

# WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT FASTING

Due to the prevalence of fasting as a required rite among several churches in Christendom, many people have been asking questions as to the place of fasting in Christianity.

Fasting is abstinence from food for a fixed period of time. It implies the taming of the passions such that one denies oneself things that give pleasure and comfort even if such are lawful.

The issue of fasting has become highly controversial because several Churches, in their quest for instant healing or miracles, have evolved various types of fasting for their adherents. They believe it is a command from God that they should fast. Writing in his book *BIBLICAL FASTING AND PRAYER*, R. D. Flory describes fasting as a “spiritual exercise (like a prayer) to cleanse the channel so His (God’s) gifts and life will flow...a matter of love and obedience.” He adds: “After a 21-day fast you will realize for the first time the Biblical authority you have over demons, over princes and powers of the air, which Jesus has given you through His triumphant work on your behalf on the cross.” Thus many people, rather than regard fasting as a reflection of deep piety, indulge in it because of their quest for miracles or instant cures.

Harold R. Brown, a South African naturopath in his book *The fast way to health and vigour*, says, “Since time immemorial, fasting has been the *sine qua non* of real and lasting cure. The survival of the human race is due as much to periodic abstention from all food, save water, as by its consumption. Many who could not afford a doctor’s prescription have unknowingly cured themselves simply by doing without the very foods and drugs they thought were essential to their better health. An empty stomach has saved more lives than any known specific in medical records.”

## PURPOSE OF FASTING

The Holy Bible makes it clear that fasting may be done in supplication to God for some divine gifts, to ward off danger or to solve some pressing problems affecting the worshippers of God either as individuals or groups. The Church at Antioch fasted and prayed as a result of which the Lord revealed to them that Barnabas and Saul should be set apart for the work of God. – Acts 13:1-3.

Fasting may be done to show contrition or remorse for one’s sins. David fasted and prayed to God to spare his child – the product of his adulterous union. However in spite of his fasting, the child died according to the word of the Lord. – 2 Samuel 12:14-17; See also Daniel 6:18; 2 Samuel 1:12; Psalm 69:12; 35:13. Joel 2:12-15.

The children of Israel were enjoined by God to observe a certain day in the year as a Day of Atonement during which time the high priest makes atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year. That day was one of self-denial, of abstinence from fleshly pleasures, and of reconciliation of the natural Jews to God. (Leviticus 16:27-31). The Day of Atonement, now

observed by the Jews as Yom Kippur, was the “fast” mentioned by St. Paul in Acts 27:9 at which time of the year (September-October), sailing was dangerous.

There are examples of fasting to avert a national calamity. The children of Israel, threatened with destruction by the Moabites, Ammonites and other gentile nations, the Holy writ says that King “Jehoshaphat feared and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.” The outcome of that battle was that the enemies of the children of Israel were routed by the Lord’s angel and the Jews only came to gather the spoil. – 2 Chronicles 20:1-4, 15-17, 20, 24-30. See also Jonah 3:6-10; Nehemiah 9:12.

St Paul also advised Christian couples that they could, with common consent, abstain from sexual relations for the purpose of giving themselves to fasting and prayer.— 1 Corinthians 7:3-5.

## **JESUS CHRIST AND FASTING**

By the time of Jesus Christ fasting, as an important adjunct to prayer, was a pretty well established custom among the Jews. However, formalism and empty traditionalism had become associated with it. Fasting had been stripped of its essence; vainglory and hypocrisy had taken over. This was evident in Christ’s telling indictment of the self-righteous, holier-than-thou Pharisee, who was not justified in the sight of God in spite of the fact that he fasted “twice a week” (Luke 18:9-14).

During Christ’s earthly ministry, the disciples of John the Baptist were curious that they and the Pharisees fasted often but the disciples of Jesus Christ never did. They then came to the Lord Jesus Christ to find out. They asked, “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?” Jesus said to them, “Can the children of the bride chamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?” He added, “As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.” – Mark 2:18-20

The point Christ was making to his disciples (whom he referred to as the children of the bride chamber) was that since he (the bridegroom) was with them to cater for their spiritual well-being (as opposed to the disciples of John whose master was then in prison), there was no compelling need for them to fast or to afflict themselves in any wise. Not all the trees in Christ’s garden are of equal growth. Christ would not give to his disciples, duties they could not bear as they, being new in their calling, were not used to such religious austerities as fasting.

Moreover, God is a God of order. There is time for everything. (1 Corinthians 14:33,40; Ecclesiastes 3:1). Hence, the Lord added: “No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse. And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles,

and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles.” – Mark 2:21-22.; Matthew 9:14-17; Luke 5:33-39).

