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ALL ABOUT FASTING

In the Bible there are many examples of people fasting, going for a period of time without eating or drinking anything. One of the annual Holy Days, the Day of Atonement, is a day when God commands us to fast. But there are **no other commanded fast days** in the year. So when some religions establish other times on a recurring annual basis when their followers are expected to fast, then that is not based on any biblical instructions.

There are, however, general instructions for us individually to **fast at times of our own choosing**. In those cases the length of the fast is also left up to us to decide for ourselves. Those instructions are given from the perspective of **assuming that all of us will fast** at different times, without needing a specific commandment to do so.

And then there are also the occasions when the Church asks us to fast, to seek God's help in certain ways. And that is certainly very appropriate.

In biblical times occasions of great sorrow or great danger would commonly cause people to fast. Such fasts were frequently not premeditated, but entered into spontaneously as a result of certain things that had just happened. This shows that fasting was something with which all people in the Middle East were very familiar, something they might respond to at a moment's notice.

EXAMPLES OF FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We have no examples of anyone fasting before the flood, a time when Jesus Christ was present on earth. But then there were only three people (Abel, Enoch and Noah) who actively sought contact with God during that pre-flood period, and they are not recorded as having fasted at any time.

The first biblical example of fasting goes back to **Moses**, when he went up into the mountain to receive the tables of stone, on which God had written the ten commandments. This is recorded from Exodus 34 onwards. After breaking the original two tables of stone, Moses went up into the mountain again, and also fasted again. Moses summarized these two occasions in Deuteronomy chapter 9. Here are the relevant verses.

When I was gone up into the mount to receive the tables of stone, *even* the tables of the covenant which the LORD made with you, then I abode in the mount **40 days and 40 nights**, **I neither did eat bread nor drink water**: (Deuteronomy 9:9)

And after breaking the two tables of stone:

And I fell down before the LORD, as at the first, **40 days and 40 nights**: **I did neither eat bread, nor drink water**, because of all your sins which you sinned, in doing wickedly in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger. (Deuteronomy 9:18)

There may have been a few days between Moses' two periods of 40 days each on the mountain. But the time between these two 40-day periods was not long. And so Moses fasted twice for 40 days each time, with just a few days between those two fasts. For those 80 days on the mountain Moses was **in the presence of Jesus Christ**, and he didn't eat or drink anything. God undoubtedly strengthened Moses on those two occasions, to cope with these two extremely long consecutive fasts.

In this context of describing his experiences Moses did not use the Hebrew verb for "to fast" (i.e. "tsuwm"). Very likely that word was not yet a part of the Hebrew language. So instead of saying "I fasted for 40 days" Moses said "I didn't eat or drink for 40 days". Thus a definition for "to fast" is: **to not eat or drink anything for the period of the fast**.

This definition of fasting is reinforced by Elijah's 40-day fast. When Elijah was somewhat discouraged and fleeing from Jezebel, an angel twice woke Elijah up and told him to eat and drink. The angel had provided some baked bread, which was still baking on the fire, plus a jug of water (see 1 Kings 19:4-7). And Elijah ate and drank twice. Notice the next verse.

And he arose, and **did eat and drink**, and went in the strength of that meat (Hebrew = "food") **40 days and 40 nights** unto Horeb the mount of God. (1 Kings 19:8)

Here also the Hebrew word for "to fast" is not used. Elijah also didn't eat or drink during those 40 days. The definition for "to fast" is clearly reinforced in this incident with Elijah.

In addition to these two examples we have the definition for "to fast" clearly spelled out in the Book of Esther. Notice what Esther instructed Mordecai to do.

Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and **fast you for me**, and **neither eat nor drink three days**, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which *is* not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. (Esther 4:16)

Here Esther used the Hebrew word for "to fast", and then she also spelled out exactly what she meant. So for Esther "to fast" clearly meant "don't eat and don't drink anything". And the specific purpose for this fast was for Esther to find favor in the eyes of the king.

So it should be clear that when God's people fast for spiritual reasons, then it means that we don't eat anything and don't drink anything for a certain period of time, with a minimum of at least one full 24-hour day. And whenever the Bible uses the word for fasting, then it means abstaining from both all food and all drink.

Here are some Scriptures that use the Hebrew verb for “to fast”.

And they took their bones, and buried *them* under a tree at Jabesh, and **fasted seven days**. (1 Samuel 31:13)

King Saul had saved the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead when the Ammonite king had threatened to “thrust out all your right eyes” (1 Samuel 11:2). And they were very grateful for Saul saving them. So when the Philistines had mutilated the corpse of King Saul, cutting off his head (1 Samuel 31:9), then men from Jabesh-Gilead came by night and took the bodies of Saul and his fallen sons and burned them and then buried the bones.

God had instructed Israel in Numbers chapter 19 as follows:

He that touches the dead body of any man shall be **unclean seven days**. (Numbers 19:11 AV)

Since these men from Jabesh-Gilead had obviously touched the corpses of King Saul and his sons, therefore they were unclean for seven days. In this situation the biblical instruction was only to be outside the camp for being unclean, but there was no biblical instruction to also fast. However, these men of Jabesh-Gilead out of respect for King Saul also voluntarily fasted for those seven days. So 1 Samuel 31:13 tells us that these men abstained from both eating and drinking for seven days.

