

Fasting: Is it for today?

Abstaining from food and drink for religious purposes has become very popular today. I have heard fairly convincing sermons and personal testimonies concerning fasting. Still, I wanted to do a complete Scriptural survey of the subject before believing that it was something I should do. I tried to be as objective and complete in this study as possible, and my final conclusion is that there is no Biblical mandate for fasting today. Beyond this, I firmly believe the practice is actually contrary to our present completeness in Christ as our Head, and may have the effect of beguiling us of our reward. These are strong words, and I am not in any way belittling the sincerity of those who disagree with me on this. But let the reader examine the inspired Word for himself.

Old Testament Mandate for Fasting

In the Old Testament, fasting is mentioned on several different occasions. However, the only fast that was mandated by God was part of the observance of the Day of Atonement. Here the phrase "afflicting your soul" is used to mean fasting, and these are the verses which speak of it.

(Lev 16:29-31 KJV) "And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, *whether it be* one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you: {30} For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, *that ye may be* clean from all your sins before the LORD. {31} *It shall be* a sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls, by a statute for ever."

(Lev 23:27-32 KJV) "Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD. {28} And ye shall do no work in that same day: for it *is* a day of atonement, to make an atonement for you before the LORD your God. {29} For whatsoever soul it be that shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people. {30} And whatsoever soul *it be* that doeth any work in that same day, the same soul will I destroy from among his people. {31} Ye shall do no manner of work: *it shall be* a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. {32} *It shall be* unto you a sabbath of rest, and ye shall afflict your souls: in the ninth *day* of the month at even, from even unto even, shall ye celebrate your sabbath."

(Num 29:7 KJV) "And ye shall have on the tenth *day* of this seventh month an holy convocation; and ye shall afflict your souls: ye shall not do any work *therein:*"

(Jer 36:6 KJV) "Therefore go thou, and read in the roll, which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the LORD in the ears of the people in the LORD'S house upon the fasting day: and also thou shalt read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities."

The following verses in Isaiah speak of the misuse of this Atonement Day fast.

(Isa 58:3-8 KJV) "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. {4} 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. {5} Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? 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? {6} 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? {7} *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? {8} Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward."

Other Reasons for Fasting

There are many other occurrences of voluntary fastings in the Old Testament. Generally, I found that they came under three main headings: fasting associated with mourning a death, fasting involving sincere repentance to God for sin, and fasting as an appeal to God in fear of impending doom.

It seems natural that fasting would be associated with mourning. In times of great stress such as mourning a death, it seems almost impossible to eat. The same is true of sincere repentance and pain associated with a truly contrite heart over sin. This is also the case in situations of great fear of impending doom. Therefore, it really comes as no surprise that the Bible associates these three times of emotional upheaval with fasting. These would not be as much self-imposed willful fasts as natural outgrowths of the situation at hand, with a special appeal to God for help in the form of a fast.

Mourning:

(Judg 20:25-26 KJV) "And Benjamin went forth against them out of Gibeah the second day, and destroyed down to the ground of the children of Israel again eighteen thousand men; all these drew the sword. {26} Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the LORD, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD."

(1 Sam 31:11-13 KJV) "And when the inhabitants of Jabeshgilead heard of that which the Philistines had done to Saul; {12} All the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bethshan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there. {13} And they took their bones, and buried *them* under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days."

(2 Sam 1:12 KJV) "And they mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul, and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the LORD, and for the house of Israel; because they were fallen by the sword."

(Psa 35:12-15 KJV) "They rewarded me evil for good *to* the spoiling of my soul. {13} But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom. {14} I behaved myself as though *he had been* my friend or brother: I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth *for his* mother. {15} But in mine adversity they rejoiced, and gathered themselves together: *yea*, the abjects gathered themselves together against me, and I knew *it* not; they did tear *me*, and ceased not."

Repentance:

(1 Sam 7:4-6 KJV) "Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the LORD only. {5} And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD. {6} And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured *it* out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the LORD. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh."

(2 Sam 12:14-17 KJV) "Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also *that is* born unto thee shall surely die. {15} And Nathan departed unto his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. {16} David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. {17} And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them."

