

Fasting – A Biblical Perspective

With questions for Muslims on the Islamic perspective of fasting

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Introduction

This article aims to explain the Biblical perspective of fasting.¹ It focuses on the teaching of the New Testament (known as substantially the same² Injeel³ in the Quran). A number of questions regarding the Muslim understanding of fasting are listed at the very end. The reader is encouraged to engage⁴ with them in the hope it will lead to a better understanding between Christians and Muslims.

The study does not treat the subject from a “Christian”⁵ perspective. Sadly, a number of today's so called “Christians”, in the West especially, have become amoral. Jesus himself said about them:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

Ultimately, doing the will of God is only possible in the power of his Holy Spirit.⁶ His indwelling is promised to all those who repent (sorrowfully change their minds) and believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus according to the Scriptures. The latter is the best explanation for the phenomenal, authentic growth of Jesus’ followers in the first 300 years from about 30 to 33 million. Soon after Constantine recognized Christianity in 313 AD, the stage was set for it to become the official religion of the Roman empire in 380 AD.⁷ Little wonder that this momentous step where everyone overnight was declared to be a “Christian” sowed the seed for the widespread corruption that was to follow.

Fasting – what Jesus said

Then John’s disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”

¹ It generally means going without all food and drink for a period. The Heb. words are *šûm* (verb) and *šôm* (noun). The phrase *‘innâ napšô* (to afflict the soul) also refers to fasting. The usual Gk. words are *nēsteuō* (verb), and *nēsteia* and *nēstis* (nouns). In Acts 27:21, 33 the words *asitia* and *asitos* (‘without food’) are also used. (The New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition, Wood D.R.W., Marshall, I. Howard. 1996)

² The Muslim reader may be most interested in the rationale found in the Quran. For example, Surah 5:47: *“Let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah has revealed in it. And those who do not judge by what Allah has revealed are ‘truly’ the rebellious.”* This is only possible if the Injeel was substantially unchanged in the 6th century. For more details see: <https://christianityexplained.net/to/muslims/quran-confirms-injil-unchanged/>

There are many more reasons for the trustworthiness of the Bible: <https://evidenceforchristianity.org/how-do-i-know-the-bible-has-not-been-changed-how-do-i-know-we-are-reading-what-the-original-writers-wrote/>

³ = Gospel, Good News according to Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. For a detailed explanation of how the word “Gospel” was also used to describe the whole New Testament in early history see:

<https://christianityexplained.net/to/muslims/muslims-read-tawrat-zabur-injeel/>

⁴ For example, Christians could ask their Muslims contacts about possible replies. God willing, answers from Muslims sent to info@christianityexplained.net will be included in future updates of this article.

⁵ Lent (derived from the Anglo-Saxon words *lencten*, meaning “Spring,”), for example, is a tradition evolved from the 3rd century AD. During 40 days leading up to Easter people prepare for the celebration through prayer, penance, fasting on certain days, giving up things as a sacrifice and good works: <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/history-of-lent.html>. It can be justified by 2 Cor 3:17 and John 4:23 that call for the worship of God in Spirit, in truth and with freedom. Unlike in Islam, such a fast enables the sick, women on their period and children to participate.

⁶ <https://www.gotquestions.org/you-will-know-them-by-their-fruit.html>

⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/christianity-becomes-the-religion-of-the-roman-empire-february-27-380/a-4602728>

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. 17 Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."
(Matthew 9:14–17)

Here is a short explanation of the passage above:

Pharisees

The Pharisees are the religious leaders at the time of Jesus. Many were hypocrites, not doing themselves what they commanded others to observe. Unfortunately, this is very similar today.

Bridegroom

Jesus, the Messiah, compares himself to a bridegroom. This is highly significant in light of the fact that in numerous Biblical passages God compares the relationship with his people to that of a husband and wife.⁸ Jesus does the same!⁹ Clearly, Jesus is much more than a prophet! He said:

*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*¹⁰

Taken from them

This refers to the death of Jesus on the cross.