When Ezra led a large group of Jews from Babylon back to Jerusalem, they carried a great deal of wealth with them. It was a dangerous journey. And so Ezra proclaimed a fast to seek God’s protection for the rest of the journey. See Ezra chapter 8.

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

Here it is clear that Ezra equated fasting with “afflicting ourselves”. Afflicting ourselves applies to abstaining from both all food and all drink. Doing what is today called “a water-fast” is a modified form of fasting, yes, but **a water-fast does not amount to afflicting ourselves**. It is abstaining from all drinking that elevates a fast to “afflicting ourselves”. I’ll discuss water-fasts later in this article.

Now let’s consider how God responds when we voluntarily fast. Let’s look at the example of one of the most evil kings of Israel, Ahab. After Elijah told Ahab that God would wipe out all his posterity and that dogs would eat Jezebel, Ahab was greatly shaken. Notice:

And it came to pass, when **Ahab** heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and **fasted**, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. (1 Kings 21:27)

Now did Ahab repent? No, of course not. He was simply scared by the penalty that God was going to

impose on him and his family. And so he humbled himself before God with fasting and all the trappings of expressing humility. But he continued to be an evil king. However, in this one instance he did humble himself before God.

Notice how God responded to Ahab's actions of humbling himself. Here is what God told Elijah.

Do you see how Ahab humbles himself before Me? **because he humbles himself before Me**, I will not bring the evil in his days: *but* in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house. (1 Kings 21:29 AV)

Fasting is one way we can humble ourselves before God. This incident with Ahab shows the very powerful consequences that fasting to humble ourselves can achieve with God. When God will respond to the fasting of an evil man by postponing a penalty, then God will certainly also respond in powerful ways when God's people humble themselves before God with fasting. Never underestimate what God will do for us when we fast to humble ourselves.

While fasting is not commanded by God, God does spell out the reasons for which God expects us to fast, if we want God to intervene for us in our circumstances. God has spelled out those reasons in Isaiah 58.

Is not this **the fast that I have chosen**? to **loose the bands of wickedness**, to **undo the heavy burdens**, and to **let the oppressed go free**, and that you **break every yoke**? Is it not to **deal your bread to the hungry**, and that you **bring the poor** that are cast out **to your house**? when you see **the naked**, that you **cover him**; and that you **hide not yourself from your own flesh**? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

When we look at all these reasons God lists here one point becomes very clear: God does not want us to fast for selfish reasons. Fast for help in trials, yes. But fasting to advance our own **personal desires**, **no**. That is something God had spelled out two verses earlier.

Behold, you fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: **you shall not fast as *you do this* day**, to make your voice to be heard on high. (Isaiah 58:4)

What this basically says is: **don't fast for selfish reasons**, to get what you want to get. When you fast for such selfish reasons, then all the other trappings of expressing humility are also worthless.

Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? *is it* to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes *under him*? will you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? (Isaiah 58:5)

With these trappings you look humble outwardly. But inwardly you are not at all humbling yourself. Inwardly you are totally selfish and self-willed.

Now one application of the principles God spells our here in Isaiah 58 is that we should **never fast for more money**! We are not to fast and say: “Father, please give us more money so that we can do more in Your work. We have these open doors and we just need more money.”

That is not an acceptable reason for fasting!

Now during Mr. Armstrong’s time this type of request was on many occasions presented far more subtly. It wasn’t stated as praying: “Father, please give us more money.” No, that was far too blunt. Instead we were at times encouraged to fast and to ask God: “Father, please **send more Co-workers** to Your Church.” Now what was “a Co-worker”? Why, a Co-worker was **anyone who sent the Church money on at least two occasions**. And **why** did we call them “Co-workers”? Because we had unilaterally decided that from then onwards we would send those people **monthly letters asking for money**.

So the instruction to pray for more Co-workers was basically: “Father, please send more people to Your Church who will give us money” ... and we don’t care if those people are actually repentant or not. If they voluntarily give us money, then we’re happy.

How do I know that fasting and then praying for money is not right before God? Let’s look at what happened.

The **Auditorium in Pasadena** was built at great cost to the ordinary church members. Members were pressured to contribute to “the Building Fund”, but without decreasing their normal monthly tithes and offerings. So we paid about $10 million, plus interest for the Auditorium. What happened to it? Why, **it was sold** by those who succeeded Mr. Armstrong. And all of the financial sacrifices of every-day church members were all in vain. And all of the other properties of the Church were sold. And the money from the sales is just gone. It’s all disappeared.

That’s what happens when we fast to receive more money. It is fleeting.

Don’t misunderstand. The willingness of church members to support this project was admirable. And God surely blessed them for the sacrifices they made. But the decision by the leadership to build the Auditorium was not good.

When God calls us to do His Work, God doesn’t say: before you start doing My Work, make sure you have enough money. And if you don’t have enough money, just ask Me and I’ll give you more. That’s not how God works.

When God sets “an open door which no man can shut” before His Church (see Revelation 3:8), then we don’t have to worry about seeking more money to walk through that open door. Look, if we cannot walk though an open door without having more money than we currently have, **then that “door” isn’t really open to us**!

Any project or endeavor that requires more money than we actually have is not really “open” to us. Now if God does actually open a specific door for us, which door requires more money than we have available, then God will also provide that needed extra money, without us fasting for it. Otherwise God hasn’t really “opened” that door.

