

Fasting

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Every year Muslims in the world fast in a particular way in the month of Ramadan. On such occasions they ask their Christian neighbours about their way of fasting. According to Islamic teaching all people of God, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus fasted. Thus seeing no special fasting celebration among Christians, some friends ask: "Why do Christians not fast as Jesus and Moses did?" (Matthew 4:2; Exodus 24:28)

Many Christians do fast but they do not fast as Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan nor do they display it. Some fast every year for 40 days, to commemorate the occasion of the beginning of Jesus' ministry and to prepare for the celebration of his suffering and resurrection. To some this fast is known as "Lent". However this custom is not a law given by God nor is there any record that Jesus himself fasted for 40 days every year, only that he did so once. There is no record of Jesus prescribing such a fast for his followers. So every Christian is free to establish his, or her, own custom of fasting. Some observe Lent while others fast in other ways and at other times.

What Jesus did teach is that we should not fast with the desire to be seen and honoured by others, but that we should fast for the sake of God alone. The Bible

provides many examples of fasting in order to give all our attention to prayer, through which to overcome temptation, turn away from wickedness and injustice, and intercede for others.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew words for fasting are *sum* (verb) and *som* (noun). Muslims use the same terms, *Saum* or *Sum* in Arabic, for fasting. Fasting in the Bible is an expression of preparation for new ventures, of penitence and intercession and prayer seeking God's aid (1Samuel 31:13; 1Kings 21:27; 2Samuel 12:16ff). In the past fasting was undertaken for personal reasons (Psalm 25:13), as a national act in the face of calamity (Joel 2:15), or as a periodic liturgical observance (Zech. 8:19).

Fasting normally involves abstinence from food to show dependence on God and submission to his will. The great fast in the Old Testament times was that of the Day of atonement (Lev. 16:29-34), which Muslims also observed in the early days at Madina before the observance of the whole month of fasting was decreed. Some centuries before Jesus, four other annual fasts began to be observed (Zech. 8:19). In addition to these, in the same way that Muslims fast during other days that are not obligatory, the people of Israel also had occasional fasts. At one time the custom became so abused that people started to think that fasting would automatically gain a person a hearing from God. However, prophets spoke against such thinking declaring that their fasting was in vain (Isaiah 58:5-12; Jeramiah 14:11,12; Zech. 7).

In reference to the way people were fasting, several centuries before Jesus, God gave a very thought provoking message through the Prophet Isaiah. He said that if fasting was to be of value, it must be accompanied by compassion and a concern for justice. Those words of instruction remain true today:

"For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted', they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and unite the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here I am. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the need of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail." (Isaiah 58 :2 - 11)

In the New Testament the usual Greek words for fasting are *nesteuo* (verb), *nesteia* and *nestis* (nouns). In Acts 27:21,33 the words *asitia* and *asitos* (without food) are also used. Fasting with prayer and the breaking of bread was regularly observed. Church leaders fasted when choosing missionaries and elders (Acts 9:9; 13:2,3; 14:23).

In line with such words, Jesus accepted fasting as natural discipline. The gospel mentions him as fasting before the start of his ministry, similar to the action of Moses and Elijah (Matthew 4:2; Exodus 24:28; 1 King 19:8). During his ministry it seems that his companions or disciples did not often fast, in contrast to the disciples of John the Baptist and those of the Pharisees (Mark 2:18-19). The reason was that they were in celebration because the Messiah, as the bridegroom, was still with them. However, Jesus did mention that after his departure and until

his return they would fast (Matt. 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39).

Seeing how people fasted, Jesus advised:

“When you fast, do not look sombre 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 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 done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:16-18).

The Christian Scriptures can tell you more about the subject of fasting. If you would like a copy in the English language, please contact us*.

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