**BIBLE - "FASTING"**

**INTRODUCTION -**

The Bible has quite a lot to say about the subject of fasting, although the subject is not studied much. Consequently, much misunderstanding surrounds the subject. Hopefully, this study of fasting from the Bible will help us remove some of these misunderstandings.

"Fasting" literally means to abstain from food.

 It could be done voluntarily, cf. Matthew 4:1-2, or

 It could be forced due to one’s circumstances, 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:21.

The purpose of this study is to help us better understand what the Bible teaches about the subject of fasting.

***BIBLE – FASTING -***

**I.  FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.**

  A.  A Fast was Commanded on the Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:27-32.

    1.  "Afflict your souls" - An outward manifestation of one’s personal contrition and repentance by abstaining from the ordinary enjoyments of life (Fasting - Isaiah 58:3).

    2.  This was the only fast commanded in the Old Testament Law.

    3.  However, God’s people fasted at other times in the OT, and apparently they did so with God’s approval, provided their attitudes and motives were proper.

  B.  When And Why Did People Fast In Old Testament Times?

    1.  At times of intense spiritual work:

      a.  Exodus 34:28: When Moses was given the ten commandments upon stone, cf. Deuteronomy 9:9.

      b.  He was in the presence of God - Consumed by the occasion of receiving the Law from God.

    2.  At times of mourning and sorrow for one’s sin - Seeking God’s forgiveness through repentance:

      a.  Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:27-32: Recognition of sin on Day of Atonement.

      b.  Deuteronomy 9:18: Moses interceding for the sins of Israel.

      c.  1 Samuel 1:6: Israel’s sorrow for idolatry.

      d.  Nehemiah 9:1-2: National confession of sin.

      e.  Daniel 9:3-6: Supplication / Confession on Israel’s behalf.

      f.  Joel 1:14; 2:12-13: Israel instructed to turn to God with all her heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning over sin.

      g.  Jonah 3:4-10: Nineveh fasted as an expression of humility, repentance and dependency upon Jehovah for mercy when they believed Jonah’s message.

    3.  At times of seeking God’s protection against enemies (or, seeking God’s help in general):

      a.  2 Chronicles 20:1-4: King Jehoshaphat and Judah fast and seek God’s help against Moab and Ammon.

      b.  Ezra 8:21-23: Ezra and company fast as they petition God for protection on their journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.

      c.  Nehemiah 1:1-4: Fasting attended Nehemiah’s grief over Jerusalem and his prayer for God’s help.

      d.  Esther 4:3, 15-16: The people fasted over the destruction edict, and when they prayed for Esther’s success with the king.

    4.  At times of sorrow over sickness and death:

      a.  1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:12: At the death of King Saul and sons.

      b.  2 Samuel 12:15-23: David fasted while in total, concentrated prayer for his son’s life.

    5.  Other Jewish fast days, Zechariah 8:19:

      a.  4th month fast: In memory of the wall of Jerusalem being broken up by the Babylonians, Jeremiah 52:6-7.

      b.  5th month fast: In memory of the burning of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar - Jeremiah 52:12-13.

      c.  7th month fast: In memory of the slaying of Gedaliah, the governor, Jeremiah 41:1-3.

      d.  10th month fast: In memory of Nebuchadnezzar coming against Jerusalem, Jeremiah 52:4.

      e.  Zechariah 7:2-7: They had not been keeping these fasts with the proper attitudes and motives. If they had, their fasts would have been accepted, cf. Zechariah 8:19.

  C.  Proper Attitudes And Motives For Acceptable Fasting In The Old Testament (As seen in the foregoing examples):

    1.  An expression of humility before God, Psalms 35:13; Ezra 8:21.

    2.  A means of disciplining the soul with humility, reverence and repentance, Leviticus 23:27 - "Afflict your souls."

    3.  Expression of sorrow before God for sin and/or in mourning death.

    4.  To proceed from sincerity of purpose - To be heard by God, Isaiah 58:1-9a.

\*\* -Fasting which was/is not accompanied by one meeting God’s requirements in his life is hypocritical and vain.

**II.  FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.**

  A.  Never Directly Commanded by Christ of His People.

    1.  However, He regulates certain areas of its use, thereby showing that it could be effectively practiced by individual Christians for various reasons and at various times.

    2.  Fasting was something Jewish believers were familiar with -- But they needed to see its proper significance and use.

    3.  cf. Luke 5:33-39: Would be an occasion when His disciples would fast (Time of extreme sorrow - His death - John 16:20).

  B.  Motives to Regulate the Fasting of Christians:

    1.  Not to be done as a display of righteousness, Matthew 6:16-18.

      a.  Secret / Without display or fanfare (cf. Prayer, v. 5-6).

      b.  cf. Luke 18:12: Not a ritual which makes one righteous.

      c.  If done for that intended purpose -- One is not pleasing before God.

    2.  Out of mourning and sorrow for sin, Acts 9:9, 11.

      a.  Saul fasted as he prayed to God, agonizing over the sins he had committed against Christ.

      b.  We should learn from this attitude and response toward sin. I fear we do not take sin and its removal this seriously.

    3.  Because of intense devotion to spiritual things.

      a.  Matthew 4:1: Jesus at the start of His ministry.

      b.  Luke 2:36-37: Anna’s commitment to worship God and look for Messiah.

      c.  Acts 13:1-3: As a matter of personal dedication to the work (v. 2), and especially in preparation to send Barnabas and Saul on preaching journey (v. 3).

      d.  Acts 14:23: Supplication for God’s blessings upon newly appointed elders.

      e.  1 Corinthians 7:5: During periods of special spiritual emphasis in one's life.

    4.  Out of extreme sorrow, Luke 5:35.

  C.  Fasting Was/Is Never to be Viewed as an End in Itself, Luke 18:12 (cf. Isa. 58:3-5).

    1.  That is to say, it was not something one did "to get holy".

    2.  Rather, it was one means of exclusively dedicating oneself to God, His will and His work.

      a.  The emphasizing of the spiritual to the exclusion of the physical.

      b.  cf. 1 Corinthians 7:3-5: Abstinence from sexual fulfillment "for a season" in order to devote oneself totally to spiritual things.

\*\*  3.  Fasting and the Christian:

      -Abstinence from physical food ‘‘for a season" in order to devote oneself totally to spiritual things, because one is consumed by the importance of the spiritual.

    4.  Remember:

      -The lifestyle and character Jesus demands of His disciples is a constant life of dedication and devoted service to God (Matt. 6:33; et al.).

**CONCLUSION -**

Fasting continues to be a means of disciplining one’s soul -- A means of emphasizing spiritual things in one’s life, even to the exclusion of food, that one may be entirely devoted to the things of God.

However, one should never use fasting from a point of view which suggests that by simply doing the act, one is righteous before God! Luke 18:12