Now as far as the Auditorium in Pasadena is concerned, the decision to build it was made at a time when **we didn’t remotely have the money** to pay for it. So **God** very clearly **had not opened “any door”** for us to build that Auditorium. A bank agreeing to lend us the needed money is not “an open door”.

Having to borrow money is never “an open door”. Building that Auditorium was an expression of Mr. Armstrong’s personal desire. It took years to pay off the money the Church had to borrow in order to build the Auditorium. And history has shown that all the prayers and all the fasting for money to build the Auditorium were in vain, because now the Church no longer owns the Auditorium.

In fact, the Church owned the Auditorium for only a very short 30 years, which period includes the years by the administration that rejected all of the teachings God had established through Mr. Armstrong. It was a period of **only 12 years** for which the true teachings were taught in the Auditorium (1974 - 1986, when Mr. Armstrong died). From 1986 onwards the Auditorium was used to dismantle the true teachings of the Church.

The church members who sacrificed to build it will surely be rewarded by God. But establishing AICF (Ambassador International Cultural Foundation) to promote concerts in the Auditorium by world-renowned artists had nothing to do with worshiping or honoring God!

God’s people didn’t sacrifice so that Bing Crosby could sing in the Auditorium, or that violin virtuosos could perform there. Those things were designed to impress the world, but they had nothing to do with living the Christian life.

And to add insult to injury, today the Auditorium is the headquarters of a trinity-believing Sunday-keeping church named Harvest Rock Church of Pasadena, run by a man named Che Ahn. Che bought the Auditorium in 2004 for $19 million.

The plaque in the lobby stating that the Auditorium is dedicated to the Great God in heaven, when the building is used by a Sunday-keeping church to teach heresies, is a bitter pill to swallow. That’s not what God’s people made sacrifices for.

One lesson: don’t fast to ask for more money.

After the northern Kingdom of Israel had gone into Assyrian captivity, the southern Kingdom of Judah also descended into idolatry. So God determined to send them into captivity to Babylon. In the lead-up to that captivity God told Jeremiah not to pray for the people (Jeremiah 14:11). And then God said:

When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, **I will not accept them**: but **I will consume them** by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence. (Jeremiah 14:12)

What is God telling us here? **God does not accept all fasting**. When rebellious people fast, seeking God's help and wanting God to save their lives, then God "will not hear". Before we fast, we need to make sure that we have a right attitude towards God, and that we are not being selfish.

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

The Day of Atonement is the one day in the year when God's people are commanded to fast. While the actual instructions for this Holy Day do not include the Hebrew word that means "to fast", fasting is very clearly indicated by the words "to afflict your souls".

Also on the tenth *day* of this seventh month *there shall be* a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and **you shall afflict your souls**, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD. (Leviticus 23:27)

For **whatsoever soul *it be* that shall not be afflicted** in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people. (Leviticus 23:29)

As we saw in Ezra 8:21, "to afflict our souls" means to fast by abstaining from all eating and drinking. It is specifically the abstaining from all drinking that actually triggers "the afflicting". This instruction was already spelled out in Leviticus 16, in the account with the Azazel goat.

It *shall be* a Sabbath of rest unto you, and **you shall afflict your souls**, by a statute for ever. (Leviticus 16:31)

And this instruction is then repeated in Numbers chapter 29.

And you shall have on the tenth *day* of this seventh month an holy convocation; **and you shall afflict your souls**: you shall not do any work *therein*: (Numbers 29:7)

God's instructions for the Day of Atonement never use the Hebrew word for "to fast". It may not yet have been a part of the Hebrew language? Instead, those instructions for Atonement always tell us "to afflict our souls".

The Hebrew verb translated as "you shall afflict" is here used with the Piel stem. With this stem the primary meaning of this verb is "**to punish or inflict pain upon**" (see Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament). With fasting it is the withholding of water that actually "inflicts the pain". Here is what happens.

The average adult has enough fat stores in his body to provide all the energy needed by the body for **a whole month**. In other words, the energy stores are very adequate to cope with a fast. When we abstain from eating and fat is burned for energy, then the end products of that metabolism are water and carbon dioxide and nitrogen-containing waste products. The carbon dioxide is exhaled through the lungs. And the water is available for the kidneys to produce urine. And the nitrogen-containing waste products need to be excreted through the kidneys.

Now when we don't eat anything and **don't drink anything**, then the water in the body that is initially available to produce urine is used up pretty quickly, for some people within one day, and for other people within **a couple of days**. From then onwards the only water available for the kidneys is the water that is produced by fat metabolism. But the water produced by the burning of fat amounts to only about 20% of the water that is needed to make all the urine that is needed to excrete all the waste products produced by the metabolic processes that are taking place. The waste products that need to be excreted frequently also include toxins like heavy metals that had been stored in the fat cells, and which toxins are released when that fat is burned for fuel. If those toxins remain in the blood stream, they can produce headaches and possibly also fevers. This will make the fast quite difficult to cope with.

In response to this water shortage the kidneys typically make the urine more concentrated. It is **this shortage of water** that **is extremely stressful for the body**. This shortage of water is what causes "the afflicting". So when we are told "to afflict our souls", then that instruction makes clear that we are **not to drink anything** during that fast.

