

Chapter 1: Introduction to Fasting

WHAT IS FASTING?

Throughout the Scriptures, fasting is associated mostly with abstaining from food for a specific period of time for the purpose of seeking God. The fundamental principle of fasting may also include abstinence from any activity, event, or temporal pleasure for the sake of drawing near to God—abstaining from companionship to spend time alone with God; abstaining from sleep to pass the night in prayer; or abstaining from a certain labor, hobby, or pastime to dedicate time to God.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF FASTING

The following is a fairly comprehensive list of Scriptural references to fasting. Included are texts that relate only indirectly to fasting, such as those referring to a hunger or thirst for God. Thoughtfully and prayerfully review this list.

Leviticus 16:29, 31: On the Day of Atonement, the people of Israel were commanded to humble or afflict their souls. This phrase expresses self-denial and is connected most often with fasting (Psalm 35:13; Isaiah 58:3; Ezra 8:21). See also Leviticus 23:27-29 and Acts 27:9.

Exodus 24:12-18: Moses fasted on Mount Sinai forty days and nights while receiving the stone tablets of the Law (Deuteronomy 9:9).

Exodus 34:27-28: Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights to intercede for rebellious Israel and to receive a second copy of the Law (Deuteronomy 9:17-19; 10:10).

Judges 20:26-28: Israel fasted and inquired of the Lord for direction in the war against the tribe of Benjamin.

I Samuel 1:6-11: Hannah fasted and prayed for God to open her womb and give her a son.

I Samuel 7:6-8: Israel fasted in repentance at Mizpah and asked the Lord for deliverance.

I Samuel 31:11-13: The valiant men of Jabesh-gilead fasted in mourning for the death and desecration of King Saul and his sons.

II Samuel 1:11-12: David and his men fasted in mourning for the death of Saul, Jonathan, and those who had fallen by the sword in the battle against the Philistines.

II Samuel 12:15-23: David fasted that God might show mercy and spare the life of his child whom God had struck terminally ill as judgment.

UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

I Kings 21:9-13: Jezebel and Ahab used fasting to feign piety toward God and to mask their plot to kill Naboth.

I Kings 21:20-29: After hearing God's judgment upon him through Elijah, King Ahab humbled himself before God through fasting.

II Chronicles 20:1-4: King Jehoshaphat and Judah fasted to be delivered from the threat of war from the Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites.

Ezra 8:21-23: Ezra and the exiles with him humbled themselves with fasting that God might give them a safe journey from the river of Ahava to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 1:3-11; 2:1-8: Nehemiah fasted in mourning over the remnant in Jerusalem who were greatly distressed and under reproach, in confession of the sins of Israel, and in petition of God for mercy and for favor in the eyes of King Artaxerxes.

Nehemiah 8:18; 9:1-3: Israel fasted in a solemn assembly to hear the Law of God and to confess their sins and the sins of their fathers.

Esther 4:16: Queen Esther, her maidens, and the Jews in Susa fasted that she might find favor before the king and that the Jews might be delivered from the destruction that Haman had plotted.

Esther 9:20-22, 30-31: The day of Purim was established as a holiday in commemoration of the Jews' great deliverance from the decrees of Haman and all their enemies. The celebration included not only feasting and rejoicing and gift-giving, but also fasting and lamentation.

Psalms 4:7: God brings greater gladness to the heart than grain and new wine.

Psalms 34:8: David admonished God's people to taste and see for themselves that the Lord is good.

Psalms 35:13-14: David humbled his soul with fasting before God for the sake of others when they were sick and needy.

Psalms 42:1-2; 63:1: The psalmist described a passion for God as a hunger and thirst for Him.

Psalms 69:9-10: David wept and fasted because of his zeal for the things of God and because of the godless who reproached God's name.

Psalms 27:4: David's greatest desire was to behold God's beauty.

Psalms 73:25: Asaph desired nothing on the earth above God and His presence.

Psalms 102:4; 107:18: God's people were represented as being so afflicted that they were said to "forget" (102:4) or even "abhor" their food (107:18).

Psalms 109:24: David was physically weakened from fasting in the midst of his enemies.

Isaiah 58:1-5: Israel asked why God had not noticed their fasts. God rebuked them for their wickedness and hypocrisy.

Isaiah 58:6-14: God described the fasts performed by the righteous that are pleasing to Him.

Jeremiah 36:9-10; 36:20-26: All the people from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah proclaimed a fast and listened as the scroll of Jeremiah was read; however, God's warning was not heeded.

Daniel 6:16-19: King Darius spent the night fasting for the deliverance of Daniel, whom he had unwittingly condemned to the lions' den.

Daniel 9:3-20: Daniel fasted as he confessed his sin and the sin of his people.

Daniel 9:2; 22-23: Daniel fasted as he asked for wisdom to understand the prophecies concerning Israel's future.

Joel 1:14-15; 2:12-17: God commanded Israel to fast and call a solemn assembly in order to repent and plead for mercy before the coming of the day of the Lord (God's judgment).

Jonah 3:4-10: After the preaching of Jonah, the Ninevites called a fast, repented of their wickedness, and pleaded that the Lord would be merciful.

Zechariah 7:1-7; 8:19: During their exile, the Jews established four annual fasts: one each in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months.

Matthew 4:1-3: Jesus fasted for forty days and nights in the wilderness prior to being tested by the tempter.

