Fasting

Intro: Fast comes from the Greek word νηστεία (nesteia) which is a combination of νη (ne) which means “no,” and ἐσθίω (estaio) which means “to eat.” Thus, not to eat, or abstaining from physical nourishment. It also comes from the Hebrew tsom. This embraces the idea to afflict the soul, or to afflict self. When we see a phrase such as afflict your soul or afflict yourself, we need to understand fasting, not asceticism.

I. Types of Fasts
   A. Total fasts
      1. A complete abstinence from food or drink.
      2. Est. 4:16 “Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.”
   B. Partial fasts
      1. The restriction to a very plain diet or abstinence from either food or drink, one or the other.
      2. Dan. 10:3 “I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.”

II. Duration of Fasts
   A. One day.
      1. Jud. 20:26 “Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.”
      2. 1 Sam. 7:6 “And they gathered together to Mizpeh, 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 children of Israel in Mizpeh.”
      3. We would assume that this would be twice one day a week; Luke 18:12 “I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.”
   B. Short period of time.
      1. Three days and nights; Est. 4:16 “Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.”
      2. Seven days, probably a partial fast; 1 Sam. 31:13 “And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.”
      3. David fasted 6 to 7 days; 2 Sam. 12:16-18, 23 “David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead: for they said, Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spake unto him, and he would not hearken unto our voice: how will he then vex himself, if we tell him that the child is dead?... But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”
   C. A partial fast of 3 weeks; Dan. 10:3 “I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.”
   D. Very long period of time (40 days and nights)
      1. Moses at the giving of the Old Testament; Exo. 34:28 “And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.”
2. Elijah; 1 Kin. 19:8 “And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God.”

3. Christ; Mat. 4:2 “And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.”

III. LUKE 5:33-35 “And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? 34 And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? 35 But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.”

A. While Jesus was on earth this question was asked.
B. While the bridegroom, Christ, is with them there is no need to fast, when the bridegroom shall be taken away then they will fast.

C. Should we fast?
1. Has the bridegroom been taken away from us? Yes.
2. Then should we fast?
3. Two answers have been given.
   a. When the bridegroom was taken away, the disciples did fast.
      (1) Now he is back with us.
      (2) Mat. 28:20 “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”
      (3) So there is no need to fast.
   b. While Christ is with us in that manner, He is not with us in a physical sense, so we should fast.
   c. To those who say we do not need to fast, then why did the early church fast?

IV. THE TEACHING OF THE BIBLE.
A. The Old Testament.
1. The children of Israel fasted on the Day of Atonement.
   a. Lev. 23:27 “Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.”
   b. Lev. 16:29 “And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you:”
   c. Acts 27:9 “Now when much time was spent, and when sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past, Paul admonished them,”
2. They fasted during times of national crisis; Jonah 3:5 “So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.”
3. Numerous private fasts. Often in time of sorrow or mourning.
4. Fasted at the dedication of the covenant, and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem; Neh. 9:1 “Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earthen upon them.”
5. Fasted (4 months set aside) in regard to the captivity.
   a. Zec. 8:19 “Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace.”
   b. Zec. 7:5 “Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?”
B. **Purpose of fasting.**

1. Fasted in time of mourning, sorrow, affliction, and crisis.
   a. Ps. 69:10 “When I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting, that was to my reproach.”
   b. Acts 27:33 “And while the day was coming on, Paul besought them all to take meat, saying, This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing.”
2. Coupled with prayer to bring a person closer to the Lord; Ps. 35:13 “But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting and my prayer returned into mine own bosom.”
3. Used at the beginning or the end of a great work or office; Acts 13:3 “And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.”
4. When one applied himself to a particular interest.
   a. For example when one studies the Scriptures.
   b. Mat. 15:32 “Then Jesus called his disciples unto him, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way.”
   c. Mark 8:3 “And if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from far.”
5. Never is fasting used to lose weight.
6. Fasting causes you to become absorbed in whatever it is, you lose the desire for food and the other will be heightened.

C. **The New Testament (with a view are we to fast today?)**

1. In the sermon on the Mount; Mat. 6:16-18 “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 17But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”
   a. The teaching is applicable for those who would make up the church.
   b. Implies that those who make up the kingdom will fast.
2. The bridegroom taken away.
   a. Mat. 9:14-15 “Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? 15And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridegroom mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.”
   b. Mark 2:18-20 “And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? 19And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridegroom fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.”
   c. Luke 5:33-35 “And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? 34And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridegroom fast, while the bridegroom is with them? 35But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.”
   d. When the bridegroom is taken away, they will fast.
   e. Is He taken away?
      1. He is with us; Mat. 28:20 “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”
      2. He has ascended and thus not with us; John 16:7 “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.”
   f. We find the early church fasting often.
3. Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-23 “Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.... And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”

a. In their daily ministration, they fasted.

b. In separating Paul and Barnabas for the work, they fasted.

c. In appointing men to serve as elders, they fasted and prayed.

4. 1 Cor. 7:5 “Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.”

5. 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27 “In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings;... In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”

a. In serving the Lord, Paul was often hungry and thirsty.

b. In serving the Lord, Paul often fasted.

Conclusion: We can, thus, conclude that we are to fast, separating ourselves from physical things to devote ourselves more acutely to spiritual matters. However, since no specific time is given (as in the Old Testament), we would conclude that it would be according to the individual’s wishes, or as a congregation as a whole under the direction of the elders determines its need and time.