

FASTING VERSES

Torah

- Exod 34:28 Moses neither ate nor drank 40 days while on the mountain with God – Note: the term “fasting” is not used.
- Lev 16:29-31 On Day of Atonement the people shall “deny yourselves, and do not work” – Hebrew literally says “humiliate [*anh II*] self-of-you [*nefesh*]” – not clear in this verse that this means abstain from food –see Lev 23:27-32
- Lev 23:27-32 Refers back to Day of Atonement using the same language in v. 27 “humiliate your *nefesh*”; but then v. 28 says “all-work not do with-bone this day”; and the reason is given in vs. 29: “for all-*nefesh* which not-humiliate [*anh II*] with-bone this day shall be cut off from the people” – here it is pretty clear that what they are denying their souls/bones/selves is work. This is reinforced in v. 32, which frames “humiliate your *nefesh*” in Sabbath language. [see, however, Ezra 8:21; Ps 35:15; Isa 58:3-5 for passages that connect this phrase with fasting, though it is not clear that they are synonyms as much as parallel or overlapping actions – in other words, there are several ways of “humiliating/humbling/denying oneself” one of which is to abstain from food, another is to cease working]. Acts 27:9 refers back to this day as a “Fast,” but that may be because it later became a fast for those Jews who had no access to the temple.
- Num 29:7 More Day of Atonement material where “humiliate your *nefesh*” language parallels abstaining from work.
- Num 30:13 “humiliate your *nefesh*” is something that a woman makes a vow to do – unclear
- Deut 9:9, 18 Moses does again what he did in Exod 34 after the Israelites committed idolatry “because of all the sin the people committed, provoking the LORD by doing what was evil in his sight. For I was afraid that the anger that the LORD bore against you was so fierce that he would destroy you.”

Pre-Exile

- Judg 20:26 Israelites wept, sat before the LORD, and fasted in the middle of a battle against their own people (Benjaminites) and then they gave offerings and inquired about what to do next...God told them to keep fighting and they will defeat them on the next day.
- 1 Sam 7:6 Samuel told the people to forsake baalism, then to gather so he may pray to God on their behalf. So they gathered, drew and poured out water, fasted for a day, and confessed their sin.
- 1 Sam 14:24-43 Saul places his troops under a fast
- 1 Sam 31:13 After burying Saul’s bones, his men fasted seven days.
- 2 Sam 1:12 After David learns of Saul’s death he and his men mourned, wept, and fasted until evening – a lot shorter of a time than Saul’s men
- 2 Sam 3:31-35 David mourns, puts on sackcloth, and fasts until sundown at Abner’s death
- 2 Sam 12:16-23 David mourns, lays on the ground, and fasts after his first child with Bathsheba becomes ill and then, resumes to normal activity once the child died. David gives his reason: to plead with God to allow the child to live, over-against a prophecy from Nathan that the child would die and a statement that it was the LORD who struck the child with illness. David says, “Who knows? The LORD may be

gracious” (v. 22). This is the same exact phrase used in the context of fast in Joel 2:14 and Jonah 3:9.