Matthew 6:16: Jesus assumed that fasting would be practiced by His disciples and warned against improper motives (e.g. hypocrisy) when fasting.

Matthew 6:17-18: Jesus taught about the proper motives for fasting and the promise of reward.

Matthew 9:14-15: Jesus taught that His disciples would fast after His ascension.

Matthew 9:16-17: Jesus distinguished between the old order of fasting, which was practiced by the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist, and the new order of fasting, which would be practiced by His disciples.

Mark 9:29: Jesus mentioned fasting along with prayer as a means of strengthening the believer's faith for spiritual warfare. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

Luke 2:36-38: The prophetess Anna served God day and night in the temple with fasting and prayer. Her prayers were possibly related to her waiting for the coming Messiah.

Luke 18:11-12: The Pharisees fasted twice a week (see also Matthew 9:14).

Luke 18:9-14: Jesus condemned self-righteous boasting in fasting.

Acts 10:30: Cornelius was praying and fasting when the angel appeared to him and directed him to send for Peter. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

Acts 13:1-3: The Christians in Antioch practiced fasting. The missionary movement began during such fasting.

Acts 13:1-3: Fasting was practiced in relation to the ordination of missionaries.

Acts 14:23: Christians at Antioch fasted as part of the ordination of missionaries and elders.

Romans 14:6: Paul wrote that the believer is free to follow his conscience in the matters of observing days and eating, yet he is obligated to do all unto God and for His glory.

I Corinthians 7:5: Paul mentioned fasting and prayer as proper reasons for abstinence within the marital relationship. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

I Corinthians 9:24-27: The victorious Christian life requires self-control, including disciplining the body to make it subservient to the will of God.

II Corinthians 6:4-5: Fasting was one of the ways in which the Apostle Paul commended himself as a genuine servant of God. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

II Corinthians 11:27: The Apostle Paul fasted often in the midst of his ministry. *Variations in translation related to this text are discussed in the next section.*

Colossians 2:23: Paul declared ascetic practices and severe treatment of the body to be of no value against fleshly indulgence.

I Timothy 4:1-5: It is heretical to advocate abstaining from foods that God has created to be gratefully shared by those who believe and know the truth.

VARIATIONS IN TRANSLATION

In the above survey of biblical texts regarding fasting, we mentioned five texts that would require further discussion because of variations in translations. Before advancing further in this study, we will consider each one in detail.

MARK 9:29

Some translations (KJV/NKJV) include fasting along with prayer, while others (NASB/ESV) omit it and mention only prayer. The earliest Greek manuscripts (Alexandrian, Western, and Caesarean) do not include the additional phrase "and fasting." However, it is found in virtually all other remaining manuscripts and versions. Those conservative scholars who omit fasting believe it is a scribal insertion influenced by the early and medieval church's growing emphasis on fasting. Nevertheless, even if the phrase "and fasting" is a later insertion, it is not contrary to sound doctrine or practice. Remember that the disciples' inability to cast out the demon was only indirectly related to their lack of prayer (and/or fasting). The primary reason for their failure was their lack of spiritual authority due to their lack of faith (Matthew 10:1; Mark 9:18-19; Matthew 17:19-20). Like prayer, biblical fasting can be a means of strengthening the believer's faith and is represented throughout the Old Testament as a means of asking God for deliverance.

ACTS 10:30

The KJV and NKJV describe Cornelius praying and fasting, while the NASB and ESV say that he only prayed. Again, this difference of translation is based on variants in Greek manuscripts. Some scholars argue that the reference to fasting was deleted from the account in verse 30 because it is not mentioned in the first account in verses 1-4. Others hold that the reference to fasting was a later scribal addition due to the early and medieval church's emphasis on fasting. Regardless, even if the word "fasting" is a later insertion, it is not contrary to sound doctrine or practice.

I CORINTHIANS 7:5

Some translations (KJV/NKJV) refer to spouses devoting themselves to prayer and fasting, while others (NASB/ESV) refer only to prayer. This difference of opinion is once more based on variants in Greek manuscripts. The earliest manuscripts do not mention fasting. Therefore, many conservative scholars hold that this reference found in later manuscripts was also a scribal addition. Again, even if the word "fasting" is a later insertion, it is not contrary to sound doctrine or practice. In fact, it is not improbable that fasting might have accompanied prayer in such cases.

II CORINTHIANS 6:5 AND II CORINTHIANS 11:27

The KJV mentions "watchings" and "fastings," while the NASB describes "sleeplessness" and "hunger." The reason for the differences is not due to variants in different manuscripts, but to differing opinions regarding the translation from Greek to English. In II Corinthians 6:5, "sleeplessness" is translated from the Greek word **agrupnía**, which can denote sleeplessness or watching. The word "hunger" is translated from the Greek word **nēsteía**, which can refer to a religious fast or a forced fast due to want, poverty, or difficult circumstances. In II Corinthians 11:27, "sleeplessness" is again translated from the Greek word **agrupnía**, but "hunger" is translated from the Greek word **limós**, which most often denotes famine, hunger, or starvation. The Apostle Paul possibly had both ideas in mind. He probably followed the example of Jesus by spending nights in prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12). There were times when he was forced to go without food due to poverty or circumstance (Philippians 4:12; I Corinthians 4:11) as well as times when he voluntarily fasted to seek the Lord.