Then they will fast

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement for the certain forgiveness of sins, is the only fast commanded in the Torah (Leviticus 16:29-30). Other instances where people fasted in the Old Testament are:

- to show grief and solidarity (Nehemiah 1:1-11)
- to seek deliverance or protection (Ezra 8:21-23)
- to repent (Jonah 3:10)
- to gain victory (Judges 20:26)

After the return of the Jews from exile four regular fast-days were established to mourn numerous painful events in Jewish history. Many other such non-obligatory fasts were added later to remember "certain troubles that befell Israel."¹¹ Most of them were not observed by the majority of Jews.

In light of that it becomes clear why Jesus associated fasting with mourning in Mathew 9:15. He also fasted for 40 days without food in preparation for the public ministry.¹² Fasting is prescribed for followers of Jesus in the New Testament on various other grounds:

- to determine Gods direction for his people. (Acts 13:2-3)
- to seek God's wisdom. (Acts 14: 23)
- to worship God as one expression of our love for him. (Luke 2:37)

⁸ Isaiah 54:5, Jeremiah 2:2; 31:32, Ezekiel 16:8-14; Hosea 2:7,16; Joel 1:8, Revelation 21:2.

⁹2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:25-33, Revelation 19:7-9.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:15

¹¹ For more details please visit: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6033-fasting-and-fast-days>

¹² Matthew 4

Fasting is taken for granted in the whole Bible. However, it is not easy to seek God through self-denial, via self-control. The latter is one of the fruits of the Spirit in the life of the followers of Jesus (Galatians 5:22-23). When they are weak, disciples draw closer to God, being more aware of his presence and his empowering for his work through them. Fasting in one's own strength is doomed to fail. Jesus gave this stern warning to his followers. It is one explanation why some people think Christians do not fast:

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

(Matthew 6:17-18)

Fasting by hypocrites finds no acceptance with God. It is described in more details in the Torah here:

“Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. ² For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

³ ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.

⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? ⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness^[a] will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, ¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. (Isaiah 58)

A patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; new wine into old wineskins

At the time of Jesus many people wore clothing made from linen and silk. Since a new patch would shrink at the first wash it could not be sown on an old garment without ruining it. A similar thing is true of new wine. In the distant past wineskins were made out of animal skins. After a while they stretched and lost their elasticity. Therefore, new wine would burst them because it needed room for the expansion, caused by continued fermentation. New wine skins were the only solution to store new wine.

These two examples of Jesus illustrate the main point of his discourse. Something new is happening. It cannot be mixed with the old: Jesus came to die on the cross and rise again!

Why did Jesus die and rise from the dead?

Historians virtually unanimously agree that Jesus Christ died.¹³ Further, according to an in-depth, 700 pages

¹³ <https://www.uncover.org.uk/questions/whats-the-evidence-outside-the-bible-for-jesus-life-and-teaching/>
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/14/what-is-the-historical-evidence-that-jesus-christ-lived-and-died>

academic study, almost all scholars writing on the subject also regard the following as indisputable facts because there is very strong evidence for it.¹⁴

-Very shortly after Jesus' death, the disciples (followers of Jesus) had experiences that led them to believe and proclaim that Jesus had risen and appeared to them.

-Within a few years after Jesus' death, Paul converted after experiencing what he interpreted as a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus.

In this footnote 3¹⁵ are several links to reviews of the ground-breaking book, "The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach" by Prof Michael R. Licona. In it he writes: "The objective of this investigation was to learn and apply the approach of historians outside of the community of biblical scholars to the question of whether Jesus rose from the dead. . .and then weighing a number of hypotheses representative of what is being proposed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the end, the resurrection hypothesis came out on top and meets the standards discussed herein for being historical."¹⁶

Historians, however, cannot tell us the reason why Jesus died and rose again. For this we must, of course, consult those who follow him. Their explanation of these momentous and unique events, recorded in the Torah and Injeel, make the most sense.

