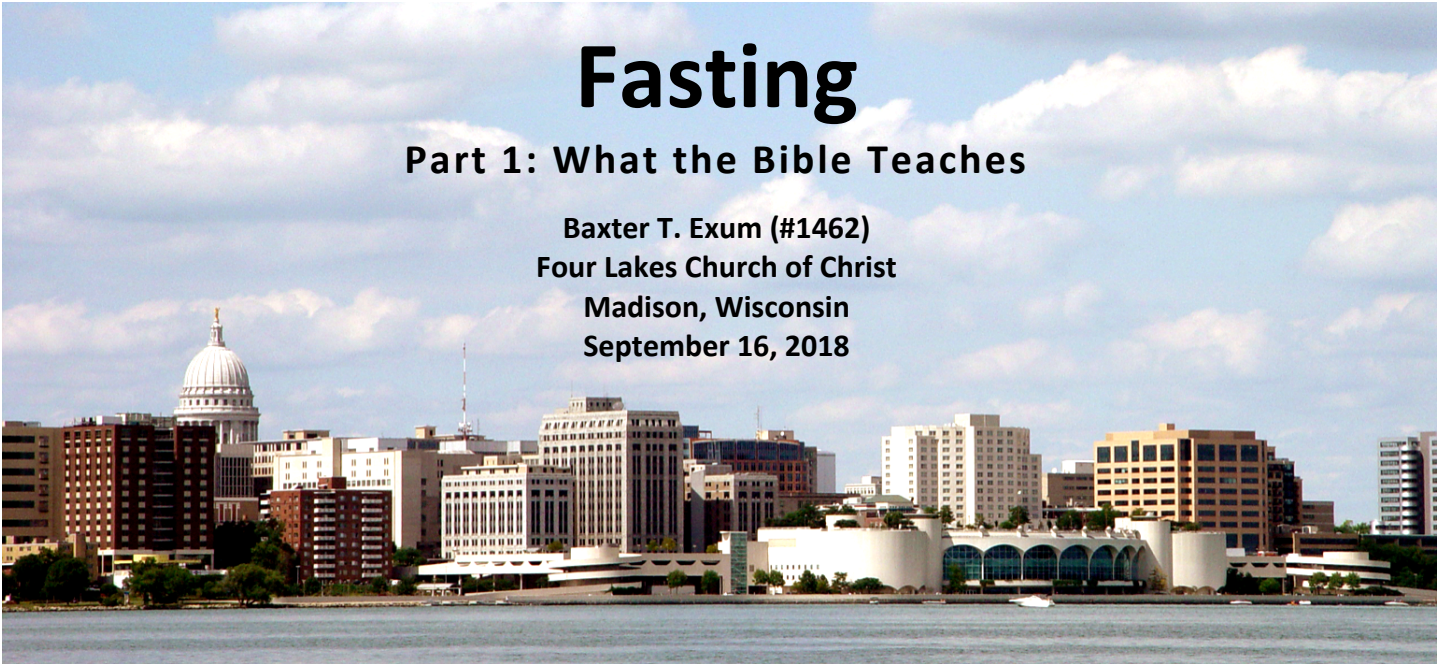


Fasting

Part 1: What the Bible Teaches

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This morning I'd like for us to study a spiritual discipline that has been somewhat neglected in recent times, and yet in another sense, many of us do it without even knowing that we're doing it. I wonder how many of us ever eat breakfast from time to time. The word "breakfast," of course, goes back many years and literally refers to a meal we eat that breaks a fast. When we eat breakfast, then, we are breaking our fast. A fast, of course, is the practice of not eating food for some period of time. When we eat breakfast, therefore, we are eating again after a time of not eating. Unless you are a teenager or a newborn, chances are, you do not eat all night long. And so all of us fast in some way or another, whether we realize it or not.