During a fast, and especially a fast of several days, the body has plenty of energy available to compensate for no food coming in. But in many cases the body doesn't have enough water available to cope, with no additional water becoming available.

Anyway, whenever we read about "afflicting our souls", then this means a fast without taking in any liquids. In a sense, it is a more emphatic statement than saying "eat neither bread nor drink water", as Moses stated it. Keep in mind that Moses' statements are the first ever references to fasting in the Bible. There are no precedents before Moses. So after those statements by Moses different ways of expressing what Moses had said were then developed in the Hebrew language.

Since there is no record of anyone fasting before Moses, I expect that the Hebrew word for "to fast" was not yet a part of the Hebrew language when Moses did his two very long fasts. So "eat no bread and drink no water" was really the only way Moses could say that he had fasted.

So first, God used the expression "to afflict our soul" to express what Moses had done. And then the Hebrew word for "to fast" was coined as a more concise way of expressing this concept of not eating and not drinking.

So much for the Day of Atonement.

FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Now let's look at the New Testament. Let's start with Jesus Christ's 40-day fast.

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

The Greek verb for "He had fasted" is a form of the Greek verb "nesteuo". This is derived from the Greek noun "nestis". This noun literally means "**one who has not eaten**" or "one who is empty". And so the verb means "**to be without food**" or "to be hungry". Throughout the New Testament this verb is used to mean "to go without food or drink", i.e. to fast.

So Jesus Christ also went for 40 days without eating or drinking. It is interesting that the three individuals in the transfiguration vision (i.e. Jesus Christ, Moses and Elijah) had all fasted for 40 days (see Matthew 17:3). I don't know that that is in any way significant, but it is interesting.

Jesus Christ also gave some clear instructions for how members of God's Church are to fast. That's recorded in Matthew chapter 6.

Moreover **when you 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. (Matthew 6:16)

Again, even without a specific command to fast, this is stated from the perspective that God's people will obviously be fasting at various times. We ourselves need to decide when to fast and how long to fast. If we only fast when we are commanded to do so, then we are "unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10).

The message of this verse is that **we are to be discreet** regarding how we appear to other people when we are fasting. It is not that in personal contacts we cannot mention that we are fasting; it is a case of not trying to make a show out of fasting, as was the case with the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (see Luke 18:12), because then there is no reward for fasting.

But you, **when you fast**, anoint your head, and wash your face; **that you appear not unto men to fast**, but unto your Father who is in secret: and your Father, who sees in secret, shall reward you openly. (Matthew 6:18)

As already stated, we are to be discreet.

Now when we decide to fast, it is important that we know **why** we are going to fast. Consider the disciples of John the Baptist.

Then came to Him the disciples of John, saying, **why do we** and the Pharisees **fast often**, but Your disciples fast not? (Matthew 9:14)

Here the disciples of John the Baptist fasted often, very likely twice a week just like the Pharisees, and **they didn't know** why they were fasting.

That's a problem!

We should never be doing things, if we don't know why we are going to do them, irrespective of whether it is doing something that is good, or whether it is responding to a bad example that someone else has set for us, or a bad instruction someone has given us. We always need to know quite clearly why we are doing something. (Obviously we are not to do anything that is bad.)

Applied to fasting:

We should never fast if we don't know why we are going to fast. For example, the Church teaches us that we should fast at various times. So we say to ourselves: I haven't fasted for a long time, so I think I should fast tomorrow. If we are then asked the question: "**why** are you going to fast, is there something specific on your mind?", then many of us might reply: "no, not really; it's just that I haven't fasted for a long time, and I feel a bit guilty for not fasting, and so I am going to fast tomorrow. Then I'll feel better about myself."

From a spiritual point of view such a fast is pretty useless. Every fast in the Bible had a specific purpose. So don't fast without a specific purpose in mind.

Now notice Jesus Christ's reply to those disciples of John.

And Jesus said unto them, **can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them**? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and **then** shall they fast. (Matthew 9:15)

Jesus Christ pointed out that in certain circumstances there is **no need to fast**. The purpose of fasting is to seek contact with God. So when people (i.e. Christ's disciples back then) are in daily physical contact with Jesus Christ, then there is no point in fasting. In other words, when the conditions that fasting is intended to achieve already exist, then there is no reason to fast.

Fasting is never an end in itself. It is the means to achieve something. So if no "affliction" is needed to achieve that something, then God also does not expect us "to be afflicted".

It will be interesting to see how this will affect people in the millennium, who will have the opportunity to be in daily contact with one of the 144,000 members of God's Family, specifically those people who actively seek daily contact with a member of the Family of God. Christ's statement may also explain why those who "walked with God" (Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, etc.) are not recorded as having fasted. They already had the contact that fasting seeks to establish. So there was no reason for them to fast.

Let's understand that when Jesus Christ created Adam and Eve, that at that time God did not expect human beings to fast. Christ was always going to be available for all those people who desired to have contact with God. The concept of fasting was simply not a part of God's plan at the time of Adam's creation.

Christ made clear that when the disciples no longer had daily contact with Him (i.e. after He had gone back to God the Father in heaven), that "**then** shall they fast". Fasting is a major powerful way to establish contact with God the Father. And after Jesus Christ's ascension into heaven those apostles needed to use fasting to have contact with God, just like all other church members need to use this tool of fasting.

