

Fast, Fasting

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Evangelical Dictionary of Theology

by Robert D. Linder, "Fast, Fasting," ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell

Total or partial abstinence from food for a limited period, usually for moral or religious reasons.

Nearly all religions promote or sanction fasting in some form. In primal religions it is often a means to appease gods, produce virility, or prepare for ceremonial observance—such as initiation or mourning. The fast was used by ancient Greeks when consulting oracles, by Native Americans to acquire their private totem, and by African shamans to contact spirits. Many Eastern religions use it to gain mystical clarity.

Judaism, several branches of Christianity, and Islam all have fixed fast days and usually associate fasting with discipline of the flesh or repentance. Islam undertakes the annual fast of Ramadan, an entire month when Muslims abstain from all food and water from sunrise to sunset.

In Judaism the Day of Atonement is the only public fast day prescribed (Lev. 16:29–31; 23:26–32; Num. 29:7–11). However, the OT also mentions many special public and private fasts, usually coupled with prayer, to signify mourning (1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:12), repentance (2 Sam. 12:15–23; 1 Kings 21:27–29; Neh. 9:1–2; Joel 2:12–13), or serious concern before God (2 Chron. 20:1–4; Pss. 35:13; 69:10; 109:24; Dan. 9:3). Fasting not accompanied by genuine repentance was denounced as an empty legal observance (Isa. 58; Jer. 14:11–12).

Jesus fasted during his so-called wilderness experience as part of preparation for formal ministry (Matt. 4:1–2; Luke 4:1–2). The Gospels report, however, that he spoke only twice about fasting: once to warn his disciples that it was to be a private act of simple devotion and once to indicate that it would be appropriate for his followers to fast after he left them (Matt. 6:16–18; 9:14–15; cf. Mark 2:18–20; Luke 5:33–35). Clearly, he did not stress fasting, nor did he lay down rules concerning its observance as had John the Baptist and the Pharisees for their disciples.

The early Christian community did not emphasize fasting but observed it in connection with occasions of solemn commitment (Acts 13:2–3; 14:23). Moreover, Jewish Christians apparently followed the custom of fasting and prayer on Mondays and

Thursdays until the end of the first century, when Wednesdays and Fridays were observed, probably in reaction against Judaizers. Such fasts usually were concluded by midafternoon and not universally enforced. From the second century on, two intensive fast days were observed in preparation for Easter.

In the fourth century, when Christianity became the only recognized faith of the Roman Empire, institutionalization of the church led to much greater stress on form and ritual. Fasting became increasingly linked with a rigorous theology and meritorious works. For example, the two-day fast before Easter became a Lenten observance of forty fast days, which by the tenth century was obligatory on the entire Western church. In addition, fasting was a common element of discipline in early monastic communities from the second century onward. When the monastic way replaced martyrdom as the highest act of devotion in the fourth century, practices such as fasting were elevated among the faithful.

The Roman Church added several fast days to the Christian year during the Middle Ages. It adopted the days of the chief agricultural operations in Italy as obligatory fasts called ember days. A season of fasting from December 13 to Christmas was added later. The Orthodox Church added obligatory fast days beginning November 15 during Advent, from Trinity Sunday until June 29, and the two weeks prior to August 15. Protestant Reformers, with the exception of Anglicans, rejected obligatory fast days along with much of the other prescribed ritual of the Roman Church. Anabaptists, more than any other reform group, relegated fasting once more to the private sphere.

The Catholic Church maintained its church calendar of fast days until the twentieth century, when it was modified by several acts related to Vatican Council II. Moreover, the modern Catholic approach has linked fasting with the call to love one's neighbor, as a symbol of identification with the poor. In some Christian circles—Catholic and non-Catholic, evangelical and nonevangelical—there is the growing custom of meeting for a simple repast and giving the cost of the normal meal to relieve world hunger.

Pentecostals have written extensively about the benefits of the fast, nearly always linking it with prayer, to deepen spiritual life and/or obtain God's favor. Some charismatic leaders even claim that the course of history can be shaped by prayer and fasting. As with any religious practice, there are dangers in fasting, especially when emphasized at the expense of other biblical teachings or misused for selfish ends. The Bible notes such abuses of fasting as a means of getting things from God, a substitute for genuine repentance, a mere convention and therefore an end in itself, and an occasion for outward religiosity (Isa. 58; Zech. 7:5; Matt. 6:16). Moreover, there is psychological evidence that fasting lends itself to self-induced visions that sometimes prove harmful.

Yet there is biblical evidence that fasting and prayer practiced together can be a useful part of individual and congregational life, though the practice should never be allowed to degenerate into empty formal observance or a device for attempting to manipulate God.

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