It has been a number of years since I have preached on this topic (the last time was in March of 2015), but we know that fasting has been in the news again in the very recent past. Most of us were absolutely horrified to hear the news out of Reedsburg just a few weeks ago, where a father walked into the police station over there to report the death of his son. Officers responded to the home and forced their way in, as the doors were apparently padlocked from the inside. Once inside they found a 15-year old young man "emaciated and deceased." According to the police report, they also found an 11-year old, also "extremely emaciated, but alive." They then found this man's wife in a similar condition. The father described himself as a minister of some kind and told police that he and his family had started a religious fast back on July 19, 2018, and had not eaten since that time. They were fasting for forty days, and there was no food in the apartment. The 11-year old was taken into protective custody and transported to UW's Children's Hospital here in Madison. Both parents were arrested and charged with child neglect and causing the death of a child. We can hardly imagine doing something like that to our children.

On the other hand, we have also seen in the news over the past few weeks, reports of various recent studies, linking other forms of fasting to longevity (obviously very much different from the abuse we saw out in Reedsburg). The National Institute on Aging along with researchers from here at UW Madison just recently discovered in their research that increasing the time between meals improved the overall health of male mice and lengthened their lives compared to mice that ate more frequently. They had two sets of cages. One group of mice had constant access to food, and the others were fed at greater intervals. Other studies have suggested the same thing, but this study was somewhat different because the health benefits were seen regardless of what the mice ate or how many calories they consumed. And personally, I am liking that! I love the idea of pretty much eating whatever I want, as long as I space my meals out a bit! Of course, there is much

more research to be done - including making the leap from mice to humans - but this is just the latest in many studies that have come out in just the last few months.

We are not here to study the news, though! We are here to study God's word. What does the word actually tell us about the practice of going without food for some kind of spiritual reason? I am thankful that Trae found so many songs that apply so well to our study this morning! My only request was that we not sing "All Things are Ready, Come to the Feast" as a song after this lesson. But we were able to sing about Jesus "fasting alone in the desert," which is great. But, we actually have a wide variety of scenarios where people in the Bible (in the Old Testament and in the New) went without food or without certain kinds of food for varying lengths of time.

Before we even get to these references, though, there is something that surprises me every time we study this, and that is: The Bible places a huge emphasis on food in the lives of God's people. We think back, in fact, to the very beginning, to the Garden of Eden. We know that God blessed Adam and Eve by saying, "**From any tree of the garden you may eat freely**" (Genesis 2:16). So, food is one of the first blessings that God gave to us. However, almost immediately, God gave the very first rule against doing something when he immediately says, "**But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat**" (Genesis 2:17). Basically, then, God's first and only prohibition in the Garden of Eden is directly connected to food and to eating. So, there is one rule in the garden, and the rule is, "Do not eat this" [paraphrased]. To me, that is interesting. Pleasing God in the Garden Eden was tied to eating (or not eating) a particular kind of food. And just talking about this makes think of Rocky Rococo's here in Madison. If you've been there, then you know that their vegetarian specialty pizza is the "Garden of Eatin'." Nevertheless, the only real rule in the Garden of Eden was on food. And then, from that point on, we see many restrictions on food, especially in the Law of Moses – only collect enough manna for the day, don't eat pork, don't eat shellfish, don't eat an animal that has died of natural causes, and so on. What and how we eat, therefore, has often been important to God. And throughout the Bible, we do see a number of references to "**fasting**," the practice of not eating for some period of time for various reasons.

This morning, then, instead of basing our thoughts on one paragraph of scripture (as we normally try to do), we'll need to just briefly refer to many passages, and I will put the references on the wall up here. Feel free to take a picture or write these down, but as you see the passages, I would suggest that you go ahead and look at each one, beating me to the next one, and that will help us to use our time more effectively. So, today I want us to look at the Old and the New, and then next Sunday morning I'd like to share some very personal lessons that I have learned over the past year - both good and bad, the positives and the dangers of fasting.

I. So, let's get started by looking the OLD TESTAMENT.

What does the Old Testament teach us about fasting? Every time I start looking into this, I am always surprised by two things. First of all, I am surprised that there does not appear to be a single reference to fasting at any time before the Law of Moses. Perhaps I have missed something here, and I would sincerely appreciate it if someone could correct me on this, but again, as far as I can tell, there is not a single reference or example of fasting at any time before the Law of Moses. So, we are talking about several thousand years without a single reference to abstaining from food to be pleasing to God - nothing from Adam and Eve all the way up to Moses. In fact, the first reference to voluntarily going without food does not come until almost at the very end of the book of Exodus (the same event is referred to again in Deuteronomy, so these first two passages go together). The passage in Exodus is just a passing reference, so we skip ahead to Deuteronomy (I told you I would be fast). I would encourage you to turn with me to Deuteronomy 9:15-20. This first reference to fasting goes back