In the next two verses (Matthew 9:16-17) Jesus Christ explained that He was presenting a completely different approach to fasting, compared to how the Pharisees and Jewish society in general approached the matter of fasting. These two different approaches were not compatible with one another. That's what "no man puts a piece of new cloth unto an old garment" means, that the two approaches were incompatible.

What these two verses mean is that Christians are not to approach fasting from the perspective of how Israelites in general in the Old Testament viewed fasting, with all the trappings that went along with fasting. The Pharisees had turned fasting into a ritual, which they performed in a regular repeating pattern. But fasting is not to be a ritual. It is to be used for the purposes spelled out in Isaiah 58:6-7. It is also to be used to seek God's will, when we are faced with a difficult decision (e.g. Acts 13:2-3).

It is clear that when the Bible refers to fasting, then it means: don't eat anything and don't drink anything. But now let's look at something that the Prophet Daniel did.

DANIEL'S EXAMPLE

In the first year of the Medo-Persian king Darius Daniel studied the Book of Jeremiah. He then understood that the "70 years in the desolations of Jerusalem" (see Daniel 9:2) had just been completed with the fall of the Babylonian Empire. So he prayed and fasted for a better understanding of when the Jews would be able to return to Jerusalem.

And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, **with fasting**, and sackcloth, and ashes: (Daniel 9:3)

Here Daniel used the regular Hebrew noun for fasting. He also mentions all the trappings that typically went along with a religious fast. Daniel clearly understood that fasting meant not eating anything and not drinking anything. And God answered that fast by giving Daniel the 70 weeks prophecy.

Now let's look at the next chapter. Once again Daniel was seeking contact with God. But instead of fasting Daniel did something else. Let's notice.

In those days **I Daniel was mourning three full weeks**. (Daniel 10:2)

Was Daniel fasting for three weeks? No, **he was not fasting**.

By “mourning three full weeks” Daniel was trying to draw closer to God. But this time he did not fast. Notice what Daniel did.

I ate **no pleasant bread**, neither came **flesh nor wine** in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled. (Daniel 10:3)

Daniel does not use the verb or the noun for fasting, as he did in the previous chapter. He also does not describe his actions with the expression “I ate no bread and drank no water”. No, he didn’t do that. Instead, what Daniel does is tell us that **he abstained from a luxurious diet**.

As a high official at the palace, Daniel normally ate of the food that was prepared for the royal table. He doesn’t say “I ate no bread”. Rather, he says “I ate no **pleasant** bread”, meaning the different luxurious breads that were baked for the royal table.

In Hebrew “bread” was used as a collective term for “all food”. For example, the statement “man shall not live by bread alone ...” (Matthew 4:4) uses “bread” to refer to all physical food collectively. So when describing fasting, no Israelite would mention both bread and meat, because in such a context “bread” already included all clean meats and all “pleasant bread”.

Also, the common people only rarely ate meat, at occasions when they would slaughter an animal. It was royalty that had meat available every single day. Think of the 30 oxen plus 100 sheep that were slaughtered every single day for Solomon’s table (1 Kings 4:23). Medo-Persian royalty had a similar set-up. So Daniel is again saying that he abstained from the luxurious diet he normally ate.

Next, nobody ever describes fasting by saying “**I drank no wine**”. Wine too was a luxury item, commonly consumed by royalty. So not drinking any wine has nothing at all to do with fasting. When we talk about fasting, wine doesn’t enter the picture.

Here is the point:

Daniel is not trying to say that he fasted for that 3-week period. Rather, he is saying that for that period **he only ate very basic, plain foods**, somewhat like the diet he had followed about 60 or more years earlier in Daniel 1:12. There he ate plain vegetables (“pulse”) and drank plain water. So here in Daniel 10:3 Daniel cut out all the desirable foods and drinks, and observed a very basic and unappealing diet, and drinking only water.

As a side note: by saying that he didn’t eat meat and fancy baked items and didn’t drink any wine for

that specific 3-week period, it tells us that normally Daniel did eat meat and baked delicacies, and normally he also did drink wine.

And during those three weeks Daniel devoted all his time to seeking God. He did this without actually fasting.

So here is the point I want to make:

At that point in time Daniel was a very old man. He had fasted many times during his life. Fasting, consuming no food and no water, becomes more difficult in old age. In old age our bodies don't carry as much water as when we were young adults. Lack of water in our tissues is common in old age. So in old age our bodies already have less water available at the start of a fast. And then fasting without drinking any water also becomes more stressful in old age, making the fast much more difficult to bear.

Did anybody tell Daniel to draw close to God this way instead of fasting, for seeking a better understanding, as Daniel had done in the past?

No!

This is something Daniel decided to do, being confident that God would recognize and accept this effort of seeking to draw close to God. So how did God respond to this non-fasting effort to draw close to God.

God fully accepted this effort on Daniel's part!

After saying that Daniel was "a man greatly beloved" by God, the angel told Daniel:

Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for **from the first day** that **you did set your heart** to understand, and **to chasten yourself** before your God, **your words were heard**, and I am come for your words. (Daniel 10:12)

Notice that God accepted that this very limited diet Daniel followed for three weeks amounted to Daniel "chastening himself". In other words: correct fasting amounts to us "chastening ourselves", yes. But following Daniel's very restricted diet can also amount to "chastening ourselves". And God accepted Daniel's effort "from the first day". So it is possible to "chasten ourselves" without actually doing a full regular fast.

