

Fasting

Part 2

Introduction

In the first part of this study, we looked at the history of fasting in the Bible and discussed some of the reasons Christians and Jews have fasted through the ages. In this part, we will continue to look at additional reasons.

Our Study

In Times of National Crisis

The story of Queen Esther is another illustration of the people's fasting during times of national crisis. Queen Esther was the Jewish wife of King Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces, stretching from India to the Upper Nile. During the king's reign, he elevated one of his officials, Haman, to a high position. Haman hated the Jews and through trickery he persuaded the king to decree that the Jews living in the provinces be destroyed.

Mordecai, a Jew who had previously discovered a conspiracy against the king, was Esther's adopted father. Mordecai sent word to Esther about everything that was happening and urged her to go into the king's presence and beg for mercy.

The Scripture: Esther 4:11-12

"[Esther said] 'Any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned will be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life.'"

1. What was the problem? _____

2. What was the exception? _____

Mordecai reminded Esther that if the edict were carried out, she and her family would perish as well.

The Scripture: Esther 4:15-16

"Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 'Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me...for three days, night or day. I and my maid will fast as you do. When this is done I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.'"

3. What was Esther's response? _____

Esther was allowed to appear before the king. She invited him and Haman to two banquets. At the second banquet the king told Esther to make her request.

The Scripture: Esther 7:3-4

"Grant me my life - this is my petition. And spare my people - this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation."

4. What was Esther's request? _____

Fortunately for the Jews, the story ends happily. Haman was hanged for his crimes and the Jews were allowed to protect themselves.

The Scripture: Esther 10:3

"Mordecai the Jew was [made] second in rank to King Xerxes, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people."

5. How was Mordecai honored? _____

For Sorrow, Grief, and Mourning

The Scripture: Nehemiah 1:1-3

"The words of Nehemiah of Hacaliah:... 'Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.'"

6. What was the condition of those who survived the exile? _____

The Scripture: Nehemiah 1:4

"When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven."

7. What did Nehemiah do? _____

The result of Nehemiah's actions resulted in his being sent back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls.

The Bible relates many other occasions for fasting in times of personal sorrow and grief. Jacob fasted when he believed that Joseph was dead, and the Psalms report times of David's fasting in his sorrow.

But fasting was not just for times of crisis. It was also a regular practice among the religious Jews.

The Scripture: Matthew 9:14-15

"John's disciples came and asked Him, 'How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but our disciples do not fast?' Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, then they will fast.'"

8. What was John's disciple's question? _____

9. What was Jesus' response? _____

Jesus was referring to Himself as the bridegroom and talked of a time in the future when He would be taken away from them. Then in their sorrow they would fast.

Unacceptable Fasting

Not all fasting is acceptable as Jesus pointed out.

The Scripture: Luke 18:11-12

"The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself... 'I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'"

10. How often did the Pharisee say he fasted? _____

Jesus assumed His followers would fast, but not for show as this Pharisee did. He even gave them guidelines for fasting.

The Scripture: Matthew 6:16-17

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head (a regular practice) and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your father, who is unseen; and your Father who sees what is in secret, will reward you."

11. How did Jesus say His followers should fast? _____

We can assume that as a religious Jew, Jesus fasted regularly, although there is only one recorded time - during His temptation.

Not everyone, including people with some physical conditions, should fast. It is a good idea to consult a doctor before fasting. In Isaiah 58, the Lord speaks of another kind of fast.

The Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-2 (Living Bible)

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord speaks His complaints against His people.

"Shout with the voice of the trumpet blast; tell my people of their sins. Yet they act so pious! They come to the temple every day and are so delighted to hear the teaching of my laws - just as though they would obey them - just as though they don't despise the commandments of their God! How anxious they are to worship correctly; oh, how they love the Temple service!"

