

Grace for Fasting- Part 1

Introduction: Most Christians who are pursuing a wholehearted lifestyle wrestle with questions about fasting at some point. Usually the questions are provoked by the weakness of our flesh and it's natural response to hate fasting, but there are also important issues related to maturity and truth. This study is meant to bring clarity and energize fasting as a vital part of our wholehearted pursuit of God.

I. THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN QUESTIONS ABOUT FASTING. THE MOST PRESSING ONE: "CAN WE STOP NOW?"

The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melek, together with their men, to entreat the Lord 3 by asking the priests of the house of the Lord Almighty and the prophets, "Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?" (Ze 7:2-3 NIV)

- A. This pressing question was on the mind of not only everyone in Bethel, who had organized a delegation to seek an answer, but clearly it was the question of the entire nation. God's response was to "all the people" (v. 5) making it an issue of national importance.
- B. The big question of Zechariah 7 was, "Can we stop fasting in the fifth month?"
- C. Historical context: There was only one fast, Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), required in the Law of Moses. Trauma and tradition had added an additional four fasts during the exile in Babylon. All of these fasts were connected to specific tragic events related to the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's temple in 586 BC.
 1. Fast in the fourth month: Babylon's army breached Jerusalem's walls on the ninth day of the fourth month (2 Ki 25:3-4; Jer. 39:2).
 2. Fast in the fifth month: The Temple in Jerusalem was burned (2 Ki 25:8-9). The most tragic day for Israel is the day the Temple was destroyed. According to the Talmud, on the very same day, the ninth day of the fifth month of Av (August), Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and Herod's temple (Zerubbabel's) by the Romans in 70 AD.
 3. Fast in the seventh month: This was to commemorate the assassination of Gedaliah (2 Ki 25:25; Jer. 41:2). Nebuchadnezzar made Gedaliah governor of Judah (2 Ki 25:22-25). Gedaliah respected and cared for Jeremiah (Jer. 39:11-14; 40:5) just as his father had done. He only reigned for two months, before Jewish zealots led by Ishmael killed him.
 4. Fast in the tenth month: This marked the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (2 Ki 25:1).
- D. After 70 years of fasting (mourning) while in Babylonian exile, the people thought it was inappropriate to continue with the fast since their return to Jerusalem marked a great victory for God's people. Essentially they were saying, "Isn't now the time for celebration?"
- E. God did not answer their question in the way they expected. These delegates wanted a simple yes or no answer, when in reality they already knew which answer they sought.
- F. Many times our attitude can be summed up like this: "God, just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it." The fact is we would not. The Lord knows our faith must be founded on

something stronger than just rules and regulations. He knows it must be grounded in encounter with him.

II. GOD RESPONDED, “YOU’RE ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION.”

- A. God’s response took an unexpected turn when he answered their question with a question.

“Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months (he knew they were really asking about all of them—not just the fifth. It was a trick question to end all of the fasts.) for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? (Ze 7:5 NIV)

- B. This is a stunning question that caught everyone off guard. In a moment, God exposed that the fasts they were observing had the wrong focus. They were fasting because of everything they had lost, and God asked if they had even thought about him in the process.

- C. God went further with his questioning and by also connecting the problem with their feasts.

And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? (Ze 7:6 NIV)

- D. God not only exposed the misplaced focus of seventy years of fasting, but he also highlighted the same error in their feasting. That wasn’t even a question on their minds, but the same spirit of error and self-centeredness has infected both their fasts *and* their feasts. God didn’t ask *what* were you fasting and feasting for? He asked *who* were you fasting and feasting for?

- E. His redirection of the question turned the issue of fasting and feasting to matters of the heart.

- F. He exposed that by asking the wrong question it would lead them down the same path as their fathers who went into exile. After only a few short years back in Jerusalem they were already heading down the same path. Essentially God was saying, “Look where it got them.”

“Are these not the words the Lord proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?”...“But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and covered their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen...(Ze 7:7, 11-12 NIV)

III. WHO ARE YOU FASTING FOR?

- A. The storyline of Zechariah 7-8 highlights that God is looking for people to encounter him in times of peace *and* trouble—times of celebration *and* mourning.

