

WHAT ABOUT FASTING?

Matthew 9:14 (NKJV)

14 Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?”

This was a good question. According to Mark 2:18, at this very time the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting while they saw Jesus and His disciples feasting in Matthew’s house. That didn’t seem right to them. “Hey, we’re all serious about God over here in our fasting, and how is it that you guys are feasting away with no thought for fasting?”

To begin with, note that John the Baptist had sort of an austere type of ministry as he called the people to repentance. He was sort of an ascetic to begin with, living in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey (cf. Mt. 3:4). So, the Pharisees and John the Baptist’s disciples both put an emphasis on regular fasting (cf. Lk. 5:33).

We need to step back and look at the place of fasting as ordained by God in the OT. The idea of fasting in the OT was to humble yourself before God and focus on Him. It made God THE PRIORITY! Fasting signified setting aside self-orientation and focusing solely on God. It often signified contrition for sin and getting right with God.

The only fast required under the Law of Moses was a fast for the annual Day of Atonement (cf. Lev. 16:29-31; Num. 29:7). Fasting on this day portrayed brokenness over sin (Lev. 16:29). The sacrifices and rituals that took place on the Day of Atonement were temporary pictures that ultimately looked forward to the permanent atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

In addition to this, the nation Israel fasted in times of national calamity (cf. Jer. 36:9; Joel 1:14). Only later, in connection with the Babylonian Captivity and after, did Israel add special “fasting days” to their religious calendar (cf. Zech. 7:2-5; 8:19; Isa. 58:3-7). Pious Jews then began to practice fasting twice a week – on Monday and Thursday (cf. Lk. 18:12).

So, fasting in general is the idea of intensively focusing on God in a singular way. It has the idea of humbling yourself in brokenness before God.

“Fasting is not commanded in the New Testament; neither is it a measure of spirituality, but the practice is assumed and recognized as beneficial. It is a private matter and has a purpose beyond mere physical discipline – to

focus one's attention upon a task, need, or personal relationship with God even to the exclusion of concern for what one will eat." – **Ed Glasscock**

An observation: People tend to gravitate towards "legalism". We have this bent that tends to want to lock into rituals and routines that we think somehow make us more spiritual when in fact they don't.

In the Didache (an early Christian teaching manual in the early 2nd century) Christians are exhorted: "***And you must not fast as the hypocrites do, [the Jews] for they fast on Monday and Thursday; you must observe your fast on Wednesday and Friday!***" So what they ended up doing is exchanging one legalistic formality for another. Stick with the N.T. teaching – the doctrine of the apostles and you will be consistent with sound doctrine.

Here was Jesus' response:

Matthew 9:15 (NKJV)

15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."

Here Jesus associated fasting with mourning - portraying it as a symbol of sorrow. Understand in context that Jesus was on the scene as the King presenting the kingdom as being at hand.

In the OT the bridegroom metaphor is often used in reference to God, and the kingdom is pictured as a coming Messianic banquet (cf. Isa. 25:6-7; 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Hos. 2:16-20; Ps. 45). John the Baptist described himself as the friend of the bridegroom in John 3:29.

Thus, Christ being the Messiah and presenting the dawning of the Messianic Age was no time for fasting. Rather, it was a time of celebration. The KING is here presenting the kingdom (on the condition of repentance, of course).

Christ is the Messianic bridegroom and a wedding is no place for fasting. Rather it is a time for feasting and celebration. The problem was that these people didn't properly understand WHO Jesus was as the Messianic bridegroom (cf. Mt. 22:2; 25:1; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23-32; Rev. 19:7; 21:2). They were completely out of sync with God's program and what God was doing. Hence, Israel ended up rejecting Jesus as their Messiah and the kingdom was put on hold.

And Jesus alludes to this rejection, saying, “***But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.***”

This “taken away” is not simply a departure but rather portrays a violent taking away as in reference to His crucifixion (cf. Isa. 53:8). This certainly would be a time of fasting and sorrow (cf. Jn. 16:16-22).

John 16:20–22 (NKJV)

20 Most assuredly, I say to you that **you will weep and lament**, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but **your sorrow will be turned into joy.**

21 A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.

22 Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and **your joy no one will take from you.**

Certainly, in the crucifixion there was sorrow for the disciples, but the resurrection turned their sorrow into joy.

As we study the whole counsel of God, we find there are special occasions where fasting is appropriate (cf. Mt. 4:2; 6:16-18; Acts 9:9; 13:2; 14:23). However, the dominant characteristic for Christians is now to be joy and not sorrow. In Nehemiah’s time the people were told in Nehemiah 8:10, “...the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Paul said...

Philippians 4:4 (NKJV)

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!

The Christian life is described overall as a feast – not a fast.

1 Corinthians 5:7–8 (NKJV)

7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.

8 Therefore **let us keep the feast**, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Immediately following the Passover day was the 7-day feast of unleavened bread. The picture is this: We are saved by the blood of the Lamb, and now we should live holy lives that are not corrupted by sin. Passover corresponds in type to the sacrifice of Christ. The feast of unleavened bread corresponds to holy living that follows having applied the Passover.

But the point is the Christian experience is an ongoing FEAST – not a perpetual FAST. Yes, we may occasionally give ourselves to a time of fasting and prayer as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:5, but the overall emphasis is that we are keeping a FEAST.

“Today the church is not to be fasting in grief but living in the power of the Holy Spirit, victoriously awaiting reunion with the Lord. Fasting can still serve the purpose of focusing and spiritual refreshing, but for the church it is not a sign of sorrow.” – ***Ed Glasscock***