ***Fast:*** Fasting is abstinence from food or water for religious purposes (See Is 58:3-7; Zc 8:19; 2 Sm 12:16,21). Fasting is done in order to take one's mind off the physical needs of the body in order to concentrate on the spiritual needs of the inner man. Fasting is not a command, but that which Christians do in absence of the bridegroom (See At 13:1-3). Fasting not only strengthens one self-discipline, it also helps to focus one's attention on the work of God in one's life.

***Disfigure:*** The Jews often let their hair go uncut when they fasted. They would put ashes on their heads and show a disfigured face in order to be publicly identified to be in a fast. Their emphasis on the fasting, therefore, was not on a plea for God to work in their lives but to manifest the meritorious performance of a religious rite. By fasting in such a manner and for such purposes, the only reward they had for fasting was the praise of men. In fasting one must focus on himself, not on other that they focus on him.

**6:17,18 *Anoint your head and wash your face:*** It is not the desire of the disciples of Jesus to meritoriously fast, nor to fast in order to draw attention to one's performance of religious practices. Fasting is to be directed toward the inner self. By concentrating on the inner spiritual part of man, Christians should give no outward indication of their fasting. The purpose of fasting is to humble oneself inwardly before God in order to proclaim one's dependance on the work of God in his life (See 17:21; Mk 9:29; Lk 2:36,37; At 14:23; 1 Co 7:5; 2 Co 6:5; 11:27). The fact that one was not give an appearance for fasting indicates that one can fast during his normal function of life. He or she does not have to go to a desert place, but can carry on with life while fasting.

## **FASTING WHEN THE BRIDEGROOM IS TAKEN**

**(Matthew 9:14,15)**

**(Mk 2:18-22; Lk 5:33-39)**

**9:14** According to the record of Mark and Luke, the

question that generated this teaching comes from the scribes and Pharisees (Lk 5:30). They asked why the disciples of John the Baptist, and the disciples of the Pharisees, fast and pray often and Jesus had not taught His disciples to fast (Mk 2:18). The complaint was made to Jesus. It is interesting to note that the question did not focus on whether they fasted, but when they fasted. Fasting was a part of religious behavior in the first century. It was practiced by the Jews, and it was taught by John the Baptist. **Your disciples do not fast:** These events took place at a time of fasting when the disciples of the Pharisees and John were fasting and praying (18:12; Mk 2:18; Lk 5:33). **Disciples:** Both the Pharisees and John had disciples. The term “disciple” is simply a term that is used to refer to one who was an apprentice, and thus, a follower and learner of the one to whom he had given allegiance to be his teacher. In this context, the disciples of John had learned from John that they should fast.

**9:15** Jesus answered the disciples of John by stating that it was not the time to fast when the bridegroom is present. Mark records, “*As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast*” (Mk 2:19). However, there will be a time when the bridegroom leaves. It would be in that time that His disciples would fast. **Then they will fast:** The companions (sons) of the bridegroom did not have to fast while the bridegroom was still in their presence. Jesus was describing Himself as the bridegroom. The time to fast would be when He goes away. In Jesus’ situation, He was taken away at the ascension in order to reign at the right hand of God. Since Jesus as the bridegroom has left, it is now the time for the disciples of Jesus to fast (See At 13:1-3; 1 Co 7:5). Jesus thus assumed that after His death and ascension, His disciples would fast. Those who are disciples of Jesus in this present age are fasting. This text makes it very clear that the disciples of Jesus in this time are fasting. The church, therefore, is identified by at least those who are fasting. Those who claim to be disciples of Jesus must think seriously about this point.

### **FASTING IN GOD’S WORK (Acts 13:1-3)**

Antioch of Syria was the third largest city of the Roman Empire. It was the ideal location from which the gospel could go out to the unbelieving Gentile world. Therefore, the Holy Spirit chose the predominantly Gentile church in Antioch to accomplish a major evangelistic work. However, his choice of the church of this city was based on who was there at the time He called Paul and Barnabas. It was a church of dedicated men and women. Their dedication is manifested in their spiritual behavior of fasting and prayer.

**13:1 Prophets and teachers:** Barnabas (4:36,37), Simeon (Niger), Lucius of Cyrene in North Africa (Rm 16:21), Manaean, who grew up with Herod Antipas, and Saul (Paul) were inspired preachers and teachers of the church in Antioch. They were dedicated people who had given themselves to the ministry of the word of God.

**13:2 As they ministered:** The emphasis here is

that their ministry and fasting was an ongoing work. In ministering to the church they ministered to the Lord. In their ministry to the Lord, they fasted (14:23). Their fasting was thus a part of their ministry (See Lk 2:37). The fact that their fasting was coupled with prayer manifested that they were serious about God working in their lives as they ministered. They were serious about depending on God in their ministry. Their prayers and fasting manifested that they were serious about world evangelism, and thus, God gave them a serious evangelistic task. **Separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work:** During one of their fasts, the Holy Spirit called through them as a group the two preachers, Barnabas and Paul. These two preachers had special talents for mission work, and thus, the Spirit called them to do a specific cross-cultural work of evangelism among the Gentiles (Gl 1:15; 2:9). The men qualified themselves before they were called through the ministry and manifestation that they depended on God. Fasting and prayer was a means by which they prepared themselves for the call of the Holy Spirit.

**13:3** After the Spirit made known to them what their work was, the entire church then fasted and prayed for Barnabas and Paul for the special mission to which the Spirit had revealed to them. What is revealed in this account concerning fasting was that it was a common thing in the church of Antioch. **Laid hands on them:** The church commissioned them to carry out the Spirit-inspired mission work of going to Asia Minor. They were thus sent away on this most important missionary journey to the Gentiles after much fasting and prayer.

Fasting and prayer are a ministry. In the Acts 13 account, it seems that this ministry preceded the ministry of world evangelism. Those we would send forth, therefore, to preacher the gospel, must be those who qualify themselves through fasting and prayer.

### **Research from the Old Testament**

1 Samuel 7:6; 31:13; 2 Samuel 12:22,23; 1 Chronicles 10:12; Nehemiah 9:1; Esther 4:3; 98:31; Psalms 35:13; 69:10; 109:24; Jeremiah 36:6; Daniel 9:3; Joel 2:12