

Jonah 3 (1-10) – The Facts about Fasting

Today's message is not going to be an exposition of our opening text, but rather a topical message about fasting. There are lots of fads and teachings about fasting, what we want to do is look at the facts and the truths about fasting. People try and make it more than it is, and so there is value in pointing out what fasting is not about, as well as what it really is about.

The Bible teaches that fasting is a voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes (Esther 4:16 – *Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish*). It is most often combined with prayer (Jonah 3:7-8). While some Bible characters engaged in lengthy fasts (Exodus 34:28 / Matthew 4:2), Scripture never encourages fasting for 40 days, or for specific lengths of time. Fasting is not an obligation.

You hear people say that fasting will cause breakthroughs and bring blessings or revival as they call it. But most spiritual revival has something to do with sin and mourning over sin. And most fasting is less about a break through and more because you've been broken. It is not about "victorious Christian living" it is about valuing Christ in calamity.

Don Green – It is popular for Christians to think fasting somehow brings them closer to God in a way that nothing else does. No matter how much people may protest their own experience to support their position, I don't buy it. You shouldn't either. The Scriptures sanctify us. We are transformed by the renewing of our mind, not the restriction of our diet. Fasting is an effect of a spiritual urgency, not the cause of it. Fasting is left to the discretion of an individual believer in times of distress.

The Practice of Fasting – The Jews were commanded to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29, 23:27-32 / afflicting = fasting – cf. Psalm 35:13). This custom became known as "the Fast" (Acts 27:9). But the validity of the Day of Atonement ceased when Jesus made the once-for-all sacrifice on the cross (Hebrews 10:10), and so the single prescribed occasion for fasting has ceased to exist.

Still, the Jews did adopt other national fast days (Jeremiah 36:6, 9). God also exhorted (Joel 2:12 – *Yet even now, declares the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;*) or compelled (1 Kings 19:8 – Elijah had to and did live for 40 days on one meal) certain believers to fast at times. The Bible does admonish people for hypocritical fasting (**Isaiah 58:3-5** / Zechariah 7:5-10) and it encourages people to participate in the right type of fasting (**Isaiah 58:6-10**). Fasting is to be associated with obedience. There can be no right fasting apart from a right attitude and a desire for right living.

For Christians, the Bible does not specifically command all believers everywhere to regularly spend time fasting. Jesus assumes that some believers will fast (**Matthew 6:16**), but He does not give a command or specify a particular time, place, or method. He indicated that fasting should not be a hypocritical religious show (**vs.17-18**). Jesus' point was that a person who fasts should make themselves look normal instead of trying to attract attention to their spiritual struggle.

You hear people say that fasting is neglected in the church. However, we're supposed to fast in secret, and not parade our righteousness before men. If people were faithful to follow Christ's instructions, we wouldn't usually know if fasting was being practiced, or neglected.

Fasting is to be motivated by a serious felt need (Daniel 9:3 – Daniel's fasting was a natural accompaniment to seeking the Lord in prayer and repentance for the sins of the people / Luke 2:36-37 – Anna was a widow, she fasted as an act of devotion while anticipating the coming of Messiah, Jesus). **Matthew 9:14-15** – Jesus' disciples didn't fast while He was with them because fasting is associated primarily with mourning or other anxiety. Jesus' own fast was not a mere ascetic exercise of self-denial, and fasting was not His regular practice (cf. **Matthew 11:19**). Before Christ's struggle in Gethsemane He feasted, rather than fasted, with His disciples.

People get all worked up about the "power" of fasting. Yet fasting is never shown in Scripture to be the means to heightened spiritual experience, or awareness, as some Christians claim. Fasting is appropriate because Christ is physically absent from the earth, but fasting is a response to special times of trial, sorrow, or struggle.

The Priority of Fasting – Fasting is less about *getting* a response from God, and more about *giving* a response to God. The book of Acts mentions fasting in only three chapters. **Acts 2:42-47** is a generalized picture of the regular practice of the early church, and it doesn't mention fasting. The Epistles say nothing about religious fasting. Some people talk about how fasting helps us cast out demons, or they give other reasons that we are supposed to fast based on Matthew 17:21 / Mark 9:29 / Acts 10:30 / 1 Corinthians 7:5. However, most textual scholars agree that the word "fasting" was added to those verses. Even if you think the KJV is more accurate in these verses, those texts do not teach a cause and effect relationship with fasting. Notable is the lack of any reference to fasting in Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter, which were addressed to Jewish Christians. Paul warned about ascetic and ritualistic tendencies (Colossians 2:16-23).