to when Moses is up on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments and the people sin by making the golden calf. In summarizing what happens, Moses explains that when he comes down the mountain holding the Ten Commandments on those tablets, he sees that the people have made a golden calf, he gets angry, he smashes those tablets, and then (skipping down to verses 18-19), he explains, ***“I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke Him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the Lord was wrathful against you in order to destroy you....”*** So, we find that Moses is basically scared, and this fear causes him to fast (he does not eat), and he prays to God for forty days. In the very first reference to fasting in the Bible, then, it is not something Moses is commanded to do, but it seems to be a natural consequence of Moses’ fear. He fasts and prays, begging for God’s forgiveness on behalf of the people, and God hears his prayer. So the first surprise I had in studying this issue is that this is the first reference – there is nothing at all before the time of Moses.

Secondly, I was also surprised (again, as far as I can tell), that fasting is never actually commanded, even under the Law of Moses. I had always assumed that fasting was a requirement of the Old Law. I had always assumed that there was some verse buried deep in Leviticus or Deuteronomy that said, “Thou shalt not eat food from sunup to sundown,” on some particular day. But again, as I did the research for this morning’s lesson, I could not find a single place where God ever commanded his people (in the Law of Moses) not to eat for some religious reason.

The closest I could get to a command to fast is found in Leviticus 16:29-30. God was giving instruction for the annual Day of Atonement, and God said, ***“This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord.”*** In later years, the Jewish leaders interpreted ***“humble your souls”*** as a reference to fasting. And yet when we look at that verse very carefully, we find that fasting is not actually mentioned. It was interpreted to mean fasting, but fasting is not actually commanded here. God does not say: Do not eat food for some particular period of time.

Now, as we quickly skim over the rest of the passages in the Old Testament, we see a wide variety of situations where various people abstained from food for various reasons. In Judges 20:26, for example, the people fast in response to a humiliating national defeat. It was not specifically commanded by God, but it was the natural response of the people to the desperate situation they were in.

We find another example in 1 Samuel 1 as Hannah is tormented by the fact that she was unable to have children. The passage tells us that she ***“wept and would not eat.”*** Again, it is a reference to not eating in the Bible – not in response to a command from God, but in response to intense grief.

The next example comes in 1 Samuel 7 as the prophet Samuel leads the people in what is basically a national day of mourning to pretty much apologize to the Lord for drifting spiritually. In 1 Samuel 7:6 the Bible says, ***“They gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day and said there, ‘We have sinned against the Lord.’ And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah.”*** Again, not necessarily commanded, but fasting here was their way of demonstrating their remorse to God.

The next reference comes in the very last verse of Samuel, following the death of Saul and Jonathan, the Bible says in 1 Samuel 31:13, ***“They [the people of Israel] took their bones [the bones of Saul and Jonathan] and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.”*** In this case, fasting was the outward

expression of national grief. Even today, we know that when we are extremely sad or torn up over something, we just cannot bear to eat, and that seems to be the case here. The first king of Israel and his son had taken their own lives since they were about killed in battle. The next example is closely related to this one. One chapter over, in 2 Samuel 1, David finds out about Saul's death, and he and his men also wept and fasted as well.

The next reference is also a reference to mourning. Over in 2 Samuel 12, the child born to David and Bathsheba is about to die, and the Bible says in 2 Samuel 12:16-17 that David, **"...was unwilling and would not eat food..."** David is torn up inside and refuses to eat over the fact that his child is about to die.

For the next reference, we skip forward to 1 Kings 21 as the prophet Elijah has a special message from God to King Ahab. The message is absolutely horrific (all kinds of terrible things would happen because of Ahab's unfaithfulness), and it seems to have really scared King Ahab, and in response, King Ahab **"tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted."** God then says to Elijah, **"Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son's days."** God, therefore, seems to see Ahab's fasting a sign of humility. It wasn't commanded, but God saw it and noticed.