(2 Sam 12:21-24 KJV) "Then said his servants unto him, What thing *is* this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, *while it was* alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. {22} And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell *whether* GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? {23} But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me. {24} And David comforted Bathsheba his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her: and she bare a son, and he called his name Solomon: and the LORD loved him."

(1 Ki 21:25-29 KJV) "But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up. {26} And he did very abominably in following idols, according to all *things* as did the Amorites, whom the LORD cast out before the children of Israel. {27} And it came to pass, when Ahab heard

those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. {28} And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, {29} Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: *but* in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house."

(Ezra 8:20-23 KJV) "Also of the Nethinims, whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name. {21} Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. {22} For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God *is* upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath *is* against all them that forsake him. {23} So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was entreated of us."

(Neh 1:3-7 KJV) "And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province *are* in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also *is* broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. {4} And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven. {5} And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: {6} Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. {7} We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses."

(Neh 9:1-3 KJV) "Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them. {2} And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers. {3} And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God *one* fourth part of the day; and *another* fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God."

(Dan 9:2-4 KJV) "In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. {3} And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: {4} And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments;"

Fear of Impending Doom:

(2 Chr 20:2-5 KJV) "Then there came some that told Jehoshaphat, saying, There cometh a great multitude against thee from beyond the sea on this side Syria; and, behold, they *be* in Hazazontamar, which *is* Engedi. {3} And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. {4} And Judah gathered themselves together, to ask *help* of the LORD: even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD. {5} And Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court,"

(Est 4:3-4 KJV) "And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, *there was* great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. {4} So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told *it* her. Then was the queen exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him: but he received *it* not."

(Est 4:16-17 KJV) "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which *is* not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. {17} So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him."

(Est 9:31-32 KJV) "To confirm these days of Purim in their times *appointed*, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings and their cry. {32} And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book."

(Jer 36:5-10 KJV) "And Jeremiah commanded Baruch, saying, I *am* shut up; I cannot go into the house of the LORD: {6} Therefore go thou, and read in the roll, which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the LORD in the ears of the people in the LORD'S house upon the fasting day: and also thou shalt read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities. {7} It may be they will present their supplication before the LORD, and will return every one from his evil way: for great is the anger and the fury that the LORD hath pronounced against this people. {8} And Baruch the son of Neriah did according to all that Jeremiah the prophet commanded him, reading in the book the words of the LORD in the LORD'S house. {9} And it came to pass in the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, in the ninth month, that they proclaimed a fast before the LORD to all the people in Jerusalem, and to all the people that came from the cities of Judah unto Jerusalem. {10} Then read Baruch in the book the words of Jeremiah in the house of the LORD, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the scribe, in the higher court, at the entry of the new gate of the LORD'S house, in the ears of all the people."

(Jonah 3:4-6 KJV) "And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. {5} So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. {6} For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered *him* with sackcloth, and sat in ashes."

Future day of impending doom:

(Joel 1:12-16 KJV) "The vine is dried up, and the fig tree languisheth; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree, *even* all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men. {13} Gird yourselves, and lament, ye priests: howl, ye ministers of the altar: come, lie all night in sackcloth, ye ministers of my God: for the meat offering and the drink offering is withholden from the house of your God. {14} Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD. {15} Alas for the day! for the day of the LORD is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come. {16} Is not the meat cut off before our eyes, *yea*, joy and gladness from the house of our God?"

(Joel 2:11-15 KJV) "And the LORD shall utter his voice before his army: for his camp *is* very great: for *he is* strong that executeth his word: for the day of the LORD *is* great and very terrible; and who can abide it? {12} Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye *even* to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: {13} And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. {14} Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; *even* a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God? {15} Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly:"

Misuse and Hypocrisy in fasting:

Even from Old Testament times, fasting was coming under disuse, falling prey to the typical sins of insincerity, hypocrisy and false pride. God spoke against these through Jeremiah and Zechariah in the following passages.

