Fasting in the Old Testament

2 Samuel 12:15-23

Introduction:

1. “Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason, and others have utterly disregarded it.” - John Wesley.
2. Fasting involves a very personal matter: food!
   1. Many of us live to eat instead of eating to live.
   2. We eat to deal with boredom, depression, anxiety, etc.
   3. What part, if any, should fasting play in our lives?
3. Fasting in the Old Testament.
4. WHEN THEY FASTED.
   1. The only fast commanded in the Old Testament was on the Day of Atonement.

“Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the Lord” (Leviticus 23:27).

* + 1. The term “afflict your souls” refers to fasting.
    2. The use of the term “afflict one’s soul” to refer to fasting indicates a purpose for fasting.

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions (Ezra 8:21).

* + 1. Luke uses the term “fast” to refer to the Day of Atonement.

Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over (Acts 27:9).

* 1. Other fasts in the Old Testament.
     1. War.
        1. Israel fasted at Bethel in the war against the Benjamites.

Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord

(Judges 20:26).

* + - 1. At Mizpah in the war against the Philistines. 1 Samuel 7:1-6
    1. David fasted for his sick son. 2 Samuel 12:16-23
    2. Death.
       1. The people of Jabesh Gilead fasted seven days at the death of Saul. 1 Samuel 31:11-13
       2. David and the people fasted for Saul and Jonathan.

Therefore David took hold of his own clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son, for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword (2 Samuel 1:11,12).

* + 1. Forgiveness.
       1. Moses fasted forty days because of the sin of Israel.

“So I turned and came down from the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire; and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. And I looked, and behold, you had sinned against the Lord your God—had made for yourselves a molded calf! You had turned aside quickly from the way which the Lord had commanded you. Then I took the two tablets and threw them out of my two hands and broke them before your eyes. And I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you committed in doing wickedly in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger” (Deuteronomy 9:15-18).

* + - 1. Nineveh fasted at the preaching of Jonah. Jonah 3:4-10
    1. Danger.
       1. Jehoshaphat fasted when threatened.

It happened after this that the people of Moab with the people of Ammon, and others with them besides the Ammonites, came to battle against Jehoshaphat. Then some came and told Jehoshaphat, saying, “A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, from Syria; and they are in Hazazon Tamar” (which is En Gedi). And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to ask help from the Lord; and from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord (2 Chronicles 20:1-4).

* + - 1. The Jews fasted when they heard that Haman had obtained the king’s decree against them.

And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king’s provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions (Esther 3:13).

When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went as far as the front of the king’s gate, for no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth. And in every province where the king’s command and decree arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4:1-3).

1. THE NATURE OF FASTING.
   1. The normal means involved abstaining from all food but not water.
   2. Daniel engaged in a partial fast.

In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a message was revealed to Daniel, whose name was called Belteshazzar. The message was true, but the appointed time was long; and he understood the message, and had understanding of the vision. In those days I, Daniel, was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled (Daniel 10:1-3).

* 1. Total fast.
     1. The people of Nineveh engaged in a total fast, including their animals.

And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water (Jonah 3:7).

* + 1. Esther and her people participated in a total fast. Esther 4:4-16
    2. Moses.

“When I went up into the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water” (Deuteronomy 9:9).

1. THE LENGTH OF FASTS.
   1. From sunrise to sunset, with food eaten at sunset.
      1. After the tribe of Benjamin had killed 40,000 Israelites.

Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord (Judges 20:26).

* + 1. David and his men after the death of Saul and Jonathan.

And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son, for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword (2 Samuel 1:12).

* + 1. David after the death and burial of his son, Abner.

And when all the people came to persuade David to eat food while it was still day, David took an oath, saying, “God do so to me, and more also, if I taste bread or anything else till the sun goes down!” (2 Samuel 3:35).

* 1. One night: King Darius after casting Daniel into the lion’s den.

Now the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; and no musicians were brought before him. Also his sleep went from him (Daniel 6:18).

* 1. Three days.

“Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!” (Esther 4:16.).

* 1. Seven days.
     1. The valiant men of Jabesh Gilead after they buried the bones of Saul and his sons.

Then they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days (1 Samuel 31:13).

* + 1. David when his son was sick.

David therefore pleaded with God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. So the elders of his house arose and went to him, to raise him up from the ground. But he would not, nor did he eat food with them. Then on the seventh day it came to pass that the child died (2 Samuel 12:16-18).

* 1. Forty days.
     1. Moses.

“When I went up into the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water” (Deuteronomy 9:9).

* + 1. Elijah.

So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:8).

* + 1. Jesus.

And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry (Matthew 4:2).

1. WARNINGS ABOUT FASTING.
   1. God demands more than an external display. Isaiah 58:1-9
   2. For whom are you fasting: yourself or God? Zechariah 7:4-10

Conclusion:

1. I plan a lesson on “Fasting in the New Testament.”
2. Fasting is something which has not and will not impress God when, in other aspects of our lives, we are ignoring or rebelling against God.
3. Do you need to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?

Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23).

1. It begins by obeying the gospel: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Roman 6:3, 4).