

Preparing for a Public Fast

Introduction – Following the events of September 11th, 2001, the CRE issued a memorial acknowledging God’s judgment upon the United States. The memorial ends, *“Therefore, mindful of this judgment of God, the churches of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelicals set aside September 11, 2002, as a day of prayer and fasting, that we may unite in confessing the sins of our respective nations.”* In preparation for a day of fasting, let us consider the instructions of the Word of God.

Biblical Public Fasting – There are a number of times throughout the scriptures where we see God’s people (and in the case of Jonah and Nineveh, a pagan nation) called to fast and seek the Lord.

The Day of Atonement (Lev 23:27) – The Old Testament calendar is full of days of feasting. Here is the only required annual fast. In it, they afflicted their souls, denying the appetites of their body in token of their sorrow over their sin and humility before a holy God.

In Days of National Emergency (2 Chron 20:1-4) – Jehoshaphat feared an attack by his enemies and called upon the nation to fast and pray to God.

In the Midst of Danger (Ezra 8:21-23) – As Ezra led the people out of exile and back to Jerusalem with the precious items of the temple, he called for a fast for protection.

During a Time of Confession of Sin (Jonah 3:5-10) – As a token of repentance, humility and faith in God, the king of Nineveh proclaimed a fast. This time, the enemy that needed turning away was God Himself. Joel calls Israel to fasting as well (Joel 1:13-14).

In the Days of Important Works of Faith (Acts 13:1-3) – The church fasted and prayed, seeking the Lord in the appointment of elders for particular works of service.

A Biblical View of Fasting – Fasting occurs in almost every religion, and many people fast for non-religious reasons. The scriptures instruct us to fast and give us the right reasons.

Longing for Christ (Matt 9:14-17) – The Bridegroom, in one sense, is gone, and His righteousness is not yet fully manifested among His people or over the world. *“Then they will fast”*. Our fasting manifests our longing for His return and for His righteousness and holiness fully established (*then what does our lack of fasting manifest?*). But this fasting is in new wineskins. We no longer fast on a Day of Atonement, for we no longer worship in shadows, but in the fullness of His revelation to us and in the completed once-for-all atonement of the cross.

To Humble Ourselves (Psalm 69:10) – We are taught to believe in ourselves and find it within ourselves, but we are not taught today to humble ourselves. Pride goes with a full stomach, idle time, and carelessness for the weak (Ezek 16:48-50). Humility and fasting are antithetical to our ‘can-do’ culture and to our easy-believism gospel, and so we see little of either.

In Response to the Lord’s Hand of Judgment (Acts 9:1-19) – Consider Paul’s conversion story. While knowing the laws of the Old Testament by heart and practicing them zealously as a Pharisee, God revealed to Paul that, in fact, he was blind, by striking him with blindness. Paul’s heart was rent and he did not eat or drink for three days. Then God opened His eyes, physically and spiritually.

Jesus Teaches “When you fast” (Matt 6:16-18) – First, note that Jesus assumes that His disciples will be fasting. The main point is not that we must never be seen fasting. The point is that we are not to be fasting in order to be seen. If the point of fasting is humility and God-centered longing, we are hypocrites, not if someone sees us, but if that is what we are really hoping will happen.

Conclusions/Applications – What should we be meditating upon and how should we prepare?

A Normal Fast – Fasting is the practice of abstaining from food, solid or liquid, but not necessarily water, for a period of time. There are many variations to this ‘normal’ fast.

A Non-Binding Proclamation – No one should feel conscience-bound to keep this fast day. We do not have the authority of the scriptures, and we will not harass those who, for whatever reason, do not choose to fast. This is an opportunity, not a requirement. Children and those with special dietary needs should make sure that what they are doing is appropriate for them. Everyone is invited to join us for prayer on the evening of the 11th regardless of whether or not you are fasting.

Humility – There is a fasting that stirs up pride (Col 2:23). But Christian fasting rests in the full justification of God by grace through faith. It is not attempting to earn something from God. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in us – self control – not something with which to impress God or others.

Feast Days/Fast Days (Zech 7:4-7) – Our ability to understand how to fast correctly is connected to our ability to feast appropriately. Every Lord’s Day is a high feast day, and especially as we gather at His Table. At His Table we learn to partake of Christ by faith, and in our fasting we learn that man shall not live on bread alone.

Proper Expectations – “*Our seasons of fasting and prayer at the Tabernacle have been high days indeed; never has Heaven’s gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer the central Glory.*” – Spurgeon. Prayer and fasting are God’s appointed means of humbling ourselves before Him and pleading His mercy upon our nation. He is kind.

“To sum up: whenever...there appear the judgments of the Lord’s anger (as pestilence, war, and famine)-’tis a holy ordinance and one salutary for all ages, that pastors urge the people to public fasting and extraordinary prayers” – John Calvin

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