(Jer 14:10-14 KJV) "Thus saith the LORD unto this people, Thus have they loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the LORD doth not accept them; he will now remember their iniquity, and visit their sins. {11} Then said the LORD unto me, Pray not for this people for *their* good. {12} When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence. {13} Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, the prophets say unto them, Ye shall not see the sword, neither shall ye have famine; but I will give you assured peace in this place. {14} Then the LORD said unto me, The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart."

(Zec 7:4-6 KJV) "Then came the word of the LORD of hosts unto me, saying, {5} Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh *month*, even those seventy years, did ye

at all fast unto me, *even to me?* {6} And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat *for yourselves*, and drink *for yourselves?*"

Traditional fasts to commemorate past calamities

According to the *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, these verses tell of the four annual Jewish fasts which were held to commemorate national calamities after the Babylonian captivity.

(Zec 8:17-20 KJV) "And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour; and love no false oath: for all these *are things* that I hate, saith the LORD. {18} And the word of the LORD of hosts came unto me, saying, {19} Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth *month*, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace. {20} Thus saith the LORD of hosts; *It shall yet come to pass*, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities:"

Prophetic of Christ:

These verses speak of the suffering, humiliation, and fasting of Christ on the cross.

Since these verses refer to the mocking of Christ on the cross, the weakness through fasting would be an involuntary fast rather than a voluntary one.

(Psa 69:1-4, 9-11 KJV) "To the chief Musician upon Shoshannim, *A Psalm* of David. Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto *my* soul. {2} I sink in deep mire, where *there is* no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. {3} I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God. {4} They that hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of mine head: they that would destroy me, *being* mine enemies wrongfully, are mighty: then I restored *that* which I took not away... (Psa 69:9-11 KJV) "For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me. {10} When I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting, that was to my reproach. {11} I made sackcloth also my garment; and I became a proverb to them."

(According to Bullinger in the margin of the *Companion Bible*, this verse 10 is translated only "I humbled myself," in the Septuagint.)

(Psa 109:23-26 KJV) "I am gone like the shadow when it declineth: I am tossed up and down as the locust. {24} My knees are weak through fasting; and my flesh faileth of fatness. {25} I became also a reproach unto them: when they looked upon me they shook their heads. {26} Help me, O LORD my God: O save me according to thy mercy:"

New Testament References to Fasting

I found that New Testament references to fasting basically fell under four main headings: continuing in the Jewish tradition of fasting, involuntary fasting, hypocrisy and rebuke in fasting, and translation errors that include fasting where none occur in the original text.

1. Jewish tradition of fasting:

In these few references, we see a continuation of the tradition of fasting by law-abiding Jews, but notice there is no exhortation to do the same.

(Luke 2:36-38 KJV) "And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; {37} And she *was* a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. {38} And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem."

(Acts 13:1-4 KJV) "Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and

Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. {2} As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. {3} And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid *their* hands on them, they sent *them* away. {4} So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus."

(Acts 14:21-24 KJV) "And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, {22} Confirming the souls of the disciples, *and* exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. {23} And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. {24} And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia."

2. Involuntary Fasting

Many of the fasts in the New Testament are very arguably involuntary fasts, simply occurring because of a lack of food available. Such is most likely the case in Lord's forty day fast in the wilderness. It was the Holy Spirit that led Christ into the wilderness. Moreover, a wilderness, by its very nature, would be lacking in food. Remember too, that Christ perfectly endured the trial in the wilderness, which was in striking contrast to the 40 years of failure in the wilderness by the children of Israel. As Deuteronomy 8:2-3 shows, it was God who tested the Israelites with hunger. Furthermore, in every way in which they failed, Christ triumphed, even to the point of quoting the last part of these exact verses to rebuke Satan!

(Deu 8:2-3 KJV) "And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, *and* to prove thee, to know what *was* in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. {3} And he humbled thee, and **suffered thee to hunger**, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that **man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.**"

(Mat 4:1-4 KJV) "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. {2} And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered. {3} And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. {4} But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

In these next verses, the text is obviously just speaking of ordinary hunger because of the circumstances. Christ supernaturally overcame this involuntary fast with the loaves and fishes.

