

A HISTORY OF BIBLICAL FASTING (1)

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Fasting—Instituted by God in the Mosaic Law

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. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 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 (Matt. 6:16-18).

I begin this article by quoting the words preached by Jesus Christ in that most famous of sermons: the Sermon on the Mount. These verses are the clearest and most definitive statement on the Christian exercise of fasting found in the whole of Scripture.

The first point to note is that Jesus Christ presumes His followers and disciples will fast. He does not say “*if* ye fast” but “*when* ye fast” (v. 16).

The second point to note is that there can be an insincere, false or hypocritical fast. This can be detected by the attitude of heart within the fasting person and whether or not he is seeking to draw attention to himself. To whom we fast is of critical importance, i.e., to our Father in heaven who sees what we do in secret, or to men as a display of our self-denial and discipline to be seen and admired (or mocked) by men.

Third, there is a promise of reward:

1. The hypocrite’s fast is rewarded with an increase of his pride, and no reward from God.
2. A sincere fast, rightly carried out, will certainly bring a corresponding gracious reward from God. There is no time limit to this reward. It may be present or future. Quantitatively, it may not be limited to a single reward, but may be an infinite and everlasting reward, reflecting the nature of the Rewarder.

The fourth point to note is that fasting is not a command. It is left as a voluntary exercise, to be used as a means of grace by individuals, churches or nations, whenever it may be appropriate to do so.

Another verse worthy of note, before we start to examine the history of fasting, is Mark 2:18 where we learn that John the Baptist, together with his disciples, fasted often. At that time, the disciples of Jesus Christ did not fast, and were questioned as to why not. Jesus Christ assured them that the days would come when they would fast: "But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days" (v. 20).

Fasting on the Day of Atonement

In Scripture, teaching on fasting first appears in the Mosaic law. Leviticus 16 sets forth the rituals to be carried out by Aaron the priest on the Day of Atonement. This was on the seventh day of the tenth month, called *Tishri*, in late September on our present calendar.

The word "atonement" in Hebrew is *kippurim*, which means "covering." The Day of Atonement is called *Yom Kippur* among the Jews. Of special concern in this article are verses 29-31 of Leviticus 16 where the people are commanded "ye shall afflict your souls." The word "afflict" in Hebrew is *anah* which means "to lower" or "humble." This most certainly means to abstain from eating and from daily work as a Sabbath. The duration of this affliction was from evening to evening, a 24-hour period (Lev. 23:32).

We can be sure of the meaning of "afflict your souls" in Leviticus 16:29, because the apostle Paul refers to the Day of Atonement as "the fast" in Acts 27:9, indicating that the time of year had arrived when it was considered unsafe for shipping in the Mediterranean Sea, that is from early November to late March.

From Leviticus 23:27-32, we see the strictness of the command. The punishment for non-compliance in fasting on the Day of Atonement was nothing less than excommunication from God's people, "For whatsoever soul it be that shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people" (v. 29). This would mean losing all covenant privileges and benefits which were confined to God's people alone, clearly a very serious matter.

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Numbers 29:7-11 gives details of the sacrifices to be made on this holy day. Exodus 30:10 teaches us how Aaron was to sprinkle the blood of the sin offering upon the horns of the altar of incense once a year. This sprinkling of blood with his finger had to be repeated seven times. Exodus 30:16 teaches us that the people were to give a monetary offering on this day.

The question before us now is: Why did God command fasting to be an essential part of the great Day of Atonement? With the help of other Scriptures, I am going to make some suggestions. Since there are no explicit reasons given in the Bible for fasting on the Day of Atonement, we have to search for implied reasons. Care has to be taken here that any ideas formed do not contradict Scripture.

To begin with, it will be helpful to understand exactly what is being portrayed and revealed to us about this important occasion. Leviticus 16:30 says, "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."

There is a presupposition here that the people are unclean due to sin in the sight of a holy God. This offensive pollution in man is being removed. The satisfactory removing of man's pollution will be dealt with more fully later. For the present purpose, it is deeply humbling for the whole congregation to witness the killing of one young bull, one ram, seven male lambs and one goat, with the other goat being sent alive out into the wilderness. The blood of these slain animals is then taken by Aaron and sprinkled upon the mercy seat (Lev. 16:18-19). This is to be done for himself, for his household and for all the congregation of Israel (Lev. 16:17). Fasting on this day humbles the people and causes them to identify with the suffering of the animals being killed on their behalf, which signifies a removing of the pollution and uncleanness of sin.