What can we learn from this account?

God accepts every effort we make to draw close to Him!

God accepts our prayers when we pray with a right attitude. God accepts our fasts when we seek earnestly to draw close to God. And God also accepts our efforts to draw close to Him when we do “a partial fast” or a fast in which we drink some water. But in that case we should not call what we are doing “a fast”. But it is nevertheless one way we can “chasten ourselves”.

Note! **What I am saying here does not apply to the Day of Atonement!** For that day the instructions are very clear: we are to afflict ourselves by not eating and not drinking anything for a whole 24-hour period. What I am saying here applies only to our own efforts within our own time-frame to seek a better understanding of God’s will and purposes.

As far as fasting for spiritual reasons is concerned, there is no point in spending the last four or six hours of our fast lying on our beds with a splitting headache. Voluntarily fasting is not about “toughing it out” to prove some point. It is about looking to God for a better understanding of whatever the subject was for our original motivation to fast. Avoid a spiritual fast without a specific motivation.

To avoid any misunderstandings:

Regarding this last statement: **We must not “switch”** from fasting with no water to a modified version of drinking some liquids, because the fast has given us a headache! **That is never to be done**! We need to always stick with whatever commitment we made at the start of the fasting period, unless it becomes impossible for us to continue with the fast. The key is to make the right decision at the start, before the actual fasting activity starts.

So before we start, we need to decide whether to do a regular fast with no drinking at all, or whether to do a modified version somewhat like Daniel. And we need to stick with whatever commitment we start out with. So, for example, if we know that we cannot fast for two days without getting a splitting headache on the second day, then we could decide to do what Daniel did for two or more days. That is the type of decision I am referring to.

And it is okay to seek God by doing a “water fast”, if a real fast, i.e. without drinking, is a very difficult thing for you to achieve. Notice something about when people in the Bible fasted for seven days or ten days or more. The Bible accounts never give the impression that these fasts were a struggle for the people who were fasting, that they were lying on their beds with splitting headaches. In the Bible they all seemed to cope just fine.

Today we are a very degenerate age. Here in the USA almost half the people are either diabetic or pre-diabetic. And then there are all our other health problems. And it seems that almost everybody around us is on some or other medical drug.

In place of Daniel’s very restricted diet for that three week period, today that concept might be replaced by a “water fast”. In society the idea of “fasting”, but taking liquids throughout that “fast”, for health reasons, is becoming somewhat popular amongst health-conscious people. Doing such a “water fast” leaves us with exactly the same amount of time to devote to praying and studying, as a regular fast ... since drinking a glass of water now and then doesn’t take up any time. To be clear, I do **not** mean that

such a “water fast” should be for 21 days. Not even remotely! The number of days is totally at the discretion of the person doing such a “water fast”.

Let’s keep in mind that such a “water fast” is not actually a real fast. And when it is done for spiritual reasons, then **we should not call it “a fast”**, even as Daniel didn’t call his 21-day activity “a fast”. But it is still one way “to chasten ourselves”.

As I stated earlier, when we “fast” in order to draw close to God, then we are not to eat or drink anything. But fasting is not the only way to draw close to God, as Daniel showed. So besides fasting we can also draw close to God by following a very restricted plain diet for a limited period of time, or doing a “water fast”, where both of these activities are not really “fasting”. Proper fasting is simply not the only way to draw close to God.

It is very difficult for most people who have full-blown diabetes to engage in proper fasting. If they can get through the Day of Atonement without major problems, then that is an achievement for many of them. But what about all the other days in the year? Can they also draw close to God by not eating? As stated earlier, if for such people a proper fast means spending hours on their beds, because they cannot concentrate on anything meaningful, then a proper fast isn’t really of value for them.

However, if on various days in the year they can do a “water fast”, or they can follow a very limited eating protocol, somewhat like Daniel, then I believe that God will accept their efforts. Our efforts must always be seen in the context of our abilities. And a diabetic person, as an example, does not have the same eating and fasting abilities as does a healthy non-diabetic person.

And there are many other health issues that can make proper fasting equally difficult for certain people. Daniel’s example gives people in this situation the opportunity to also seek God by means of very restricted eating.

I want to point out that healthy people should not use this as a justification to switch to such a restricted diet in place of proper fasting. God knows what we are capable of.

Now what about “water fasts”?

“WATER FASTS”

Today the concepts of “intermittent fasting” and “a water fast” are commonly used amongst people who are very health-conscious. For such people this type of “fasting” has no religious or spiritual meaning at all. They engage in these practices because they believe that these things will have a positive effect on their health.

When we are talking in this secular context, without a focus on seeking to draw close to God, then **I am perfectly comfortable to refer to these practices as “fasting”**. So for people who engage in these

practices, I fully accept the terms **a water fast** and **intermittent fasting**. In a non-spiritual context I see no need to place these terms in quotation marks (something I have done in this article up to now, to avoid misunderstanding). People who do these things view themselves as fasting, and that's fine in a non-spiritual context.