(Mat 15:32-34 KJV) "Then Jesus called his disciples *unto him*, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way. {33} And his disciples say unto him, Whence should we have so much bread in the wilderness, as to fill so great a multitude? {34} And Jesus saith unto them, How many loaves have ye? And they said, Seven, and a few little fishes."

Again, in relaying the story of the shipwreck of Paul, it is the circumstances and fear of the hurricane that kept the men from eating. This text is not even speaking of believers but Roman guards and mariners.

(Acts 27:32-34 KJV) "Then the soldiers cut off the ropes of the boat, and let her fall off. {33} And while the day was coming on, Paul besought *them* all to take meat, saying, This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing. {34} Wherefore I pray you to take *some* meat: for this is for your health: for there shall not an hair fall from the head of any of you."

The context of these next verses is that Paul is chronicling his persecutions. It would not make sense that the fastings spoken of here are anything but involuntary in nature.

(2 Cor 6:3-7 KJV) "Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: {4} But in all *things* approving

ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, {5} In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; {6} By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, {7} By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left,"

(2 Cor 11:25-29 KJV) "Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; {26} In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; {27} In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. {28} Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. {29} Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?"

Paul knew how to behave in both feast and famine. He learned to triumph *in spite of* whatever state he was in, which is actually how the original reads of Phil. 4:11.

(Phil 4:11-12 KJV) "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. {12} I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need."

3. Hypocrisy and Rebuke for Fasting:

In the following passage, the Lord sharply rebukes the Pharisees for their self-aggrandizement in fasting. Notice also, that He does not condemn the practice of fasting here, for it was a part of the law and the tradition of the Jews at that time.

(Mat 6:16-18 KJV). {16} 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. {17} But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; {18} That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

As a law-abiding Jew, Christ no doubt kept the required fasts. However, because the Lord did not fast frequently, as the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist were apt to do, He was frequently accused of being a "glutton and a winebibber." (Matt. 11:19, Luke 7:34)

(Mat 9:14-17 KJV) "Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? {15} And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast. {16} No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. {17} Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved."

The Lord's answer here is very instructive. First, He makes the connection between fasting and mourning, both of which are out of place when the Lord Himself is present. Secondly, He makes what seems on the surface like a strange reference to old and new cloth and wineskins. His point is that the things belonging to the Old Covenant have no place in the New. Given the fact that this response was in the question of fasting is no doubt significant.

Again, in these verses, there is a natural relationship between mourning and fasting, not necessarily in terms of a religious self-imposed nature.

(Mark 2:18-20 KJV) "And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? {19} And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with

them, they cannot fast. {20} But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days."

(Luke 5:33-35 KJV) "And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise *the disciples* of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? {34} And he said unto them, **Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? {35} But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days."**

In this next passage, Christ is not necessarily rebuking the Pharisees for fasting or tithing, but in their “holier than thou” attitude of pride even in the presence of God. Unfortunately, as we will see when closely examining the warning in Colossians 2, false pride is a common outgrowth of self-imposed will worship.

(Luke 18:11-14 KJV) "**The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. {12} I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. {13} And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. {14} I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."**

Not in the Original Manuscripts

According to either or both the *Companion Bible* and the *Zondervan Bible Dictionary* (see article entitled “Fasting,” pps.278-279), most textual scholars omit the inclusion of fasting in these following four verses, because most of the original manuscripts do not include them. Since they are considered corruptions of the text, the doctrine that is an outgrowth of these references should be discounted.

According to Zondervan, the words, “and fasting” are absent in the original in both of the following passages.

1. (Mat 17:19-23 KJV) "Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? {20} And Jesus said unto them, **Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. {21} Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting. {22} And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, **The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: {23} And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again.** And they were exceeding sorry."**

2. (Mark 9:28-29 KJV) "And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? {29} And he said unto them, **This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting."**

According to Bullinger in the *Companion Bible*, the following should read “until this hour I was praying.” Zondervan also agrees that including the phrase, “was *fasting* until this hour” is an interpolation.