- 1 Kgs 19:8 Elijah traveled for forty days on the strength of one meal – he wasn’t told to fast nor did he call it a fast. But he was told to eat and drink beforehand because he would need strength for this journey.
- 1 Kgs 21:1-29 Naboth would not give King Ahab his vineyard, so Ahab refused to eat. Then his wife Jezebel told him to eat, ordered the elders of Naboth’s town to proclaim a fast that is somehow linked with an assembly, had Naboth accused falsely before the assembly and then killed. After this happened, Elijah proclaimed the death of the king and queen as well as the end of Ahab’s dynasty. But then Ahab tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, fasted, and went about dejectedly. Then God said to Elijah that because Ahab humbled himself in this way, he will not bring such disaster upon him in his days, but in the days of his son. This happened, since the Omride dynasty ended with his sons (two of them), not with him. And his son Joram suffers the fate of Elijah’s prophecy in 2 Kings 9:25-26. Jezebel then dies in vv. 30-37.
- 1 Chron 10:12 Saul’s men fast 7 days after they bury him.
- 2 Chron 20:3 King Jehoshaphat sees an army coming and is afraid. Then he “set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.” They all do that, then Jehoshaphat prays before the entire assembly, and then God sends word through a prophet that they have nothing to fear and that God will fight on their behalf and gain victory for them, which he did.
- Ps 35:13 The psalmist responds to his enemy’s sickness by “afflicting himself with fasting” [literally “humiliated with-fasting *nefesh*-of-me”] as well as wearing sackcloth, grieving, lamenting, bowing down, and mourning
- Ps 69:10 “When-I-wept [*bch*] with-fasting my-*nefesh*” this parallels in v. 11 the phrase “when-I-gave my-garment sackcloth” – the purpose of these actions appears in vv. 13-14: that God would answer the psalmist prayer and deliver him from sinking and from his enemies.
- Ps 109:4, 24 Psalmist is growing weak from fasting the context of which is beseeching God to act on his behalf, deliver him, save him, and vindicate him before his enemies (vv. 21, 26-29)
- Jer 14:12 After a draught during which the people mourn, confess, and beseech God not to forsake them; the LORD tells Jeremiah not to pray for them. Though they fast and make offerings, God will not accept them and hear they cry, but will consume them by sword, famine, and pestilence.
- Jer 36:6, 9 God gives Jeremiah words of judgment upon Israel. He wants them to hear the words so that they may turn from their evil ways so that God may forgive them (vv. 3, 7). So Jeremiah dictates them to Baruch and commissions him to read them to the Jews when they are gathered in the temple on a “fast day,” which he does on the 5th day of the 9th month. Unfortunately, we don’t hear how the people respond; they only rat him out to the king who burns the scroll. We also don’t know why they chose to fast on this particular day, but it seemed to be routine and associated with special trips to Jerusalem.

Post-Exile

- Ezra 8:21-23 Ezra called a fast [*tzum*] “to-humiliate-ourselves before our-God; to seek from God safe passage” – so the humiliate phrase is used as part of the purpose of this particular fast. Verse 23 adds that they fasted and petitioned God for this and the he listened to their entreaty, which means he gave them safe travel.
- Ezra 9:1-10:8 When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem he learned of the people’s intermarriage with foreigners and then tore his clothes, pulled out his hair, and sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. Then he got up from his fast (v. 5), fell on his knees, spread out his hands, and prayed to God a prayer of confession. After this, in ch. 10, the people gathered, wept, and vowed to make things right. After they do so, Ezra retires for the day and spends the evening mourning over their unfaithfulness and does not eat bread or drink water (10:6). Then all the people gather again and begin devising a concrete plan, which they eventually put into place. Interestingly, we never hear from God in these chapters.
- Neh 1:4 When Nehemiah received a bad report about the Jews in Jerusalem he sat down, wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed before God for days. He then prayed a prayer asks God to see and hear his prayer of confession a petition that God would give him success before the Persian king in the request he plans to make.
- Neh 9:1 All the Israelites assembled with fasting, sackcloth, and earth on their heads. They then confessed their sins, read from the law, and worshipped God. Then after Ezra’s prayer they renewed the covenant (ch. 10). We are not told what made them do this whole thing; the previous chapter simply has them responding to Torah reading by celebrating a festival they had been neglecting: Booths. This festival begins on the 15th of the month and lasts 7 days. Then they had a solemn assembly on the 8th day, which would have been the 23rd. We are not told why this fast then takes place on the 24th day, perhaps it was in response to the daily Scripture reading that took place during the weeklong festival (v. 18) that may have been discussed during their solemn assembly on the 23rd.
- Esther 4:3 In response to Haman’s decree that the Jews be exterminated, all the Jews who heard about it mourned, fasted, wept, lamented, and sat in sackcloth and ashes.
- Esther 4:16 When Esther decides she will petition the king to save the Jews, she asks for all Jews to join her and her maids in fasting from food and water for three days on her behalf.
- Esther 9:31 Esther and Mordecai send out word that Purim should be observed along with other fasts and lamentations that the Jewish people “had lain down for themselves and their descendants.” It is not clear what this refers to, but likely refers to different days Jews chose to ritually appeal to God in light of the fall of Jerusalem that he might restore them [Zech 7] or perhaps earlier days they observed for unknown reasons [see Jer 36].
- Isa 58:1-9 Here the prophet says that the fast [*tzum*] God wants is not what they are doing: “humiliating their *nefesh*” (vv. 3, 5), bowing (v. 5), sackcloth (v. 5), ashes (v. 5); rather he wants as his fast all sorts of acts of social justice. In verse 3 in particular “humiliating their *nefesh*” is parallel to fasting, but it may just as well be pointing to the whole cluster of related practices listed in v. 5. Implied in this whole passages is that the purpose of fasting is to get God to see them (v. 3), notice them (v. 3), get their voice heard on high (v. 4), receive healing (v. 8), receive an answer from God (v. 9), receive an answer to their cry (v. 9).

