

The Heart of Christian Fasting, Part 1: Fasting in the Old Testament

Scripture: Joel 2:12–13

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There's something about the topic of Christian fasting that makes people defensive. I know I'm that way. When someone starts to talk about it, you can never be quite sure where they're going or what burden they may try to lay on your conscience. So let me put your mind at ease as we open a short blog series on the topic. *If you don't want to fast, don't fast.* I have no hidden agenda that I'm going to spring on you in the last paragraph.

I *do* have an agenda to clarify the biblical teaching on fasting and call attention to bad habits some men have developed when they teach on fasting. Have you ever noticed that teachers who promote fasting often have a way of telling you about their own practice of fasting (even as they make you feel guilty about your lack of fasting)? That is fundamentally wrong—unless I missed their exemption from Jesus' command to keep our fasting from the attention of men (Matthew 6:1, 16-18).

So in these posts, I don't want to badger you into fasting. It's more important that you understand *why* biblical saints fasted than for you to mechanically skip a few meals simply so you can say you've fasted. When you understand the principles behind fasting, you have a better idea of how to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit in your own life circumstances.

Today we'll look briefly at fasting in the Old Testament, and save other passages for later. The Old Testament had only one commanded fast, which was found in Leviticus for the Day of Atonement. All other fasts were voluntary. Since the command to fast was directed to the nation Israel, and since the Day of Atonement was fulfilled in Christ, I want to focus on the voluntary fasts of the Old Testament.

The preliminary question is: what is fasting? Answer: *Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.*

That's simple enough. But let's ask a more penetrating question. *Why* did the saints fast in the Old Testament? In summary, we can say that *voluntary fasting in the Old Testament expressed a mournful, urgent seeking of God in distressing circumstances.* Consider some illustrations from the Old Testament.

2 Samuel 12: 16-18: David fasted and wept for his dying child.

Esther 4:3, 16: The Jews fasted when threatened with extermination at the hands of Haman.

Jonah 3:6-10: Nineveh fasted when Jonah pronounced judgment on them.

Notice the common thread from those examples, which could be multiplied from other Old Testament passages. Those who were fasting were faced with extreme circumstances of impending death or God's imminent judgment. Greatly distressed and conscious of their utter helplessness, they

suspended their normal eating habits in an urgent, extraordinary seeking of God who alone could deliver them from their distress.

In other words, their fasting naturally flowed from profound spiritual urgency. It was not the product of routine spiritual ritual. It expressed deep dependence on God in times of uncommon anguish. In Joel 2:12-13 we read:

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments.” Now return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil.

Fasting was an outward expression of the inward reality of a shattered heart. It was an urgent response of repentance and great humility. It was the seeking of deliverance from a gracious God in profoundly desperate situations.

Old Testament fasting presupposes the spiritual realities of sin, judgment, repentance, helplessness, and dependence on God. It is a serious mistake to pursue external fasting without an earnest appreciation for the more important internal reasons that prompt it. Someone who casually pursues fasting as a religious duty without a broken heart actually *mocks* the reason for its existence.

What does that mean for you today? Ask yourself some serious questions. Do you turn to God in your trials or surrender to fear and grumbling? Do you repent of sin or tolerate it in your life? Are you confident in your own strength or do you see your utter need for the grace of God?

The true answers to those questions say much more about your sanctification than whether you have fasted recently. Ask the profound questions before you worry about eating food. If the internal reality is in place, external fasting will ultimately take care of itself.

We'll develop this more fully next time when we look at Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

Don Green
Managing Director

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