3. (Acts 10:30-33 KJV) “And Cornelius said, Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, {31} And said, Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God. {32} Send therefore to Joppa, and call hither Simon, whose surname is Peter; he is lodged in the house of *one* Simon a tanner by the sea side: who, when he cometh, shall speak unto thee. {33} Immediately therefore I sent to thee; and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God."

The margin of the *Companion Bible* states that “all texts omit” the words “fasting and” in this passage.

4. (1 Cor 7:4-6 KJV) "The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. {5} Defraud ye not one the other, except *it be* with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency. {6} But I speak this by permission, *and* not of commandment."

The Warning

If we only had were all the aforementioned passages concerning fasting, we might draw the conclusion that fasting is not enjoined on us as a commandment for the present dispensation, since no New Testament verse commands it. Still, some may make a convincing argument that while it's not a command to do so, still there are many fine examples of very saintly people appealing to God by means of fasting, so why isn't it possibly desirable for us as well? I strongly believe the answer lies in the extended warning of Colossians 2.

Colossians is definitely addressed to us as members of the body of Christ in this present dispensation. Chapters 2 and 3 are the central features in this book, and we are given a very specific warning, that while our standing in Christ is perfectly secure, our reward could be endangered by falling prey to a "vain and deceitful philosophy" that concentrates on the things of the flesh rather than "on things above where Christ sitteth."

Chapter 2 is a fascinating alternation between the positive, involving our completeness in Christ, and the negative, which is coming again under the bondage of ordinances that concentrate on the flesh. Such man-made additions sound pious and spiritual, but in reality, they turn the focus of the believer inward in the form of will-worship. In this regard, they detract from the goal of true spiritual perfection which can be achieved only by clinging to Christ alone. As Galations 3:3 asks, "Are ye so foolish? *having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?*"

Let's begin by simply reading the passage at hand, then I will try to present the positives and negatives in a different format for emphasis.

(Col 1:27-28 KJV) "To whom God would make known what *is* the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: {28} Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:"

(Col 2:1-23 KJV) "For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and *for* them at Laodicea, and *for* as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; {2} That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; {3} In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. {4} And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words. {5} For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ. As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk ye in him: {7} Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. {8} Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. {9} For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. {10} And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: {11} In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: {12} Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with *him* through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. {13} And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; {14} Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; {15} *And* having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it. {16} Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: {17} Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ. {18} Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, {19} And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God. {20} Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, {21} (Touch not; taste not; handle not; {22} Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? {23} Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh."

Contrasts in this passage

I have tried to arrange the verses as they appear into the positives versus the negatives to make the contrast more apparent. Translation helps contained herein are the work of either Charles Welch, mainly from his wonderful exposition on this chapter in *The Testimony of the Lord's Prisoner*, chapter 25, pp.248-270, or from E.W. Bullinger's *Companion Bible* margin of these verses.

Positive +

1:28 The goal is to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. This involves our service, and includes a warning of the possibility of being disqualified. Paul was not sure of attaining perfection in his letter to the Philippians, but later felt that he had attained it at the end of his ministry in II Timothy:

(Phil 3:12 KJV) "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

(2 Tim 4:7-8 KJV) "I have fought a good fight, I have finished *my* course, I have kept the faith: {8} Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

Positive +

2:2 - That you may be knit together in love, and have all the riches of full assurance and understanding to the acknowledging of the mystery of God, Christ (The original leaves out "of the Father".)

2:3 - All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ.

Negative -

2:4- Don't be beguiled with enticing words!

Positive +

2:6- You have received Christ; now walk in Him.

2:7- You are rooted and established in Him. Abound therein with thanksgiving.

Negative -

2:8- Beware! Do not let someone spoil you (spoil-"sulogogeo"-strip you of your armor)

with, as the original reads a "vain and deceitful philosophy." Don't go further than the Book! These empty teachings originate with the traditions of men and are after the rudiments of the world (rudiments- "stoicheion"- elemental, beginning things.) They are not after Christ.

Positive +

2:9- In Christ dwells all the fulness (pleroma) of the Godhead bodily.