At the time of writing there is a horrific war going on in Europe between Ukraine and Russia! On a regular basis we are being confronted with horrible, unbelievable images of atrocities. Did you know that it is only one of currently 22 ongoing wars in 2022?¹⁷ About 135 major conflicts have occurred previously in world history, starting only from 1300 BC when records began.¹⁸ In addition there are ongoing struggles in our own hearts and between ourselves and God. While mankind has been able to fly to the moon and send unmanned missions even beyond, it has not made any progress in taming its own outrageous selfishness.

Now contrast our miserable, shameful state with God and his perfect attributes of holiness, purity, justice and love. As history shows, our good deeds are not changing our hearts. Neither will they be able to pay off our debts before him. Do we really think God would admit us into heaven in such a hopeless state? Although he is merciful, the unchanging One would have to change some of his other flawless standards to exercise mercy. That is impossible. To believe that God made us weak does not help our cause either. If that were the case, why does he punish us in hell for what we cannot help doing?

The Bible teaches us that we have not always been slaves to sin. It started with Adam and Eve rebelling against the commandment of God who loved them in paradise. The result was death and separation. As we have seen so far, the love of God calls for restoration of our relationship with him but the justice of God demands

¹⁴ Licona, Michael R. The Resurrection of Jesus. A New Historiographical Approach (p. 303). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. 2010

¹⁵ <https://apologetics315.com/2013/10/book-review-the-resurrection-of-jesus-a-new-historiographical-approach-by-michael-licona/>
<https://jenniferguo.wordpress.com/2015/07/08/the-resurrection-of-jesus-a-new-historiographical-approach-michael-licona/>
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjajcTo8oz2AhVYPOwKHVqYBLoQFnoECCQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.etsjets.org%2Ffiles%2FJETS-PDFs%2F54%2F54-4%2FJETS_54-4_823-883_Book%2520Reviews.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2r6qy_tD8WEmNRMxdc6ZzF (pages 839 –844) digital version, pdf: pages 17-22
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjajcTo8oz2AhVYP_OwKHVqYBLoQFnoECCUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.academia.edu%2F12562597%2FReview_of_The_Resurrection_of_Jesus_A_New_Historiographical_Approach_Michael_R_Licona_IVP_Academic_2010_718_pp_in_Theology_February_2012_pp_51_52%3Fauto%3Ddownload&usg=AOvVaw01wOYWqY_dDKmDcVfudDFa

¹⁶ Licona, Michael R.. The Resurrection of Jesus (pp. 619-620). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-currently-at-war>

¹⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-wars-2031197>

punishment which only God himself can deal with. He has chosen to do that via the concept of sacrifice found in four stories written in both the Bible and the Quran:

- **Adam and Eve (Hawa):** When they sinned and discovered they were naked, a horrible shame and fear entered into their lives. They tried to cover themselves with leaves. God gave them garments of animal skin, pointing to the first sacrifice that deals with the devastating result of sin. (Genesis 3:7, 21) Men's effort to do good deeds (symbolised by the leaves) to cover their shame and fear caused by sin was not enough from God's perspective. In the Quran too God gives them 'clothing to cover their shame.' (Surah 7, Al Araf, verse 26). Shame only comes as a result of sin. Where there is no actual, consciously committed sin there is no shame, hence small children do not mind being naked.

- **Cain and Abel (Habil and Kabil):** God accepted the animal sacrifice of Abel but rejected the sacrifice of crop made by Cain. (Surah 5, Al Maida, verse 27, Genesis 4:3-7)

- **Abraham (Ibrahim):** God provided an animal as a sacrifice instead of the son (Surah 37, Al Saffat, verse 107, Genesis 22). It cannot have been a simple act of worship on Abraham's part because the Quran says, 'we ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice.' Compared with the son who is much more valuable than an animal, the latter must have been called 'mighty' because it symbolically pointed to a perfect sacrifice to come in the future.

- **Moses (Musa):** He was commanded by God to sacrifice animals for the absolute certain forgiveness of sins of the people of Israel (Numbers 19:1-10). This story is alluded to in Surah 2, Al Baqara, verses 67-74. The Jewish Temple is also mentioned in Surah 17, Surah Al-Isra, verses 1-7. Daily sacrifices of animals for the forgiveness of sins were central to it according to the Torah. Surah 5:44 mentions Jewish priests. One of their main tasks was to sacrifice animals for the forgiveness of sins.