We have another reference in 2 Chronicles 20, in a passage we just studied a week or two ago. King Jehoshaphat receives a message that an enemy army is on the way, and in response, the Bible says in 2 Chronicles 20:3-4, **"Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord."** In this case, fasting was combined with prayer in an effort to reach out to God. It wasn't commanded by God, but it was something Jehoshaphat commanded to try to help demonstrate their humility before God.

The next few references in Ezra and Nehemiah are somewhat related. We are now on the other side of the Babylonian Captivity. As God's people are returning to Jerusalem, several fasts are proclaimed. They fast before the journey back home, asking God to be with them (Ezra 8:21-23). They also fast before conducting the investigation into the unscriptural marriages, before asking those illegally married couples to separate (Ezra 10:6). Then, in the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah is still in Babylon but he hears that those who have already returned are living without the protection of a wall. The Bible tells us in Nehemiah 1:4 that when Nehemiah hears these words, he **"sat down and wept and mourned for days,"** that he was **"fasting and praying before the God of heaven."** Then, once the wall is complete, they get together as a nation, and according to the opening verses in Nehemiah 9, **"...the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them."** They also confessed their sins and read from the book of the Law and worshiped.

We have another reference to fasting in the book of Esther. As Esther is getting up the courage to approach the king, she sends a message to all the Jews in captivity. She has Mordecai assemble all the Jews. She says, **"...fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day"** (Esther 4:16). She does the same with her own people in the palace.

We have two references to fasting in the book of Psalms, the first in Psalm 35:13-16 as King David prays for his enemies. He refers to how he **"humbled [his] soul with fasting."** He dresses in sackcloth; he bows down in humility. He seems to be doing this to show his dependence on God. God, I need you. God, you are in control. God, I depend completely on you. The other reference in Psalms comes in Psalm 69:9-12 where David refers to

facing his enemies all alone, weeping in his soul **“with fasting.”** He was going without food to demonstrate his dependence upon God.

We then have several scattered references throughout the prophets. One of the most comprehensive passages on the negative side of fasting from God’s point of view is found in Isaiah 58. Starting in verse 3, the people ask God why he doesn’t seem to care about their fasting, and God gives his answer. Starting halfway through verse 3, God says,

- Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers.***
- 4 Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.***
- You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.***
- 5 Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?***
- Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?***
- Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord?***
- 6 Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness,***
- To undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?***
- 7 Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house;***
- When you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?***

The problem with the fasting going on in ancient Israel, then, is that their hearts were not right. They were abstaining from food, trying to appear to be super spiritual, but they were ignoring the poor, they were mistreating their workers, they were abusing their slaves, they were ignoring the homeless, they were failing to give clothing to the naked. The fasting, then, was more of an irritation to God than it was a blessing. More than anything, God wanted their hearts to be right. He wanted obedience. He wanted them to share their food with the poor.

We have another reference in Jeremiah 14. This takes place in those years leading up to the Babylonian Captivity. God was fed up, and in the middle of it, God had a message for the prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 14:11-12, ***“So the Lord said to me, ‘Do not pray for the welfare of this people. When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence.’”*** So again, the people were fasting, they had the outward form of religion, they looked good on the outside, but their hearts were terrible. God, then, said that he would not listen.

We have another passing reference to fasting in Daniel 10, right after Daniel received a vision from God. He says (in Daniel 10:2-3), ***“In those days, I, Daniel, had been mourning for three entire weeks. I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all until the entire three weeks were completed.”*** Not all food, just tasty food. This is somewhat related to what I do whenever we go out for steak. I always order it with broccoli, because anything that tastes that bad must be good for me, so hopefully it cancels out the steak. But again, we see fasting as an outward sign of mourning.

We then have several references to fasting in the book of Joel. As Joel announces the coming destruction of the nation, we pick up in Joel 1:13-14 where Joel has a message from God. He speaks out and tells the priests to ***“consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly.”*** He goes on to warn about the coming judgment on the nation with the picture of a massive locust attack – it would be devastating in every possible way. He starts describing it in great detail, and then there is a pause. Notice with me, please, Joel 2:12-13, right in the middle of it,

- ¹² ***“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping and mourning;***
¹³ ***And rend [tear or rip up] your heart and not your garments.”***
Now return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil.