- Zech 7:1-8:23 Some Jews send to the priest to ask if they need to keep mourning and fasting on the 5th month like they had been doing (7:3). Interesting, the word for fast is the verb form of Nazarite: *nazar*. So this may have been a partial fast. God then says that they have been fasting (normal word for fasting) on the 5th and 7th month for seventy years (50 years of exile and 21 more – this prophecy is in 518, but the exile ended in 539). So they obviously did this in response to the exile and simply want to know if they can stop now that it is over, but they are obviously not fully free since Persia occupies their land. God’s first response is that their fast wasn’t really for God, but it was for themselves. This echoes 8th century prophets who condemned their hypocritical assemblies. Then he rehearses the words of those prophets which is not to oppress the poor, which is what got them in exile to begin with. Then he pronounces good things he has in store for Israel and exhorts them to speak truth to one another, render just judgments, stop evil against one another and false oaths. Finally, he declares that their fasts in the 4th, 5th, 7th, and 10th months shall be seasons of gladness and festivities (8:19). So they should love truth and peace and then the nations will stream to them to seek the LORD.
- Joel 1:14 After describing a recent locust (v. 4) and/or nation (v. 6) invasion, Joel tells the priests to put on sackcloth, lament, wail, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land, and cry out to the Lord – for the day of the LORD is near (v. 15).
- Joel 2:12-15 God calls Israelites to return to him with fasting, weeping, mourning, torn hearts because “who knows he may turn/repent [*shuv*] and repent/relent [*niham*] and leave a blessing. Verse 15 calls them to blow the trumpet, sanctify a fast, and call a solemn assembly.
- Jonah 3:5-10 After Jonah announced Nineveh’s destruction, the people believed God, declared a fast, and everyone put on sackcloth. When the king heard, he did the same and issued a decree requiring all humans and animals to abstain from food and water, put on sackcloth, cry mightily to God, and turn from evil ways and violence. The reason is given: because God may relent and change his mind and turn from his fierce anger and let them live. When God saw this, “God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”
- Dan 1 Daniel and friends abstain from the king’s portion and prefer seed-food and water
- Dan 6:18 King Darius spent the night fasting after he had sent Daniel to the lions, against his desires. He also didn’t or couldn’t sleep. Interestingly, we don’t hear that Daniel prayed or anything and then the king rushes to the den to ask if Daniel’s God had rescued him. Should we presume God answered the king’s fasting?
- Dan 9:3 Daniel is wrestling with the apparent lack of fulfillment of Jeremiah’s 70 year prophecy and turns to the LORD, seeking an answer by prayer, supplication, fasting, sackcloth and ashes, and ultimately a prayer of confession. The prayer ends with a petition that God hear, forgive, listen, act – and act fast!
- Dan 10:2-4 Daniel received a vision after mourning three weeks, during which he ate no rich food—meat or wine—and did not anoint himself. This seems to be a selective fast. We are not told why, but the month and date in v. 4 indicate he was fasting during Passover (14th day of first month) and Feast of Unleavened Bread (15th-21st day of first month) according to Lev 23:5-6, perhaps as a substitute. It is Cyrus’s third year as king, which is two years after he sent the Jews home from exile.

