

Fasting

Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament sets a period of fasting for the people of God. Many have said that the only fast day under the Law of Moses was the Day of Atonement, but that is incorrect. The Law says nothing about fasting on that day. The practice arose as a demonstration of humility. The Day of Atonement was the only “negative” gathering of the people; all other Jewish holidays were celebrations of historical events (Passover) or harvest (Pentecost and Tabernacles), and also celebrations of the ways in which God had blessed them. The Day of Atonement was a day in which they acknowledged their sin and the grace of God. Over the next few centuries, the practice arose of fasting on that day, to the point where The Day of Atonement became known as “the fast.”

However, fasting was a practice of many faithful people in the Old Testament.

- The people of Israel fasted before asking God about continuing a civil war (Judges 20:26)
- Samuel proclaimed a fast as part of national repentance (1 Samuel 7:6)
- The men who reclaimed the bodies of Saul and his sons fasted afterwards (1 Samuel 31:13, 1 Chronicles 10:12)
- David fasted after hearing the news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:12)
- David fasted and prayed when his infant child was sick (2 Samuel 12:16-23)
- Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast when Israel was being threatened by Moab (2 Chronicles 20:3)
- Ezra proclaimed a fast for the people who were returning to Israel after the Babylonian Captivity in order to appeal to God for safe travel. (Ezra 8:21-23)
- Nehemiah fasted and prayed concerning the plight of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4)
- The people fasted in connection with separating themselves from foreigners and re-establishing the Law after the Captivity (Nehemiah 9:1)
- Esther asked her people to fast before she risked going into the presence of the king (Esther 4:16). This became a part of the Feast of Purim (Esther 9:31)
- David described fasting and prayer as a response to affliction (Psalm 35:13, 109:24)
- A Messianic Psalm of David attributed fasting to the Messiah as a sign of mourning over Israel (Psalm 69:10)
- The people proclaimed a fast and listened to the words of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 36:6-9)
- Daniel fasted and prayed concerning the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy that Israel would serve Babylon 70 years (Daniel 9:3)
- Joel recommended a fast be proclaimed as a part of appealing to God (Joel 1:14, 2:12-15)
- The people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast of repentance (Jonah 3:5)

In the gospels, when the Law of Moses was still in force, fasting is mentioned several times:

- Jesus fasted (Matthew 4:2)
- Fasting is a private thing (Matthew 6:16-18)
- Fasting is for times of sorrow and of petitioning God. (Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22, Luke 5:33-39)
- Anna the prophetess fasted regularly (Luke 2:37)

In the descriptions of the early church, fasting is mentioned twice:

- The church in Antioch of Syria practiced fasting in connection with important events (Acts 13:1-3)
- The church in Antioch of Pisidia practiced fasting in connection with important events (Acts 14:23)

Fasting was not a practice recommended by God, but one that people adopted to help them focus on important and godly things. There are no prescribed times or occasions. Rather, faithful people devoted such long periods to prayer that regular meals were missed. They did not want to break up their communication with God for worldly pursuits, even something as practical and necessary as eating. It was not an attempt to punish oneself (we cannot punish ourselves adequately for sin). It was not a mark of holiness. Rather, it was the normal result of dedication to God: they missed meals because talking to God was more important at the moment.