The message continues in verse 15 with an invitation, ***“Return to me with all your heart, ...with fasting, weeping and mourning.”***

The next reference comes in the book of Jonah. I don't know if you remember this, but the king of Nineveh actually called for a national fast. After the big fish incident, Jonah preaches, and in response, the king of Nineveh puts on sackcloth and ashes, and then he makes a proclamation, ***“Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.”*** So, the king of Nineveh takes it up a notch - he even makes the animals participate in the fast! And, of course, God sees their repentance, he sees that they have sincerely turned from their sin, and he changes his mind on destroying the people of Nineveh.

And this brings us to our last reference in the Old Testament, a passage found in Zechariah 7-8. Zechariah was preaching to those who had just returned to the Jerusalem area after coming back from the Babylonian Captivity. The people send him a message and basically ask, “What do we do now? Do we keep on fasting like we did before?” [paraphrased]. God responds in Zechariah 8:19 by explaining that those fasts from previous times should be turned into ***“joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace.”*** The idea, then, is that instead of fasting, the people were to love truth and peace.

II. We now move into the NEW TESTAMENT.

We have the prophetess Anna who at the age of 84 ***“...did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day”*** (Luke 2:37). This, of course, is in the New Testament, but it actually happens as the Law of Moses was still in effect.

The next example in chronological order is the example of Jesus fasting in the wilderness (in Matthew 4 and Luke 4). We sang about this today, didn't we? We sang about Jesus “fasting alone in the desert.” Right after his baptism, Jesus goes out into the wilderness where he does not eat for forty days. At the end of those forty days, Satan tempts Jesus and says, ***“If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”*** And Jesus answered him, ***“It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”*** We also sang about this today (Seek Ye First). Jesus, at that point, therefore, had not eaten food for about a month and a half. In some way, this seems to prepare him for what he is about to do.

The next three references actually go together (they are three accounts of the same event), but they explain a how some of John's disciples and the Pharisees came up to Jesus, and they wanted to know: Why are we fasting, but Your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus answered, ***“While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they?”*** [this is party time, this is the bachelor party] ***So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.”*** So, Jesus says that the time is coming when his disciples would fast. So, when is that? What was Jesus referring to here? Some have taken this almost as a command. Jesus, though, refers to the time of fasting as when he was taken away from them. I would ask, then, is Jesus with us today or not with us today? Are we sad here this morning because Jesus is gone? Or are

we happy because he is here? I'm happy that he's here! And that's why I've put Matthew 28:18-20 up here. Jesus promised that he would be with us always. The time of fasting, then, was most likely that time when Jesus was in the tomb. The disciples would fast on that Saturday between the crucifixion and resurrection. Of all the possibilities, that's my best guess as to what Jesus was referring to here. That doesn't tell us that fasting today is right or wrong, but that seems to be what Jesus is talking about. I would also point out that Jesus does not condemn John's disciples and the Pharisees for fasting in this passage. Instead, he seems to change the subject a little bit. By the way, he goes on to talk about how foolish it is to try to put new wine in old wineskins or to put old wine in new wineskins, and in context, he seems to be warning about the danger of trying to pour an Old Testament practice into a New Testament way of thinking. But even in this context, he does suggest that fasting is connected with some level of grief or loss - not as a religious requirement of any kind, but there are times when it is natural and appropriate.

The next passage comes in the Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew 6:16-18). We'll save more on this for next week, but to summarize this passage: Jesus puts fasting in the same category as praying and giving, and he addresses our motivation. As we pray, as we give, and as we fast, we are not to do it to be noticed. These three disciplines are primarily between us and God. Some have taken this to mean that if we fast, nobody can ever know about it. But I would point out that sometimes prayer can be public. Today we had an opening prayer that was quite public. Sometimes our giving can be known to others - I might see you put something in the basket. So it seems that it is our motivation that matters. We are not to do these things for the purpose of being noticed - it's not that nobody can ever know that we do them.

And this is illustrated in the next passage up here - Luke 18 and the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. These two men go into the temple to pray, and the Pharisee makes it very clear that he is in the habit of fasting twice a week, and he uses that as a way to brag about how righteous he is. The Lord, though, says that the Tax Collector is the one who goes home justified, because his attitude is, ***"God, be merciful to me, the sinner."*** Jesus goes on to say, of course, ***"I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."*** Remember: The Jewish people had interpreted the command to humble themselves to mean fasting. But here, it is the man who apparently did not fast who is described by Jesus as being humble!