A second idea may be grasped by considering the word rendered "afflict." The Hebrew word *anah* means "to lower," as mentioned already. This suggests that the congregation deliberately had to lower or humble themselves on the Day of Atonement. The congregation would witness the killings, the collecting of blood and the sprinklings, followed by Aaron laying both hands upon the head of the live goat and confessing over it all their transgressions. The people would then see the goat sent away into the wilderness by a fit man. The goat was symbolically bearing away all their iniquities.

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness (Lev. 16:21-22).

These two verses are powerful and pregnant with symbolic meaning. It is extremely important to grasp this in order to understand the Christian doctrine of imputation and substitution. The guilt of the sinful party is transferred to the innocent party in order to bear the just punishment.

The hapless, uncared-for goat was led away into the wilderness, whether the Judean or the Arabian wilderness, we are not told. Those who live in the verdant British Isles will find it difficult to comprehend the hostility of these wildernesses, especially the Arabian. There would be insufficient forage or water even for a hardy goat to live. Dehydration would quickly set in, followed by emaciation and death in the barren wilderness.

To watch the ritual proceedings, no doubt for many hours, fasting as they did so, would intensify in Israel's mind the solemnity of the occasion as God symbolically displayed His purpose to remove sin and reconcile a people to Himself. Fasting on this day seems a very appropriate exercise, in keeping with the need to humble ourselves.

Humbling ourselves is a daily New Testament duty: "And be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God" (I Pet. 5:5-6).

Considering the Day of Atonement and all that it symbolises, I hope to explain from the Old Testament how reasonable and appropriate it was for God to command His people to fast. More can be discovered, I am convinced, if we now look into Scripture both before and after the Mosaic institution.

First, let us go back to the ancient times and the patriarchs to see what has been revealed and understood regarding animal sacrifice. At the very beginning of human history, as soon as Adam and Eve had been deceived and fell into sin, God graciously covered their nakedness with coats of animal skins:

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"Unto Adam also and his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21). The idea of God covering their shame through a sacrifice was revealed at the very dawn of history. Their understanding may very well have been dim and hazy, yet their second son Abel clearly understood that God could not be approached and worshipped without an animal sacrifice: "And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering" (Gen. 4:4). Hebrews 11:4 elucidates: "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh."

Moving forward to Noah, we see that he together with his family were the only survivors of the worldwide flood. As soon as he entered the new world, he sacrificed both clean animals and birds:

And Noah builded an altar unto the LORD; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake (Gen. 8:20-21).

Let us now come to the time of Abraham and the test God put him through with his son Isaac. Abraham clearly understood the purpose of the sacrifice: "And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:8).

Moving forward to the time of King David, we discover an altogether clearer meaning of animal sacrifice. In the greatest penitential Psalm, we read, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." David adds, "Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering" (Ps. 51:17, 19). Thus God is not so much looking at the animal sacrifice as upon the contrition of heart in the worshipper.

Further, we find in Isaiah 1:11-12, 15,

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or

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of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? ... And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

Here we see God is disgusted by these worshippers. No doubt they are sacrificing in the prescribed manner, yet, because they are not doing it in faith or true heart obedience, they are rejected by God.

In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews contains the fullest explanation of the Mosaic institutions of the tabernacle, sacrifices, priesthood and more. To quote just a few verses, Hebrews 10:4 explains clearly the impotence of animal sacrifices to remove or cover sin: "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." There was no *kippurim* or covering from the animals sacrificed on the Day of Atonement or any cleansing from their sprinkled blood. Hebrews 10:1 states the purpose of the animal sacrifices: "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect."

Some other passages to read and study are also from Hebrews. Hebrews 6:18-20 states that our hope is in Jesus Christ, the high priest Himself. Hebrews 9:11, 14 reiterates,

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building ... How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

The ritual sacrifices on the Day of Atonement had to be repeated every year, which meant sins were remembered annually: "But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year" (Heb. 10:3). In contrast, we read,

But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God (Heb. 10:12).