The fifth story is clearly taught in the Bible only. Without it, however, the previous four stories are incomplete:

- **Jesus (Isa):** As mentioned already, animal sacrifices in the Torah (Old Testament) are less valuable than human beings. They only pointed to the perfect and sinless sacrifice to come. An illustration may help to understand this better: It is a bit like a cheque (=animal sacrifice) which guarantees money (=Jesus and his death). Once it is paid, the cheque becomes obsolete. Jesus died on behalf of all people in the world to take away the sins, shame, fear and guilt of all those who repent and believe in him (John 1:29, Mark 10:45). God confirmed his work by raising Jesus back to live on the third day and up to Him about forty days later (Acts 1:3, 1 Cor 15).

Since Muslims are asked in the Quran to believe in the previous books from which we just explained God's way to forgive mankind, do you believe in it? If not, please consider Surah 2, Al-Baqarah, 107: "Whatever message We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than that or the like thereof..." What could possibly be better than to receive instantly and absolutely certain forgiveness of sins, restoration from shame to honour, release from fear and guilt and power for a life in obedience to God? All this has been promised in the previous Scriptures to all who truly repent and believe in God's way.

Conclusion

Fasting is prescribed in the Bible for various reasons, such as: showing grief and solidarity, mourning, seeking God's presence, deliverance, protection, direction, wisdom, victory, repenting and to worship God as one expression of our love for him.

Jesus died and rose from the dead to enable the certain forgiveness of sin. He empowers his followers to a life of good deeds lived in gratitude to their Saviour and Lord. This centre of Christian belief is well-established as historical fact.

Followers of Jesus fast *because* they are 100% certain of their forgiveness of sins and eternal destiny in heaven. They do not fast *in order to maybe* achieve this position before God like other religions, particularly Islam, teach.

Christians fast to be *more useful* to God *not to be accepted* by him, God willing. Through repentance and faith, they are already accepted.

The unique message and sacrifice of Jesus on behalf of those who choose to follow him cannot be mixed with other beliefs. Syncretism, unity for the sake of truth, a one world religion, is not possible because of irreconcilable differences.

More information can be found here: www.christianityexplained.net

Alternatively, if you would like to give your life to Jesus or have questions and comments please write to: info@christianityexplained.net

Questions for Muslims regarding the Islamic perspective of fasting

1. Why did Mohammad at first only fast on the same day the pagans did?

Narrated 'Aisha: (The tribe of) Quraish used to fast on the day of Ashura' in the Pre-Islamic period, and then Allah's Apostle ordered (Muslims) to fast on it..." (Sahih Bukhari, Book 31, Hadith 117)

2. Did Mohammad decide when to fast, not Allah?

Ibn 'Abbas reported that when the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) fasted on the day of 'Ashura and commanded that it should be observed as a fast, they (his Companions) said [complained] to him: Messenger of Allah, it is a day which the Jews and Christians hold in high esteem. Thereupon the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: When the next year comes, God willing, we would observe fast on the 9th. But the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) died before the advent of the next year. (Sahih Muslim, Book 6, Hadith 2528)

3. Why did Mohammad think Jews fast on the Day of Ashura in the month of Muharam (Jewish month of Tammuz) when their fast is on the day of atonement (10th day in the Jewish month of Tishri)?¹⁹ Please also explain why Muslims allegedly have more claim over Moses?

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: The Prophet came to Medina and saw the Jews fasting on the Day of Ashura. He asked them about that. They replied, "This is a good day, the day on which Allah rescued Bani Israel from their enemy. So, Moses fasted this day." The Prophet said, "We have more claim over Moses than you." So, the Prophet fasted on that day and ordered (the Muslims) to fast (on that day). (Sahih Bukhari, Book 31, Hadith 222)

4. Why was fasting changed by Allah from what was easier and flexible to what is more difficult?

Narrated Ibn 'Umar: The Prophet observed the fast on the 10th of Muharram ('Ashura), and ordered (Muslims) to fast on that day, but when the fasting of the month of Ramadan was prescribed, the fasting of the 'Ashura' was abandoned". (Sahih Bukhari, Book 31, Hadith 116)