For me it's the same as how we speak about "days". Religiously we reckon days from sunset to sunset. But in our personal lives none of us follow that correct way of reckoning days. In our own lives we reckon days from midnight to midnight. So we speak about seeing someone on Monday evening at 8:00 p.m., though technically that is already a part of Tuesday, because it is after sunset. But nobody would call Monday evening 8:00 p.m. "Tuesday". So likewise, when totally secular people want to call eating only a very small amount of food, or drinking some liquids "fasting", then I am totally comfortable with that, even though I know that technically they aren't really fasting. In this context I see no reason to argue about words, because it doesn't affect how I speak about fasting in a religious context.

Now the health benefits of not eating for a certain length of time have been demonstrated over and over in medically controlled studies. Fasting people to resolve serious health issues is a form of therapy that is used by a number of medical doctors. There is a vast amount of medical literature available on the subject of fasting. Websites that provide such medical research articles include **scholar.google.com** and **researchgate.net** and **PubMed**. And then there are numerous videos on **Youtube** by qualified medical doctors that deal with the subject of fasting.

There are considerable differences amongst people who fast for health reasons. And that's fine.
For **intermittent fasting** people restrict their food intake to "an eating window". So every day people will eat all their food in a period from 4-8 hours, and then fast for a period from 16-20 hours. The idea is to limit the glycogen in the blood, in order to promote fat burning.

Personally I don't care for intermittent fasting on any kind of regular schedule. It is certainly helping many people to control their weight. And that's fine. But it is not for me.

Then there are water fasts, where people don't eat any solid foods for one or more days. But they do drink liquids during their water fasts. Some people only drink water during such fasts, while others drink watery vegetable soups or bouillon. Some also take mineral salts and electrolytes during such water fasts. Some decide on eating a very small number of calories every day of their water fasts. There is great variety amongst those people who engage in water fasts.

Personally I like doing water fasts.

My own history with total fasting (no eating and no drinking) goes back almost 60 years. My experience with water fasting goes back less than 5 years. Now I have had pain-free arthritis for almost 30 years. And I have experienced time and again that my joints always feel better after a fast. And that is true for both total fasts and water fasts.

From a health point of view, the benefits for me from a water fast are the same as the health benefits from a spiritual fast. But there is a very noticeable difference in how I feel during a total fast for spiritual reasons and a water fast for health reasons. Here is how these different fasts have affected me.

I have in the past repeatedly done **total fasts for spiritual reasons** (no drinking) of five days. The five-day fasts started in 1978 in response to Mr. Armstrong fasting twice for five days, and saying that **he had set us ministers an example**. So that made me feel obligated to also fast for five days, since at that time I was less than half of Mr. Armstrong's age.

On the first two days of such fasts I usually feel fine and can perform all my usual daily activities. But by about days three or four I am struggling to concentrate for any length of time. That's also the time when I frequently experience some difficulties with sleeping. My body has no water that it is willing to shed, for the purpose of excreting toxins that have been released into the bloodstream, and that makes me somewhat listless. Also my body shuts down all sweating, to conserve water. That has made such fasts more stressful in the summer, when I am not able to sweat. For day five I am then really just "toughing it out", and lying down at every opportunity. It becomes difficult to concentrate in praying. My body is clearly very low on fluids.

This is the type of fast that amounts to "**afflicting our souls**". Afflicting our souls implies that we experience some difficulties, otherwise there is no afflicting.

On the other hand, I have also done **water fasts** of up to 15 days, during which I only ingested as much water as I felt like drinking. These water fasts I have done for health reasons. In the instance of the 15-day water fast my one leg below the knee had swelled up a lot from one day to the next. The possibility was that it could have been a blood clot, although it could also have been something far less serious than a clot. I don't know, but I felt that I should do a longer water fast to deal not only with the painful swollen leg, but also deal with some of the very likely visceral fat in my body.

I mention this to show that I wasn't doing the water fast for 15 days to somehow show how long I could do a water fast. I was doing it to deal with what I perceived to be a very serious threat to my health. And yes, the swelling in my leg disappeared completely in the first few days of that water fast.

Now here is the point: Throughout the entire 15-day water fast I felt fine. No headaches, and no disrupted sleep patterns, and no feelings of hunger at any time. The ability to focus mentally was not adversely affected in any way throughout those 15 days. Thinking about food was only in the mind. But my body wasn't asking for food at any time. My body was not producing the hunger hormone ghrelin. None of the water fasts I have done, including that longer one have been stressful to me, except for feeling quite low on energy.

Water fasts **don't really "afflict our souls"**. They are not really that difficult. They don't cause discomfort, except perhaps for people who are totally unaccustomed to any type of fasting. The most notable thing for me was that I had less energy than usual, and that strenuous efforts during the water fast easily made me light-headed, but without feeling any real discomfort.

I certainly intend to continue doing occasional water fasts, though not necessarily exceeding ten days. I know that such water fasts greatly benefit both my arthritis and my general well-being.

Now does this mean that I endorse long-term water fasting?

No, absolutely not!

I very emphatically do not endorse or recommend any kind of fasting that is longer than one day!

I have no idea how old you are, what your personal health is like, if you are suffering any major health problems, etc. While many people may cope very easily with a fast of longer than two days, there are also other people, who, because of their personal health circumstances, could die or experience severe adverse reactions in response to trying to do a longer fast of two or three days or more.

Well, you might ask, then what are you doing in this article, with telling us about all the potential good benefits that both religious fasts and water fasts can achieve.