OT Conclusions

- * Nowhere does God command or even ask the Israelites to fast. The closest we come is a questionable translation and possible misunderstanding of what takes place on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16 & 23; Num 29:7)
- * On multiple occasions the Israelites and foreigners choose to fast to God to appeal to them in a particular situation and God responds to them.
- * Some fasts seem to be tied to called assemblies (1 Kgs 21:1-29; 2 Chron 20:3, which could explain why some associate it with the Day of Atonement – because when all the people come together food logistics become problematic, so it's easier to abstain)
- * It often accompanies confession of guilt and petitions God to forgive and restore (Deut 9; 1 Sam 7:6; 1 Kgs 21; Ezra 9-10; Neh 9:1; Jonah 3:5-10)
- * It sometimes accompanies grief for someone who has died or is sick 1 Sam 31:13; 2 Sam 1:12; 2 Sam 3:31-35; 12:16-23; 1 Chron 10:12)
- * In some cases, fasting happens to request God to reverse an unfavorable verdict he declared against them (e.g., 2 Sam 12:16-23; 1 Kings 21; Jonah 3:5-10; Joel 2:12-15)
- * In some cases, Israelites fast to petition God for direction (Judg 20:26; 2 Chron 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23; Neh 1:4; Esther 4:3; 4:16; Ps 35:13; 60:10; 109:4, 24; Dan 6:18)
- * Sometimes it is both a confession of sin and cry for God to help out in some way (Isa 58:1-9; Jer 14:12; Dan 9:3; Joel 1:14; 2:12-15; Zech 7-8)
- * There is some evidence of special days when the Israelites chose to fast on a periodic basis (Esther 9:31; Jer 36:6; Zech 7-8)
- * A few fasts seem to be partial (Dan 1; Dan 10:2-3; Zech 7-8)
- * God's people need to be reminded on occasion that God wants justice more than fasting (Isa 58:1-9; Zech 7-8)
- * Fasting is co-opted to serve a sinful desire (1 Kings 21:4-14)
- * Some fasts appear to be unique and are not easily imitated (Exod 34:28; 1 Kgs 19:8)
- * Length-wise, some fasts are part of a day, a whole day, 3 days, 7 days, 40 days, as long as it takes, and unspecified. One day is most common.

Matt 4:2 After being baptized, Jesus fasted 40 days and nights and was famished—immediately before being tempted and then beginning his public ministry. This appears to mirror the fast of Moses.

Matt 6:16-18 Jesus says that when we fast we should not try to be seen by others, but by God who will see in secret and reward us. Note: Jesus does not command the practice but notes that there are better and worse ways to do it. He simply assumes it, just like he assumes they pray (Matt 6:5) and bring gifts before altars (Matt 5:23).

Matt 9:14-15 John's disciples ask why they and the Pharisees fast often, but Jesus and his followers do not. Jesus uses a bridegroom analogy to say that it is not fit for the disciples to fast while he is with them, but that they will fast when he is taken away from him.

Matt 17:21 This verse is in some ancient manuscripts but not others. There were some demons that the disciples could not cast out. Jesus says it is because they have little faith in v. 20. Then v. 21 he adds that this kind of demon only comes out with prayer and fasting.

Mark 2:18-20 Same as Matt 9:14-15

- Luke 2:37 A prophetess, Anna, was married for 7 years and after her husband died she remained at the temple day and night praying and fasting until the age of 84. At that time, she prophesied about the child who would redeem Jerusalem (Jesus was a young boy at the time).
- Luke 4:1, 2 Same as Matt 4:2
- Luke 5:33-35 Same as Matt 9:14-15 and Mark 2:18-20
- Luke 18:12 Parable of the Pharisee who thought he was better than a tax collector because he fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of his income. His prayer was not heard because he exalted himself.
- Acts 9:9-11 After Saul was knocked to the ground by a blinding light from God, he went to Damascus, fasted and prayed for three days, and could not see. Then God brought Ananias to him to complete his instruction in the Lord.
- Acts 10:30 Cornelius was praying [some Greek manuscripts say “fasting”] and an angel appeared to him and said God has heard his prayer and seen his alms and is sending Peter to him as part of his answer.
- Acts 13:2-3 Prophets and teachers in Antioch were worshipping the Lord and fasting when the HS told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work he had for them. So after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.
- Acts 14:23 After appointing “for them” elders in each church with prayer and fasting, Paul and Barnabas entrusted them [who?] to the Lord in whom they had come to believe. I think that the “them” is the towns of each church that Paul and Barnabas had to leave in God’s hands before they moved on. I think this because of the phrase “in whom they had come to believe,” which makes “them” sound like recent converts. But the elders they appointed were not likely recent converts.
- Acts 27:9 The term “the Fast” refers to the Day of Atonement as a chronological marker
- 1 Cor 7:5 Paul tells married believers not to deprive one another of sex, except as they agree for a time of prayer.