Am I saying that people shouldn't fast? No, on the contrary, I would encourage you to fast, but I would also exhort you to be biblical about it. Let me say a word about that. And this applies to much more than just the topic of fasting. Being biblical doesn't just mean that someone finds verses in the Bible. The Word of God must be rightly interpreted, and this means using the immediate context of Scripture and also the whole canon of Scripture as a guide. Biblical narrative doesn't always mean biblical normative. Biblical persons don't always equal biblical precedent. Biblical portrayal is not necessarily biblical practice or biblical promise. Just because someone does something some certain way doesn't mean we are all supposed to do this thing or do it that way. Certainly, we find patterns and principles in the Bible. But the key to finding and understanding them is not how many times we see something mentioned in the Scriptures, but the relation of each mention to the overall picture of each passage we find it in.

In most of these narratives, fasting is something that is a part of the overall picture, but it isn't the main point of the picture. The prayers, humility, repentance, sorrow, struggle, and seeking after God are. Too often people take parts of the narrative portions of Scripture and turn them into their own purpose, and call that being biblical. They see fasting in part of a passage and conclude that fasting is for this or that purpose, when fasting is *not* for this or that, fasting was *included* in this or that. Fasting was an accompaniment, not the crucial factor.

People want to turn fasting into some spiritual power tool. Yes, people fasted at times because they wanted God to do something, but more often people fasted because they were grieved over something. Again, fasting is less about *getting* a response from God, and more about *giving* a response to God. Elevating fasting over the reading of Scripture and prayer is misleading and dangerous. It prioritizes one activity God allows me the *freedom* to practice, over many activities God *commands* me to practice. Concerning fasting, Luther said, “We do not, therefore, object to fasting itself, but to the fact that it is represented as a necessary duty and that specific days have been fixed for its performance.”

Fasting and Prayer – Fasting is an accompaniment to prayer (**Nehemiah 1:3-4 / Acts 13:2-3, 14:23**) – it is an affirmation of intense prayer, a part of a deep spiritual struggle before God. It is never an isolated act or a ceremony or ritual that has some inherent efficacy or merit. Fasting doesn’t earn God’s favor, it is an expression of humility (Psalms 69:10 / negative ex. Luke 18:12). Overwhelming danger often prompted fasting (2 Chronicles 20:1-4 – Jehoshaphat called for a fast as the people were surrounded by enemy armies). Fasting may be used as part of a petition for protection (**Ezra 8:21-23**), but it can’t be used as a cover for disobedience or indulgence. Fasting doesn’t guarantee “results”, and the lack of it doesn’t guarantee failure (Acts 4:23-31 – one of the great prayer meetings in history, but no mention of fasting). Fasting doesn’t ensure the certainty of receiving clear guidance from God. However, it can help us to focus on God. And the best prayers have legs: after his fast, Nehemiah then went to work to do something public about his prayer (Nehemiah 2:2-6 – he goes before the king to petition him for help). Fasting isn’t just “skipping a meal”. You don’t just give up food, you focus on prayer.

Fasting and Focus – Fasting is not about taking a burden for God, it is about showing your burden to God. Fasting is appropriate during times of sorrow; it is an expression of grief. Judges 20:17-28 – The Israelites had lost forty thousand men in battles they should have won, and they wept and fasted before the Lord not only to seek His guidance, but also to express their grief for the brothers they had lost. Fasting is a sign of grief over the death of respected people or loved ones (2 Samuel 1:11-12 – David fasts in grief over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan / contrast this with 2 Samuel 12:15-23 – David fasts in grief before his son dies, but not after). Fasting can be an expression of repentance, for grief over sin (1 Samuel 7:6 – the Israelites gave up their false gods and fasted / 1 Kings 21:27-29 – Wicked King Ahab humbled himself when he heard of the consequences of his actions / Acts 9:9 – Paul fasted after his encounter with Christ that changed his life forever). Fasting expresses grief for the sins of others you know (1 Samuel 20:34 – Jonathan fasted in grief because of how his father Saul was treating David), including your enemies (**Psalms 35:12-14**), or for people groups or society in general (Ezra 9:5, 10:6 – Ezra fasted as he mourned over the faithlessness of the people).

Fasting is about drawing near to God, as an accompaniment to prayer, and most often in response to calamity, dangers, sin, sorrows, or trials. Maybe you’re grieving over the death of a loved one, fighting a major health battle, or battling a besetting sin. Maybe you’re overwhelmed with a difficult family relationship, or you urgently need the Lord’s guidance. If so, then fasting may be an appropriate outlet for the burden of your heart. It is a legitimate thing to do if you are doing it legitimately. However, if you’re in a joyful frame of mind, don’t try to adopt an artificial position of mourning and fasting. James says: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise” (James 5:13). Fasting is right if the focus is right.