What I am doing is **providing you with information**.

I am trying to inform you, but without endorsing or recommending, about the effects fasting can have on our bodies. I have also given you websites that make available medical research into water fasting and total fasting, for you to do your own research.

Understand something:

You should never fast because someone has recommended that you fast!

Anyone who fasts because someone else has recommended that they should fast, is fasting for the wrong reason. Someone may recommend that we should fast for some reason, and that's fine. But we then have a responsibility to evaluate all the information that is available to us, to then reach our own conclusion, whether or not we should actually fast. And if we then decide to fast, we should have a clear reason in our own minds for doing that fast. This is true for religious fasts and also for health fasts. Always have a clear purpose in mind.

And people who are not accustomed to fasting should seriously consider having medical supervision before engaging in any lengthy fasting. We are a physically sick society, and for many people lengthy fasting could entail serious risks. Therefore such people should seek medical advice before entering into serious lengthy fasting.

Let's summarize what we have discussed.

IN CONCLUSION

1) The only fast that is commanded in the Bible is for the Day of Atonement. That fast refers to no eating and no drinking for one whole day.

2) The expression “to afflict our souls” refers specifically to not drinking any liquids during our fast.

3) Whenever fasting or a fast is referred to in the Bible, it always means that people will neither eat nor drink anything.

4) Whenever someone either eats small quantities of food or drinks some liquids, as in Daniel’s case, then such an occasion cannot be called “a fast”.

5) Fasting is one way we can humble ourselves before God. Fasting is a means for drawing close to God.

6) However, fasting is not the only way we can humble ourselves before God. As we see with Daniel, doing something less than a total fast was also accepted by God as Daniel “chastening himself” to draw close to God. The key is to recognize that God accepts every genuine effort we make to draw close to God, whether it is fasting, or whether it is something else.

7) When people, who struggle to do a complete fast, want to draw close to God by in some way restricting their food intake, then **it is totally up to them to decide** whatever restrictions they will impose on themselves during a time when they seek to draw close to God. **They will not be fasting**, but that doesn’t prevent them from drawing close to God. Their health and their physical conditions may impose certain limitations on them. We must always operate within the boundaries of what we are able to do.

8) For any fast, be it a religious fast or be it a water fast, we must always have **a clear purpose** in mind. It’s no good to reason, as I have sometimes done in the past: since I haven’t fasted for quite a while, I now really ought to do a fast. That’s not a good reason for fasting.

For every **spiritual fast** (no food, no drink) the purpose must always be **to humble ourselves** before God. In addition our purpose can also be to seek a better understanding of God’s truth, to seek God’s help and protection, and to seek God’s guidance in decisions we have to make. See also Isaiah 58:6-7 for more purposes for a spiritual fast.

For **water fasts** some purposes could be to seek to lose some weight, to eliminate toxins from our bodies, to deal with specific health issues, and to slow down our aging process.

9) Regarding spiritual fasts, we need to make sure that we don’t fast for selfish reasons. And religious fasts should not be seen as a ritual.

10) While there is no clear commandment to fast (other than on Atonement), it is clear that **God expects**

us to voluntarily fast. God expects us to determine when to fast, and how long to fast. And here some of us, because of health circumstances, will have to deal with greater limitations than some other people. Fasting is not a competition, where we have to fast just as much as someone else. Fasting is really very individual.

11) When we do a water fast, it is basically to reap some or other health benefit. That is the main purpose in most cases of water fasting. However, **a water fast could also be for spiritual purposes** for someone who cannot really cope with a fast of no eating and no drinking. In those cases it should not be called “a fast”. But it will be an effort of the people doing the water fast to humble themselves and to chasten themselves, seeking to draw close to God. God is aware of their specific circumstances, and God will recognize the effort which those people will put out.

12) I do not recommend that anyone does any fast longer than one day, because I have no idea whatsoever regarding your personal health circumstances. Without that knowledge I cannot possibly make any recommendations. I recognize that fasting for any length of time could be very dangerous for certain people. Furthermore, you should never do a fast based on someone’s recommendation.

I have provided information for you to enable you to do your own search for additional information. Then the only reason you decide to do a fast, however long you decide, should be that **you have reached your own conclusion** that for a specific reason you want to do a fast. Other people’s recommendations should never determine what we do with our lives. We can listen to and evaluate recommendations people make, but ultimately **we must always convince ourselves** that we want to do something.

13) We should also recognize that the closer we are to God through regular meaningful prayers and serious Bible study, the less is the need for a spiritual fast. Fasting is not a ritual. **Fasting is a tool** to draw close to God, so that we can then understand God’s will and God’s mind more fully.

When we recognize that we are close to God, because God is clearly giving us a greater understanding as we go along, then we are somewhat in the position of the apostles during Christ’s ministry, and to a small degree that decreases **the need for the frequency** of fasting. Not the need for fasting, but the need for how often we should fast.

The less we regularly pray and study, the greater is the need for frequent fasting, though typically in that situation we don’t fast at all. And while those who seriously study and pray on a regular basis may need to fast less often, typically those are the people who in practice in many cases fast more often. Those who need it more fast less, and those who need it less fast more, is the way it typically goes. But always keep in mind that fasting is not an end in itself; it is only a tool towards a goal.

And that’s about it.

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