The implication of Christ's statement that his disciples could not fast while he was with them, was that when he would be taken away (at his crucifixion), they would be thrown into sorrow. The Lord made this clear in John 16:20 “Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice; and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy”. Indeed after Christ's crucifixion the disciples “mourned and wept” (Mark 16:10). They fasted when the Lord was taken away from them as he had earlier predicted.

## **FASTING IN THE PRESENT DAY**

That fasting is not ruled out in the Christian era is evident from the case of the deaf and dumb spirit, which Jesus Christ cast out of a Jewish boy. Earlier his own disciples had tried to oust the devil from the boy but failed; but at Jesus' command the deaf and dumb spirit left the boy.

Intrigued by it all, the disciples asked why they could not cast the deaf and dumb spirit out. Christ answered, “This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.” This clearly gives the understanding that under certain desperate situation, one could fast. – Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:17-29.

However no matter how deeply one may afflict his soul, no matter how extensive the fasting, it will be ineffective if it is not based on the truth, the fear of God and the practice of righteousness. The Jews made an error of judgement by believing that because they fasted often they would be in favour with God and be blessed by Him. Many professed Christians have fallen into this error of turning the solemn, private act of fasting into a mere ritual or formalism. Some even pay other people to fast for them according to the number of days some so-called visionaries, pastors, prophets and prophetesses that abound these days prescribe.

Fasting is a voluntary act of self-denial or sacrifice by a troubled individual or group of persons. It is ridiculous, therefore, for someone to engage in fasting on behalf of another. Please see Philippians 2:12; Ezekiel 18:4,20; Galatians 6:4,5; Ezekiel 14:12-20 etc.

## **LENGTH OF FASTING**

With regard to the period of time one should fast, some individuals have been known to fast for upwards of 40 days, apparently in imitation of Moses and the Lord Jesus Christ who neither took food nor water during their fast. Others recommend fewer days. According to Flory, “Your need and desperation should influence the length of the fast. Some (have) continued in prayer and fasting for 40 days until the demons went out”. However, Christians should guide their affairs with

discretion. It is indiscreet to fast for days on end especially in this time of grace. – Proverbs 2:10; Psalm 112:5.

Because the Israelites had turned the solemn rite of fasting into mere formality – they fasted and “afflicted their souls” but at the same time reveled in iniquity – God Almighty speaking through Isaiah pointed out to them that He had no regard for their prayers and fasting, as it is written: “Wherefore have we fasted, say they and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?”- Isaiah 58:3-5.

Jeremiah the prophet was used by God to proclaim also that because the Jews persisted in wickedness, their fasting and prayers would be of no avail. “Then said the Lord unto me, Pray not for this people for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offerings and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence”. -Jeremiah 14:10-12.

It can be understood from Jeremiah’s proclamation that one who fasts often and yet indulges in sin or personal righteousness in order to get the praise of men cannot be blessed by God. Such a one is exposing himself to the adverse judgement of God. Jesus Christ warned: “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: the Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” – Matthew 6:16-18.

But contrary to Christ’s injunction that fasting should be a quiet, sober or private affair, many churches make such a flourish about fasting that special dates and holidays are set aside for them. Fasting has thus been robbed of its essence in order to attract the attention of the world and for the individuals involved to be hailed by men as righteous. As the Jesus Christ said, such already have their reward, which is the admiration they get from those unlearned in the Scriptures – and nothing more.

The fast required by God is not so much the abstinence from food as the doing of righteousness at all times. He made this clear in Isaiah 58:6-9 to wit: “Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh”.

What the foregoing passage makes clear is that importance is no longer attached to fasting as a rite. What is important is the fear of God and the practice of righteousness. The fasting that is more acceptable to God and which "is in the sight of God of great prize" is the practice of righteousness at all times. (Psalm 106:3). Thus a Christian can be having his normal three square meals a day and yet be fasting, that is giving himself to righteousness. Such a one must deny himself of "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" to meet up the Lord's requirement. This is the fasting that is required of every faithful Christian in these last days. – See John 2:15-17; Matthew 6:27; Romans 13:11-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; 1 Timothy 2:1-5.

From all that has been said, it is evident that fasting is a sober, private affair: It should not be published.

Those who publish their fast, calling attention of the world are like the hypocrites in time of Christ. (Matthew 6:16-18). They are not doing the will of God. Moreover, now that Christ has come the second time, fasting is not mandatory or binding. Christ the Tabernacle of God is now with men, as it is written: "And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God." (Revelation 21:3).