2:10-You are complete (filled-pleroo) in Him. (Here is contrasted the empty philosophy of men with the fulness of Christ who fills us!)

2:10- He is the Head of all principality and power.

2:11- Christ alone can put off the body of the sins of flesh- the true circumcision.

2:12- You are buried and risen with Him in the true baptism- our identification with Christ

2:12- This true baptism (association with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection) is completely the faith operation of God alone!

2:13- And He counts you as dead to your sins and uncircumcision of your flesh,

2:13- He counts you as having been raised with Him and He has forgiven all of your sins!

2:14- The ordinances against us are blotted out by His nailing them to the cross.

There are two types of ordinances in view here:

1. Writ of the charges of our individual sins-nailed to the cross
2. Ordinances and requirements of the Jewish law are blotted out also.

2:15- Christ publicly showed triumph over principalities and powers on our behalf.

(Welch explains that the Romans marched their captives right through the city along with the spoils, as a public humiliation and show of their complete triumph.

This is the picture of what Christ has done for us.)

Negative -

2:16- In view of all this, don't let anyone judge you in relation to the former things: food, drinks, observances of special holy days, new moons or Sabbaths.

2:17- These things were only the shadows- now you have the reality! The body is now of Christ. Don't go back!

2:18- Don't let anyone *defraud you of your prize* (which is a more accurate translation according to the *Companion Bible*) in a *voluntary* humility. (This opposes the access that you are given by grace in Christ.)

2:18- Don't get involved in man-made additives like worship *with* the angels, which the original seems to indicate- Welch says there was a belief at that time, that with a certain man-made approach to God, people could worship on the same level as angels. However today, there also seems to be a great trend to actually worship the angels themselves.

2:18- Don't believe those who claim to have knowledge into unrevealed, unseen things. The original wording may indicate knowledge through visions of things claimed to be seen. Both go outside the revealed Word and should be avoided.

2:18- These things mentioned have the effect of *vainly* (again the word empty) *puffing up* the fleshly mind. So claiming to be humbling, they actually cause fleshly pride. This important point is reiterated in verse 23.

Positive +

2:19-Hold the Head(Christ)- all nourishment for growth and increase for all the joints and bands(ligaments) of the body is contained in Him. This is what truly causes growth in God!

2: 20- Again, you are dead with Christ from the elemental things of the world.

Negative-

2:20-21 Since you are dead to the elemental things of this world, why would you subject yourself to ordinances again? “Touch not, taste not, handle not.”

2:22- These things all perish with the using, and again this is after the doctrines and commandments of men!

2:23- These things seem to show wisdom in “self-imposed” worship and false humility, and self-abasing of the body. But these do not bring honor, they actually satisfy (pleshmone-fill up) the old fleshly nature!

On page 270 of *The Testimony of the Lord's Prisoner*, Welch makes an excellent summary paraphrase on this last verse.

“All this harsh treatment of the body and enforced humility is vain. It does not render the honor that the body of the redeemed should have, and, by the fact that it attempts that which Christ alone can accomplish, really ministers to the satisfying of the flesh, in spite of all protestation to the contrary.”

Now, just for the sake of completeness, let's look at the current popular practice of fasting again and see if it fits in the warning of Colossians 2.

1. Does fasting neglect and voluntarily abase the body? Remember that the Old Testament term for fasting is “afflict your soul.”
2. Does fasting involve the elemental things of the flesh-food and drink?
3. Are the present day initiatives to fast based on a commandment of God to do so?
4. Is fasting an added ordinance of man?
5. Is the practice mostly based on personal testimony of “victory through fasting”?

6. Does fasting turn a person outward toward Christ or inward toward matters of will- power?

7. Does fasting minister to the flesh or the spirit?

We need not go outside the Book to find the true answers for spiritual growth. In fact, we needn't do anything but read on into Colossians 3 to find God's prescription for the outworking of our high calling. It begins with these marvelous words:

(Col 3:1-3 KJV) "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. {2} Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. {3} For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God."

Oh, that we might have grace to truly follow hard after our Lord and finish the course that He has laid before us!

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