- B. The fasting of the people in exile was based solely on their self-centeredness and what they had lost. In their mourning, the only thing they were focused on was themselves. The height of their mourning did not go beyond grieving over the pain and loss of their carnal desires.

- C. Likewise the same was true of their feasts. While they were treating the feasts as opportunity for celebration, still they were only focused on themselves. Both the issues of eating and not eating are about having our hearts postured toward encounter with God.

IV. WHILE THE CHURCH TODAY IS EXPERIENCING A RESURGENCE OF FASTING, THERE IS ALSO A GROWING CRITICISM. WHAT ARE WE TO THINK?

- A. There are some New Testament warnings in the epistles that commonly get used as arguments *against* fasting. However, these are mainly about distortions in teaching and not against fasting altogether. These are weak arguments taken out of context.

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving (1 Ti 4:1-4 NIV)

Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Col 2:20-22 NIV)

“Everything is permissible”—but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible”—but not everything is constructive. (1 Co 10:23 NIV84)

- B. The more damaging argument that is experiencing a growth in popularity involves the issue of God’s grace in the life of the believer. There are two main criticisms of fasting based on a misunderstanding of God’s grace.
1. Doesn’t the arrival of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus make fasting obsolete? Isn’t it like trying to put new wine in an old wineskin?
 2. Doesn’t the finished work of the cross and ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit mean we should now celebrate?
- C. The question of the Bethel delegates in Zechariah 7 mirrors the question being asked among some Christians today. “Isn’t the need for fasting cancelled because of the victory we have received through grace? Shouldn’t we just be celebrating because of all we have gained?” In a similar way, this is a “trojan horse” position with broader intentions and ramifications that only serve to reduce the level of our pursuit of God.
- D. Indeed, the free gift of grace has made all things available to us. We cannot do anything to earn it. We cannot strive by any means to obtain it. All things are given to us through the free gift grace and thanks to the finished work of the cross.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship (full legal standing of a male heir) through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. (Ep 1:3-6 NIV)

- E. It would be a misunderstanding of grace to think that it takes the place of the need for spiritual hunger and wholehearted pursuit of God. Grace does not make fasting obsolete.

Instead, grace super-charges it as a means of confronting compromise and spiritual apathy toward God in order to remove obstacles that hinder our relationship with him.

- F. The apostle Paul addressed the issue of food and mirrored the understanding given in Zechariah 7. Food cannot commend us to God.

But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. (1 Co 8:8 NIV)

The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. (Rm 14:3-6 NIV)

- G. Grace highlights that having the Giver surpasses having than the gifts. Grace enables us to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our mind.

V. WHAT DO WE TRULY DESIRE?

- A. The debates about fasting are ultimately about our fundamental approach to spiritual hunger and maturity. We must believe that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (He 11:6 NKJV)

- B. The reward we are to seek in fasting is not first or mainly the gifts of God, but God himself.
- C. Fasting exposes the noise of our inner cravings and lusts that demand to be satisfied. In fasting, we are faced with the realities of our heart's true desires. Fasting gives us a way to make war on the deceitfulness of those desires. Subduing our carnal desires is not simply a matter of denial and discipline. Desire for God is required to endure this voluntary pain.
- D. In fasting, desire for the world loosens its grip on the affection of our hearts. We can join with the Apostle Paul and declare that we gladly will lose everything for the sake of gaining Christ.

What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ (Php 3:8 NIV)

- E. Let us resolve that both our feasting and our fasting will be about encountering God. Our celebrations are not just opportunities to disengage and check out. Our fastings cannot be wrongfully based on self-centered motives or efforts. Let's posture our hearts to acknowledge our need for greater spiritual hunger. We need more of Him!

"Fasting expresses, rather than creates, hunger for God."¹ –John Piper

¹ Piper, John. *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer*. Wheaton: Crossway, 1997. 85. Print.