

What The Bible Teaches on
PRAYER and FASTING
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Chapter 4: What Was the Practice of the Children of Israel?

4. What was the practice of the Children of Israel?

Israel as a nation observed various fasts at different times and for different purposes as the following examples indicate:

(a) In repentance

(1) 1 Samuel 7:5-6

When the Philistines killed King Saul in battle and captured the Ark, it did not take them long to realise that it was the totem of a God much more powerful than they had imagined. They returned it to Bethshemesh in the land of Israel and there, seventy men were struck down for an all-too-human curiosity which made them look to see what was in it. Taking care of the Ark was not likely to have been anybody's particular ambition after that! Abinadab, however, was given the unenviable job in Kiriath-jearim, and his son Eleazar was consecrated as its custodian.

It was twenty years later, under the leadership of Samuel, before anyone gave much thought to the Ark again. Israel then mourned and sought after the Lord with prayer and fasting.

(2) Nehemiah 9:1-3

The people of Israel were slaves in Babylon, exiled from the Promised Land because of their sins. Under Nehemiah they returned to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Then they read from the Law and understood their need to repent of the many sins of the nation. This they did with fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting ashes

on their heads as traditional signs of repentance.

(b) In Mourning

(1) 1 Samuel 31:11-13; [1 Chronicles 10:11-12]

The men of Jabesh Gilead honoured King Saul and his son Jonathan who had fallen in battle. The victorious Philistine enemies-exposed their bodies to ridicule but these valiant men went and retrieved them for cremation and a decent burial, following which they mourned their deaths with seven days of fasting.

(2) 2 Samuel 1:11-12

This too was in mourning for King Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the soldiers of Israel who had fallen in battle along with them. This time it was proclaimed by his faithful friend David for the troops under his command.

(3) Esther 4:1-3

It was at the time when the Jews were in exile, under the rule of the Persians. Out of hatred for one Jewish man called Mordecai, a high government official, Haman, planned to destroy not only him but all his people in addition. The entire Jewish nation was therefore in danger of extermination in a flagrant attempt at genocide. This was the reason for their mourning and fasting in all the provinces of the Persian Empire.

(c) Seeking God's Favour

(1) Judges 20:24-28

Israel as a nation had decided to punish the tribe of Benjamin for standing by one of their men who had committed a serious wrong against the law of God and man. After enquiring of the Lord, they went into action against Benjamin but were soundly defeated! This is what sent them fasting as they cried to God for help.

(2) 2 Chronicles 20: 2-4

Jehoshaphat was one of the Kings of Judah who loved the Lord. He turned his people away from worshipping idols and appointed just judges, Levites and priests to assist him in administering the land according to the Law of God.

Then he heard that a vast army of invaders was on its way to destroy his country. This was why he proclaimed a fast for all Judah to seek God's favour in a time of grave national peril.

(3) Ezra 8:21-23

When Nehemiah was appointed Governor and sent by the Persian Emperor to go and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem he gladly went with a detachment of military officers and horsemen (Nehemiah 2:9). Some time before this, however, Ezra the priest had been sent to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple and offer sacrifices to God. Having assured the pagan king that the God of Israel was able to protect the party on their dangerous three-month journey to Jerusalem, he was too ashamed to turn back to him and ask for an escort of soldiers. He proclaimed a fast among his fellow travellers instead, to seek God's protection on the way.

(4) Esther 4:15-17

Queen Esther had not declared officially that she was Jewish and that she was therefore one of those targeted for extermination. At the instance of her uncle, Mordecai, she was going to plead their cause before the king. Taking her life in her hand as she went to

seek royal audience, she requested Mordecai and all other Jews in the palace to fast and pray for her.

(d) On behalf of others

(1) Ezra 10:1-6

Following his safe arrival in Jerusalem along with his party, Ezra offered sacrifices of praise to the Lord. He was shocked to discover that the people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, were disregarding the Law of God. He had a time of prayer and confession together with the leaders but subsequently went into a room in private to fast and to pray on behalf of the people.

(2) Psalm 35:11-14

In a manner that is most usual in the Old Testament, the Psalmist not only prays but fasts on behalf of his enemies.

(e) For National Remembrance

(1) Esther 9:30-32

After the great deliverance of the Jews from the wicked design of Haman, Queen Esther decreed that the fast of Purim be observed as a national event by future generations.

(2) Zechariah 8:18-19

By the time the nations of Israel and Judah went into exile, the Jews had settled on four periods of fasting through the year, in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months. Scholars of the Talmud, (the Book of Jewish Law and Commentaries), explain that, except for the fast of the seventh month which was instituted as part of the Law, they all mark disasters in Jewish history.