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Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself (Heb. 7:27).

For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with the blood of others; For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:24-26).

The sacrifices and rituals which the children of Israel watched on the Day of Atonement were all ordained by God as symbols pointing the people forward to a day when the types would be fulfilled in the promised Messiah Jesus Christ, the antitype. Aaron the high priest is fulfilled in Jesus the high priest. The animals sacrificed are fulfilled in Jesus Christ sacrificed. The blood of the animals is fulfilled in the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross. The tabernacle is fulfilled in the human nature of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of His Spirit in us. The Aaronic high priest entering into the holy of holies is fulfilled in Jesus Christ entering into the presence of the Father in heaven itself.

Considering our question of why God commanded fasting on the Day of Atonement, what was of greatest importance to God on this day? Was it the high priest, the animals being killed and burnt, their blood sprinkled or the tabernacle itself? The answer is the people themselves. This is where God's real interest lay: redeeming a people to Himself. So fasting could be an act within each person to facilitate humility, repentance for sin, confession before God, dependence upon Him and hope in His mercy and good purpose to reconcile a people to Himself, each person seeking to appropriate the benefit symbolised by the display of *kippurim* or covering for sin.

After all, we as New Testament Christians need to be impressed with the infinite value of the atonement made by Jesus Christ for us at Calvary. We also need to regard its benefit as more necessary even than our daily food. I Peter 2:5 says, "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."

With the coming of Jesus Christ, ushering in the New Testament dispensation, the temple and the whole sacrificial law passed away as Jesus Christ clearly foretold (Matt. 24:2; John 2:19). So also passed away the Day of Atonement from the calendar of the people of God, and with it the command to fast. There is no longer any need for the Day of Atonement to be on any believer's calendar except for information purposes (cf. Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16).

Fasting as a Contrast and Reminder of the Fall

I now wish to explore another line of thought which I believe will give much insight into fasting as a Christian exercise of piety. To do this, we have to go back to the Garden of Eden and see how mankind became unclean in God's sight. Originally, man was created very good and upright in God's image (Gen. 1:26-31; 2:25). The devil came with his temptation to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17; 3:1-6). Theologians known for accuracy of exegesis have no problem with interpreting the first eleven chapters of Genesis as factual historical events. We believe the tree was a real tree with real ripe fruit, whether they were apples, pears, peaches or an extinct fruit is beside the point. The central significance is that the tree and its fruit represented a test of loyalty and obedience to God. Eve's action of taking the fruit, eating it and then giving it to Adam, who also ate, was the darkest hour of mankind's whole existence upon earth (Gen. 3:1-7). The act of eating one fruit is so simple yet it has the most profound and everlasting results, as I will very briefly set out:

1. Adam was the federal head of all humanity, so the whole race fell with Adam and Eve on that fateful day (Rom. 5:12, 19; I Cor. 15:22).
2. Adam and Eve along with the entire human race changed their allegiance from God to the devil with the action of eating the fruit, thus believing the devil and not God (Gen. 3:15).
3. Adam, Eve and the human race experience shame and guilt as a result of eating the one fruit (Gen. 3:7-10).
4. A three-fold curse descends from God upon the devil, mankind and the earth (Gen. 3:15-19).
5. Adam, Eve and all humanity die physically and return to dust as a result of eating one fruit (Gen. 3:19).

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To list the innumerable and extensive consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience is far beyond telling. Without going into details, I will set out the broader consequences which affect life for mankind.

1. The line of the devil's seed in their generations from Cain onwards very rapidly became exceedingly wicked, so much so that God brought an end to life by sending a global flood. Think just for a moment of the worldwide destruction, turmoil and sudden death, not only of men, women and children, but also of the whole animal kingdom as witnessed by the abundance of fossil evidence. Only those on the ark survived the catastrophe. All this fearful development of sin in the ancient world can be traced back to the eating of the fruit.
2. In the new world cleansed by water, it was not long before apostasy set in again and man began to develop a philosophy of life without reference to God. The evidence for this was the building of the Tower of Babel. Again God intervened to stop the process, which He did by confusing the languages. What a rupture in man's essential oneness this has caused with the racial and cultural wars which have developed throughout history.
3. With the advent and arrival of the Son of God or the Seed of the woman as promised, the world condemned Him and put Him to death. The Sanhedrin represented God's chosen people, and Pilate and Herod represented the Gentiles. How could such a crime take place in this world? God incarnate put to death by mankind! Amazing as it may seem, it can be traced back to the eating of one fruit.
4. Sin also affected the animal kingdom. All animals die, which was unnatural and unknown before man's fall. Mankind as created was crowned over the animal kingdom (Gen. 1:28). Therefore, man's death immediately affected the animal world. What pain and suffering man has brought upon the lower creatures! "Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust" (Ps. 104:29). "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Rom. 8:22).
5. What about our physical world called "earth"? In Genesis 8:21 the word "smite" is used as an expression of what God had just done in bringing

