

# ZOOM STUDY: IMPORTANT BIBLICAL THEMES

## FASTING

1.) In what contexts does the average person think of fasting?

2.) How did God never intend fasting to be used? How does this demonstrate a complete misunderstanding of true godliness?

**Isaiah 58:3-5** “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 quarreling 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?”

**Matthew 6:16-18** “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 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.”

**Luke 18:14** “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’”

3.) What were the Israelites commanded to do on the Day of Atonement? What spiritual purpose would this serve?

**Leviticus 16:29-31** This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month [Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement] you must deny yourselves [fast] and not do any work—whether native-born or an alien living among you— because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a sabbath of rest, and you must deny yourselves [fast]; it is a lasting ordinance.”

4.) Let’s look at some other examples of fasting in Scripture and note its spiritual and contextual functions:

**Joel 1:4, 6, 14** What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten. [...] A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. [...] Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.

**Jonah 3:4-5** On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

**Esther 4:1,3** When Mordecai learned of all that had been done [with Haman’s decree to annihilate the Jews], he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ...In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

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**Zechariah 8:19** This is what the LORD Almighty says: “The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah.”

- What events in our national history might be appropriate for us to fast?

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**2 Samuel 12:16-17,22** David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. ...[When asked about this after the boy died David] answered, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, ‘Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.’”

**Ezra 10:6** While [Ezra] was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.

**Acts 9:9** For three days [Paul] was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

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**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. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids 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.”

**Ezra 8:21-23** There, by the Ahava Canal, I [Ezra] proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, “The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.” So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

**Acts 13:2-3** While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

**Acts 14:23** Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

5.) Jesus kept the Old Testament law perfectly, so he fasted annually on the Day of Atonement. Otherwise, we only have one other concrete mention made of Jesus' fasting—when he fasted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights (cf. Matt. 4:2). What was unique about that fast—it's surrounding circumstances and purpose?

6.) On at least one occasion Jesus was questioned and criticized for not fasting as John's disciples and the Pharisees did. How are we to understand his reply? Why do we maintain that while it has its place when used appropriately and spiritually, fasting is adiaphora and not mandated in the New Testament church?

**Matthew 9:14-17** Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your 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. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

7.) Is there any advantage to fasting before Communion, as many Christians did in the past?

*Closing Prayer: Humble Savior, we adore you for bearing our transgressions and for perfectly trusting your Father through all. Cause us to properly mourn over our sins, to depend on you for relief and forgiveness, and to look to you and your Spirit for guidance and every blessing. Amen.*