Beyond this, we have a reference to Paul fasting in those days leading up to his conversion in Acts 9. He sees Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he does not eat or drink for three days. Ananias tells him what to do to be saved, he is baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and in Acts 9:19, the Bible tells us that only then did he ***"take food and was strengthened."*** This fasting was not commanded, but it seems to be the natural result of Saul being torn up over what he had done. He had persecuted the Lord by persecuting his church. Some have suggested that Saul was saved right there on the road when he first saw the Lord, but that is definitely not the case. He is overwhelmed with the enormity of his sin (even to the point of not eating), and he only eats after his sins are forgiven at the point of baptism.

The next reference comes in Acts 13 as the church in Antioch prepares to send out Barnabas and Saul on their First Missionary Journey. Starting in Acts 13:2, the Bible says, ***"While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."*** Like those passages we saw in the Old Testament, it seems that fasting here is a way to express their dependence on God as they go to God in prayer, asking for God's blessing on what they are about to do. I would also point out that this must have been somewhat public. This is something they somehow did together as a congregation, somehow without violating what Jesus said in Matthew 6.

And then, as far as I can tell, the last real reference to fasting in the Bible is found in the next chapter, in Acts 14:23. Within that three-year period of the First Missionary Journey, Paul and Barnabas establish a number of congregations, and on their way back out, they appoint elders in those brand new congregations. Notice, please, Acts 14:23, ***“When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*** So again, there is a connection between prayer and fasting, and in both cases, this seems to be something they did together as a group - they prayed and fasted and sent out missionaries, and they prayed and fasted and appointed elders. And again, they seem to have done this somewhat publicly, as a group, without violating what Jesus warned about in Matthew 6.

And this, as far as I can tell, is the last reference to fasting in the New Testament. We have nothing in the letters of Paul, nothing in the letters from the other inspired writers, and nothing in the book of Revelation - no commands to fast, no references to fasting, no schedule for fasting, and no punishment for not fasting.

Conclusion:

As we wrap up this overview, I would close with the reminder that fasting doesn't really seem to be commanded (even in the Old Testament); instead, in the Old and in the New, it seems to be something that is done voluntarily:

- Sometimes as a way of demonstrating reverence or fear of God.
- Sometimes as a way of showing remorse and regret over sin.
- Sometimes as a way of mourning over some kind of loss.
- Sometimes in response to a national tragedy, such as a devastating defeat in battle.
- And sometimes simply as a way of showing humility before the Lord.

Again, next week, if the Lord wills, I hope we can come back together and study some very practical lessons as we look at some of benefits as well as some of the dangers. I would especially love to hear your questions on this issue between now and next Sunday.

As we close, we want to give everybody here an opportunity to get right with God, to obey the gospel (if you are not already a Christian), or to approach God in prayer, asking for forgiveness (if you are already a Christian). For those who are outside of Christ, the Bible teaches that all people must repent and be baptized. We do this to imitate the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins. If you have any questions, let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: furlakeschurch@gmail.com

FASTING?

Old Testament

Exodus 34:28
Deuteronomy 9:15-20
Leviticus 16:29-30
Judges 20:26
1 Samuel 1:1-18
1 Samuel 7:5-6
1 Samuel 31:13

2 Samuel 1:11-12
2 Samuel 12:15-23
1 Kings 21:17-29
2 Chronicles 20:1-4
Ezra 8:21-23, 10:6
Nehemiah 1:1-11, 9:1-2
Esther 4:13-17

Psalms 35:13-16
Psalm 69:9-12
Isaiah 58:3-7
Jeremiah 14:10-12
Daniel 10:2-3
Joel 1:13-14;
2:12-13,15
Jonah 3:1-10
Zechariah 7-8



FASTING?

New Testament

Luke 2:36-38
Luke 4:1-4; Matthew 4:1-4
Matthew 9:14-17
Mark 2:18-22
Luke 5:33-39
Matthew 28:18-20

Matthew 6:16-18
Luke 18:9-14
Acts 9:1-19
Acts 13:1-3
Acts 14:23