the flood over the world. The Hebrew word *nakah* has a sense of great force and terrific impact. The global physical upheavals involved in the flood and its aftermath could only have had a most dramatic effect on the entire world, not least on the climate and the atmosphere around our planet. The new world of Noah's family would have been characterised by the storms, hurricanes, typhoons, tornadoes, snow, ice and hail with which we are now so familiar, along with their trail of havoc and destruction. These things may have occurred also before the flood, but no explicit mention is made of them until afterwards. Every such storm can be traced back to mankind eating one fruit.

6. Not only the atmosphere has lost its original settled calm and tranquillity (Gen. 2:6), but what about the earth's crust, the very land under our feet? This also has been mightily disturbed, heaved up and down, fissured and shattered into continents and isles. From this arises every earthquake, volcano, tsunami and the massive destruction they can bring in an unsuspecting moment, all of which can be traced back to the actions of Adam and Eve.
7. What about the heavens? There is considerable evidence that the solar system has been disturbed, more than likely by several events at differing times since creation. Look at the craters on the moon and on Mars, for example. The solar system and possibly the whole galaxy are no longer serene. For more information on this fascinating topic, read *The Biblical Flood and the Ice Epoch* by Donald Wesley Patten, who states, "The catastrophic view contends that not just the earth but virtually every planet has experienced astral havoc of one sort or another, and to one degree or another."¹
8. What about eternity? Is it possible that the eating of one fruit can have consequences beyond our present world and continue into the next age and last forever? Anyone with only a little acquaintance with the biblical record will know it does. The first truth to consider is that our actions are weighed by God: "For the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed" (I Sam. 2:3). I will now quote a few Scriptures

¹ Donald Wesley Patten, *The Biblical Flood and the Ice Epoch* (Seattle, WA: Pacific Meridian Publishing Co., 1966), p. 309.

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to prove that there is an eternal and never-ending result from eating the forbidden fruit for all who do not seek and find an atonement or covering for their sin.

And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish (Deut. 8:19).

The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth (I Sam. 2:10).

The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away (Ps. 1:4).

The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God (Ps. 9:17).

... cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12).

... danger of eternal damnation (Mark 3:29).

... Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:44, 46, 48).

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation (John 5:28-29).

And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever (Rev. 20:10).

Having opened up the subject, I trust it is becoming clearer why God commanded fasting on one day in the year on the Day of Atonement during the Old Testament dispensation. The day was pointing forward to the Messiah

redeeming and recovering His people from the ruin brought on us by the simple act of eating. Fasting or not eating has no merit in itself and it must never be supposed that fasting can undo Adam and Eve's fall away from God. Jesus Christ's death at Calvary is the real and only atonement for sinners.

We concur with the wisdom of God who introduced fasting into the Mosaic law. Two paramount principles are revealed. First, it brings to mind the horrific, far-reaching and damning result both to Satan, the Tempter, and to his seed among mankind who remain under the influence and control of the serpent. These never find the covering for sin, which is essential for peace and reconciliation with God. Second, fasting is a most fitting and reasonable requirement to place upon the children of Israel as God opens up His infinite mercy and gracious purpose to deliver His own people from such a catastrophic deception.

Fasting, having been once instituted by God within the ceremonial law, provides a means of grace to aid penitence, contrition of spirit and humility before God. Considering the nature and purpose of Christian fasting carried out by the power of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ as members of His body, it stands in spiritual contrast to Adam and Eve who, following the word of the serpent, ate in disobedience to God.

to be continued (DV)

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