NT Observations

- * Jesus lived in an age when fasting had become somewhat routinized. It was the regular practice of the Pharisees and John the Baptist’s disciples. Some people fasted twice a week and thought that by doing so that they were better than others.
- * This routine on the part of John’s disciples was likely tied to the ascetic life he chose as a concrete way to prepare for the coming Messiah and kingdom.
- * This routine on the part of the Pharisees was likely tied to an effort to be pure in a context where the temple had been compromised in its ability to secure the purity of God’s people. The Essenes did this sort of thing when the temple was co-opted by illegitimate priests and eventually destroyed by Greeks. They needed some sort of substitute, and fasting was one of many rituals (including multiple washings) that gave them a sense of ritual rightness with God. In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees believed that the Sadducees had made compromises with Rome in order to stay in power, so they had an antagonistic relationship with the temple establishment just like Jesus did.
- * The fasting of John’s disciples, Pharisees, and Essenes continue a tradition that began after the temple destruction in 586. Fasting became a ritual way (among others, like multiple prayers a day as in Daniel) to remember and mourn Israel’s loss and to petition God to hasten Israel’s full restoration. It began to occupy a key place in Israel’s calendar. It may even have been a way for the Israelites to honor calendar days, like the Day of Atonement, in a context when this holiday

could not be observed according to Torah. It served as a tabernacle substitute. This is partly why, in Zechariah, they asked whether they still had to do the fasts after the second temple was built.

- * In this context, Jesus—who is our highest role model for godliness—developed a reputation for NOT participating in regular ritual fasting. Why? Here we cannot forget the impact of the beginning of God’s kingdom. When Jesus says, the “bridegroom” is here, he is referring to the Messiah! The kingdom is here. The king is with them. Now is a time of celebration. When he refers to the disciples’ future fasting, he may be anticipating their initial response to his crucifixion. There is no evidence that they began ritual fasting after the resurrection or ascension. If anything, the movement of the church was in the opposition direction. They realized that Jesus fulfilled the sacrificial system such that all rituals meant to stand in for tabernacle or temple functions were to be terminated. Now that the kingdom had begun in Jesus, they celebrated new life in the kingdom and no longer fasted in expectation of its arrival. Instead we find them celebrating regular love feasts (Jude 12; 2 Pet 2:13). This is a fulfillment of Zech 8:19. The book of Hebrews was written to emphasize that Jesus fulfilled all of this without remainder! It chastens readers not to return to such practices and to enter God’s rest NOW! Paul’s repeated instruction about Christians not needing to keep up with Israel’s special days is particularly relevant to the issue of cyclical, calendar fasting.

Big Picture Conclusions

Types of Fasting We should NOT Imitate

- * Fasting because you are unable to satisfy your greedy desires (Ahab’s first fast)
- * Fasting to deceive others (Jezebel)
- * Fasting without social justice
- * Fasting to be seen by men (Pharisees)
- * Fasting that is not easily repeatable and may even be somewhat presumptuous to think applies directly to us: Moses’ 40 days with God; Elijah’s 40-day journey that was commissioned by God; Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness; Anna’s decades long fast. God may still do exceptional things with exceptional individuals today, but we should not build a template from them.
- * Fasting which purpose was to achieve a form of purity that Jesus won for us once and for all
- * Fasting that presumes that the kingdom has not yet come
- * Fasting that was designed to stand in for the absence of the tabernacle/temple
- * In sum, it is not clear that any form of regular ritual fasting is prescribed for Christians.

What’s Left

- * Fasting after a tragic loss
- * Fasting after egregious sin
- * Fasting before an act of divinely declared punishment that we would like God to withhold
- * Fasting before a significant act of deliverance or help that we would like God to perform
- * Fasting in the midst of a significant event during which God’s people seek divine guidance

Potential Conclusion

- * The kind of fasting we ought to imitate comes during extreme times.
- * We might want to avoid taming the practice by reducing it to routine spiritual calisthenics.