12. What was God's complaint? _____

The Scripture: Isaiah 58:3 (Living Bible)

"'We have fasted before you,' they say. 'Why aren't you impressed? Why don't you see our sacrifices? Why don't you hear our prayers? We have done much penance, and you don't even notice it.' I'll tell you why! Because you are living in evil pleasure even while you are fasting, and you keep right on oppressing your workers."

13. What was the people's response? _____

14. How did God answer? _____

The Scripture: Isaiah 58:4-5 (Living Bible)

"What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. Is this what I want - this doing of penance and bowing like reeds in the wind and putting on sackcloth and covering yourself with ashes? Is this what you call fasting?"

15. How did God describe their fasting? _____

The Scripture: Isaiah 58:6-7 (Living Bible)

"No, the kind of fast I want is that you stop oppressing those who work for you and treat them fairly and give them what they earn. I want you to share your food with the hungry and bring right into your own homes those who are helpless, poor, and destitute. Clothe those who are cold and don't hide from relatives who need your help."

16. How does God describe His chosen fast? _____

The Scripture: Isaiah 58:8 (Living Bible)

"If you do these things, God will shed His own glorious light upon you. He will heal you; your godliness will lead you forward and goodness will be a shield before you, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind."

17. What would be the people's reward if they obeyed His chosen fast? _____

The Scripture: Isaiah 58:9-10 (Living Bible)

"Then when you call, the Lord will answer...All you need to do is to stop oppressing the weak, and to stop making false accusations and spreading vicious rumors! Feed the hungry! Help those in trouble! Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you shall be as bright as day."

18. What else would be their reward? _____

The Scripture: Isaiah 58:11-12 (Living Bible)

"The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy you in all good things and keep you healthy too; and you will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. Your sons will rebuild the long-deserted ruins of your cities and you will be known as 'The people who rebuild their walls and cities.'"

19. How does the Lord continue? _____

Through this chapter in Isaiah we see that true fasting is much more than going without food and humbling oneself. It is ending the urge to fight and oppress others and going through the mechanical motions of fasting. It is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and taking care of the helpless, poor, and desperate.

When God's people do these things, God will truly reward them - with good health, restoration, guidance and safety.

The Answers

1. Anyone who approached the king without being summoned would be put to death.
2. For the king to extend his gold scepter and spare his life
3. She told Mordecai to have all the Jews fast for her three days and three nights. She and her maids would also fast. After that time, she would go to the king, and if she perished, she perished.
4. That the king would save her and her people
5. He was made second in command to the king and held in high esteem by his fellow Jews.
6. They were in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem's walls were broken down and burned.
7. He wept and fasted and prayed.
8. "Why don't your disciples fast?"
9. How could the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he was with them? When the time came that the bridegroom was taken away from them, then they would fast.
10. Twice a week
11. In secret and only before God
12. The people only sought Him externally, as if they were a righteous nation and didn't forsake His ways. They delighted in "pretending" to come near to God.
13. God did not acknowledge their fasting.
14. When they should have been fasting and grieving for their sins, they were living in evil pleasure, and continuing to oppress their workers.
15. As fighting and quarreling. Such acts would not cause God to hear them. Their fast was entirely mechanical rather than a humbling of themselves and a pretense of a condition they did not have.
16. To stop oppressing those who worked for them and pay them fairly; to share their food with the hungry and bring those who are helpless, poor and destitute into their homes; to clothe those who were cold and not to hide from relatives who needed their help.
17. They would be healed and restored to a new life; their goodness would lead them forward; goodness would be a shield before them and the glory of the Lord would protect them from behind.
18. When they called on the Lord, He would answer; if they stopped oppressing others, making false accusations, feeding the hungry and satisfying the needs of those in trouble, then their light would shine out in the darkness and their darkness would be as bright as day.
19. He would continually guide them and satisfy them in all good things; He would make them healthy. They would be like a well-watered garden. They would rebuild the ancient ruins and be known as "The People Who Rebuild Their Walls and cities."

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