

Fasting in the Old Testament

This article is from the “Among Friends” section of the Church of God Big Sandy's website (churchofgodbig sandy.com). It was posted for the weekend of Sept. 19, 2026.

By Dave Havir

BIG SANDY, Texas—At our Bible study on Wednesday night, I gave a presentation to precede the upcoming Day of Atonement. The presentation was five days before the Day of Atonement. The purpose was to encourage my friends to have a successful and meaningful fast on Monday (September 21). The title of the presentation was “Fasting in the Old Testament.”

(The title of the Bible study that I plan to give at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday is “Fasting in the New Testament.”)

Three main subheads

When I have talked about fasting through the years, I have often organized the material under three main subheads. The general theme is after, during and before.

- The fasting after involves repentance.
- The fasting during involves seeking help during a trial.
- The fasting before involves connecting with our Spiritual Father.

Not fitting a category

Before we slot some scriptures into the three categories, let's notice a few general scriptures about fasting that may not directly fit under the three main categories.

- 1 Samuel 31:13—The children of Israel fasted seven days after the death of Saul. (This history is also told in 1 Chronicles 10:11-12.)
- 2 Samuel 1:11-12—David and his men fasted to mourn the death of Saul.
- Psalm 35:13—David described his mourning for his enemies.
- Jeremiah 14:12—Jeremiah mentioned that God does not always hear those who are fasting.
- Zechariah 7:5—The Lord asked: “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those 70 years, did you really fast for Me – for Me?”
- Zechariah 8:19—The Lord mentioned that the fasts of the fourth month, the fifth month, the seventh month and the tenth month be filled with joy, gladness and cheer.

After a sin – repentance

- 1 Samuel 7:6—When the people gathered together at Mizpah, they fasted and said: “We have sinned against the Lord.”
- 1 Kings 21:27-29—After Elijah told King Ahab what his wife Jezebel had done, Ahab humbled himself with fasting before the Lord.” (In 1 Kings 21:8-9, Jezebel had forged a letter from her husband proclaiming a fast in her plot to wrest land from Naboth.)

- Ezra 10:1-6—After Ezra was praying, confessing, bowing down and weeping bitterly; he “ate no bread and drank no water” because he was mourning.
- Nehemiah 1:4-11—Nehemiah said: “When I heard these words, I sat down, wept and mourned for many days – I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”
- Nehemiah 9:1-3—The children of Israel were assembled with fasting.
- Jeremiah 36:6-9—The people of Judah proclaimed a fast before the Lord.
- Daniel 9:3-19—Daniel said: “I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications – with fasting, sackcloth and ashes.”
- Joel 1:14—The Lord said: “Consecrate a fast.”
- Joel 2:12—The Lord said: “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning.”
- Joel 2:15-17—The Lord said: “Consecrate a fast.”
- Jonah 3:5-10—After the Lord sent Jonah to warn the nation of Nineveh to repent, the people of Nineveh believed God and proclaimed a fast.

During a trial – seeking help

- Judges 20:21-26—After the men of Israel were drubbed by the Benjamites, they went to the house of God and fasted – before they defeated the children of Benjamites (verse 36).
- 2 Samuel 12:15-23—When David’s son was sick, he pleaded with God by fasting.
- 2 Chronicles 20:3-4—When Jehoshaphat heard that many soldiers were coming against him, he proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.
- Ezra 8:21-23—Ezra proclaimed a fast – instead of asking for an escort of soldiers on the way to Jerusalem.
- Esther 4:1-3—Mordecai and the Jews turned to God with fasting and weeping.
- Esther 4:16—Esther and the Jews fasted before she visited the king.
- Psalm 69:10-12—David fasted for relief during trials.
- Psalm 109:24-25—David fasted for relief during trials.

Before – connecting with our Father

- Exodus 34:28—When Moses was with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights (while writing the 10 Commandments on the tablets), he “neither ate bread nor drank water.”
- Leviticus 16:29, 31—On the Day of Atonement, the people were instructed to “afflict your souls.”
- Leviticus 23:26-32—On the Day of Atonement, the people were instructed to “afflict your souls.”

(Someone could mention that these verses in Leviticus also instructed people to provide a physical offering as well. And since the physical offerings are not promoted behavior in the New Testament, shouldn't people also conclude that the action of "afflicting a soul" should also not be promoted behavior in the New Testament? While that question is logical, I recommend that people consider the example of Jesus Christ in Matthew 4:1-2.)

- Isaiah 58:3-6—In the book of Isaiah, the Lord gave instruction about how fasting is an act of worship toward God and an action of service toward people.