'A'isha (Allah be pleased with her) reported that the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) had ordered to observe fast (on 'Ashura) before the fasting in Ramadan was made obligatory. But when it became obligatory, then he who wished fasted on the Day of Ashura, and he who wished did not observe it (on that day)". (Sahih Muslim Book 6, Hadith 2502)

¹⁹ <http://www.islam-watch.org/authors/117-ghalib/1342-to-my-fellow-muslims-with-love-revealing-real-muhammad-and-islam-5c-fasting-the-third-pillar-of-islam-muhammads-love-a-hate-toward-jewish-ashura-fasting.html>

5. Moses and Jesus both fasted 40 days and night (Exo 34:28; Mat 4:2) Should not Mohammad as the last prophet have fasted at least as many days as they did?

Abu Huraira: Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) forbade Al-Wisal in fasting. So, one of the Muslims said to him, "But you practice Al- Wisal. O Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him)!" The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied, "Who amongst you is similar to me? I am given food and drink during my sleep by my Lord." So, when the people refused to stop Al-Wisal (fasting continuously), the Prophet (peace be upon him) fasted day and night continuously along with them for a day and then another day and then they saw the crescent moon (of the month of Shawwal). The Prophet (peace be upon him) said to them (angrily), "If It (the crescent) had not appeared, I would have made you fast for a longer period." That was as a punishment for them when they refused to stop (practicing Al-Wisal).
(Sahih Bukhari, Book 30, Hadith 72)

6. Does a Bedouin fast more than Mohammad?

A bedouin with unkempt hair came to Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) and said, "O Allah's Messenger (ﷺ)! Inform me what Allah has made compulsory for me as regards the prayers." He replied: "You have to offer perfectly the five compulsory prayers in a day and night (24 hours), unless you want to pray Nawafil (optional)." The bedouin further asked, "Inform me what Allah has made compulsory for me as regards fasting." He replied, "You have to fast during the whole month of Ramadan, unless you want to fast more as Nawafil." The bedouin further asked, "Tell me how much Zakat Allah has enjoined on me." Thus, Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) informed him about all the rules (i.e. fundamentals) of Islam. The bedouin then said, "By Him Who has honored you, I will neither perform any Nawafil nor will I decrease what Allah has enjoined on me. Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said, "If he is saying the truth, he will succeed (or he will be granted Paradise).
(Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 3, Book 31, Hadith 115²⁰)

7. The Quran says there are only four holy or prohibited months during which Arabs did not fight: Muharram, Rajab, Dzul Qadah, and Dzul Hijjah (Surah 9:36, 37; 2:197, 217; 5:2; 9:2-5; Sahih Bukhari book 4, Hadith 419). Why is the month of Ramadhan not included and why did Mohammad fight in those months?

For example, the raid on the Meccan caravan in Nakhla took place in the month of Rajab, when Abdullah bin Jash and his people deceived the caravan of the Meccans, pretending to have gone for pilgrimage only to ambush them. Since then, Muslims never observed the sanctity of any month and many raids and bloodshed of Muhammad took place in the month of Ramadan, such as the battle of Badr.

8. Why does Mohammad mention a fast that was never practiced by any prophet in the Bible?

Mohammad said, "...No fasting is superior to the fasting of (the Prophet David) which was one half of a year, and he used, to fast on alternate days." (Sahih Bukhari, Volume 8, Book 74, Hadith 294)

9. The month of Ramadan is taking place in public and is commanded to all Muslims who are physically able. Does that not encourage hypocrisy in those (young) Muslims who only do it to please their families and communities?

10. Statistics have shown that Muslims eat more food during Ramadan than during other months. What is your reply to those who say the Muslim month of fasting is really only a "re-arranging of the mealtimes"?

11. Jews and Christians fast differently from Muslims. What then is the meaning of Surah 2:183: "O believers, fasting is enjoined on you as it was on those before you, so that you might become righteous."

²⁰ <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/30>