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When You Fast, Put Oil on Your Head and Wash Your Face

Matthew 6: 16-18

When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face DIG: What fasts do Jews remember to this very day? What is the one supreme fast? On what days did the Pharisees and Torah-teachers fast? What was significant about those days? How did they fast? Why did the Lord rebuke them for their wrong motives? What was their reward? In contrast to them, how are Jesus' disciples supposed to fast?

REFLECT: What examples do we have of fasting in the Scriptures? Are we commanded to fast? If we choose to do so, what benefit is there for us when we fast? What is fasting an expression of? How are we supposed to look when we fast? Why? Who sees our fasting? How do we receive our reward?

In His ninth example of true righteousness, Yeshua teaches about fasting and how the Torah differed from pharisaic Judaism. There are many examples of the righteous of the TaNaKh **fasting**. Moshe, Samson, Samuel, Hannah, David, Elijah, Ezra, **Nehemiah, Esther, Dani'el** and many others **fasted**. And the B'rit Chadashah tells us of the **fasting** of Anna, John the Baptizer and his disciples, Yeshua (**Matthew 4:2**), Rabbi Sha'ul, believers at Antioch (**Acts 13:3**), and numerous others. We know that many of the early church Fathers **fasted**, and that Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitefield and many other faithful believers also **fasted**.

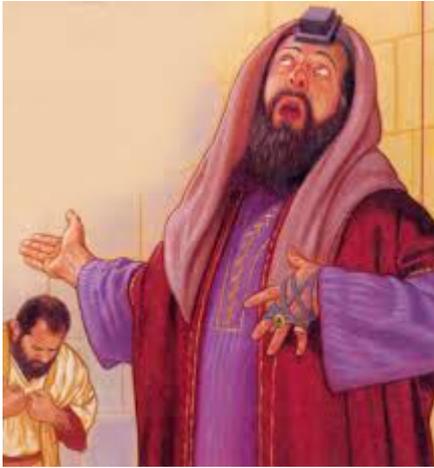
Zechariah mentions four such **fasts** that were observed during **his** generation and continue down to today. **This is what ADONAI, the LORD of heaven's angelic armies** says: **The fast days of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months are to become times of joy, gladness and cheer for the house of Y'hudah. Therefore, love truth and peace (Zechariah 8:19 CJB).** The **fast of the fourth month** (the 9th of Tammuz/July) recalls the breach of the walls of Jerusalem in 586 BC. **The fifth month's fast** (the 9th of Av/August) recalls many tragedies that have befallen Isra'el, especially the destruction of both the first and second Temples on



this very day. The **fast of the seventh month** (the Fast of Gedaliah/September) marks the assassination of the last king of the first Temple period. The **fast of the tenth month** (the 10th of Tevet/January) commemorates the tragic time when the Babylonians set the siege against Jerusalem.

In addition to these traditional **fasts** in Judaism, there is one supreme **fast** on Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement. Some may argue that even this is not a directly commanded fast, yet the similarity of language in **Leviticus** and **Isaiah** leads to this natural connection. The same Hebrew word for **humble your soul**, or *oni* in **Leviticus 23:27** is used specifically of **fasting** in **Isaiah 58:5**, making Yom Kippur as the greatest fast of the spiritual year.⁵⁶⁸

The rabbis taught that in order for it to be a proper fast, it needed to be continued from one sundown until after the next, when the stars appeared, and for about twenty-six hours the most rigid abstinence from all food and drink was required.⁵⁶⁹ The Pharisees made a spectacle of **fasting** twice a week on Monday and Thursday, in addition to the **fasts** above (**to see link click Cq - Jesus Questioned About Fasting**). They claimed those days were chosen because they were the days Moses made the two separate trips to receive the tablets of Commandments from **God** on Mount Sinai. But, not so coincidentally, those just happened to be major Jewish market days, when the towns were crowded with farmers, merchants, and shoppers. Thus they were two days where theatrical **fasting** would have the largest audiences. Those **fasting** would wear old clothes, sometimes purposely torn and soiled, dishevel their hair, cover themselves with dirt and ashes, and even use makeup in order to look pale and sickly. So, they let the world know that they were **fasting** by their sanctimonious behavior. What a show. But, when the heart is not right, **fasting** is a sham and a mockery. It is, therefore, no surprise that the **Messiah** rebuked the Pharisees for their wrong motives.⁵⁷⁰



There is no commandment in the New Covenant to **fast**. While **fasting** is optional, many believers find that **fasts** keep them connected with the Covenant people by observing them. As a result, because **God** does not command **fasting**, it is not like giving or praying, for which there are many commands in the Scriptures. The purpose of **fasting** is to simplify our physical life so that we can focus on our spiritual life. Consequently, **fasting** is an expression of dependence upon **ADONAI** rather than upon daily nourishment. We are not to **go around looking miserable as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting**. Because **God** had no place in **their** motives or thinking, **He** had no part **in their reward. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full (Mattityahu 6:16)**. They wanted recognition by the public, and that **reward**, and only that **reward, they received in full**.

The phrase **and when you fast** supports the understanding that **fasting** is not commanded. But **when** it is practiced it is to be regulated according to principles **Jesus** gives here. In contrast with the Pharisees and Torah-teachers, believers' washing and anointing are supposed to be a part of everyday hygiene that was sometimes given up during a **fast**. **But Christ** said: **When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face (Matthew 6:17)**. When **fasting**, believers should avoid calling attention to themselves. **Jesus** was teaching that this is a private act of sacrificial worship that should not provide any room for religious pride. Everything is supposed to look normal **so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting (Mattityahu 6:18a)**.

Yeshua's apostles didn't **fast** while **He** was with them because **fasting** is normally associated with **mourning** or other times of heightened spiritual need or anxiety. When the disciples of John the Baptist asked **Messiah** why **His** talmidim did not

fast like they and the Pharisees did, **the Lord answered: How can the guests of the groom mourn and fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them.** As long as **Yeshua** was living **they** couldn't **mourn** because **the Groom** was physically present. They needed to feast, not **fast**. **But the time will come when Jesus, as the Groom, will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast (Mt 9:15; Mk 2:19-20; Lk 5:34-35).** As a result, **fasting** is appropriate for this Dispensation of Grace (see my commentary on [Hebrews Bp - The Dispensation of Grace](#)), because **Christ** is physically absent from the earth. But, it is appropriate only as a response to special times of testing, trial or struggle.

An overwhelming sense of danger often prompts **fasting**. King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast in Judah when they were threatened by an attack from the Moabites and Ammonites (**Second Chronicles 20:3**). From a purely human standpoint they could not possibly win; but yet, they cried out to **ADONAI** for help, **fasting** as they did so. Queen **Esther, her** servants, and all the Jews in the capital city of Susa fasted for three full days before **she** went before King Ahasuerus to plead for the Jews to be spared from Haman's wicked scheme against **her** people (see my commentary on [Esther Ba - I Will Go to the King; If I Perish, I Perish](#)).

When fasting, only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:18b). The one who sincerely wants to please **YHVH** will purposefully avoid trying to impress others. **Jesus** does not even say we should **fast** for the purpose of being seen by **Ha'Shem Himself** because **fasting** is not to be a display for anyone – including **God**. **Fasting** is merely a part of concentrated, intense prayer and concern for **the Lord, His** will and **His** work. **The Holy Spirit's** point here is that **the Father** never fails to notice **fasting** that is heart-felt and genuine.⁵⁷¹ Only those who **fast** before **ADONAI** in this manner will receive **their reward**.