

THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

A Biblical Theology of Self-Denial Before God

A Formal Lesson in Six Movements

Pine First Baptist Church

Teaching Notes and Classroom Apparatus

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Lesson Front Matter

Central Text: Joel 2:12–13; Matthew 6:16–18

Doctrinal Locus: Sanctification; the means of grace and the spiritual disciplines

Confessional Anchor: Second London Baptist Confession 22.5; Westminster Confession of Faith 21.5

Suggested Duration: One 75-minute session, or three 40-minute sessions (Movements I–II, III–IV, V–VI)

Aim

That the student would understand fasting not as a meritorious work or a technique for extracting favors from God, but as an embodied posture of dependence — a bodily amen to the soul's confession that God alone is life.

Learning Objectives

By the conclusion of this lesson the student will be able to:

1. Define fasting from the biblical vocabulary of both testaments and distinguish it from asceticism, hunger strike, and dietary regimen.
2. Identify and expound the six principal occasions of fasting attested in Scripture.
3. Articulate the relationship between the outward act and the inward disposition, using Joel 2:13 and Isaiah 58 as controlling texts.
4. Explain the redemptive-historical shift introduced by the presence of the Bridegroom (Matt 9:14–17) and its bearing on Christian fasting.
5. Handle the textual question at Matthew 17:21 / Mark 9:29 with integrity.
6. Apply the discipline responsibly in personal and congregational practice, with due regard for conscience, health, and the danger of self-display.

Memory Verse

"Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." — Joel 2:13

Introduction: Defining the Discipline

The Vocabulary of Scripture

The Hebrew Scriptures speak of fasting principally through the noun **סִיּוֹם** (*šôm*) and its cognate verb **סָם** (*šûm*), denoting voluntary abstention from food. Alongside this stands an older and theologically richer idiom: **עָנָה נַפְשׁוֹ** (*'innāh nepesh*), "to afflict the soul" or "humble oneself," which is the actual language the Torah uses to legislate the one annual fast required of Israel on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27–32; Num 29:7). This idiom is instructive. The Pentateuch does not command Israel to *skip a meal*; it commands Israel to *humble the self*, and abstention from food is the assumed bodily form that humbling takes. The physical act is never the substance of the thing. It is the sign of the substance.

The New Testament employs **νηστεία** (*nēsteia*, noun) and **νηστεύω** (*nēsteuō*, verb), literally "not-eating" (*nē*- privative + *esthiō*, "to eat"). Luke supplies the intensive plural **νηστείαίς** in Luke 2:37, describing Anna's habitual practice. Paul's list of apostolic hardships in 2 Corinthians 6:5 and 11:27 uses the same root, though there in the sense of involuntary deprivation — a reminder that the word itself carries no automatic piety. Context, not vocabulary, tells us whether a given abstention is worship.

A Working Definition

Fasting is the voluntary and temporary renunciation of food — a good gift of God — for a spiritual end, whereby the believer enacts with the body what the soul professes: that God is more necessary than bread, and that the hunger of the moment is a lesser hunger than the hunger for Him.

Three elements of this definition deserve emphasis at the outset:

It is voluntary. Involuntary hunger is affliction, not discipline. Scripture never treats poverty-induced deprivation as fasting.

It is temporary and God-ward. Fasting has a terminus and a target. Abstention without a God-ward object is dieting; abstention without a terminus is not fasting but the very "severe treatment of the body" Paul condemns as of no value against the indulgence of the flesh (Col 2:20–23).

It is derivative, not primary. Fasting is nowhere in Scripture the point. In every passage before us, fasting accompanies something else — prayer, confession, commissioning, mourning, ministry to the Lord. It is always a preposition-word, never the noun of the sentence. The moment fasting becomes the subject rather than the servant of prayer, Isaiah 58 has already begun to indict us.

The Grammar of Assumption

A crucial observation for our doctrine of Scripture: the New Testament nowhere *commands* fasting, yet everywhere *assumes* it. Our Lord does not say "if you fast" but "**when you fast**" (ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε, Matt 6:16) — the same construction He uses of giving (6:2) and praying (6:5). No

Christian doubts the obligation of the second and third. The construction places fasting in the same category: an assumed practice of the disciple, regulated rather than instituted.

This is precisely how the Reformed confessions handle it. The Second London Baptist Confession names "solemn humiliations, with fastings" among the "several parts and ordinary duties" of worship, alongside prayer, the reading of Scripture, and the singing of psalms (22.5) — language taken over nearly verbatim from the Westminster Confession (21.5). Calvin devotes a careful section of the *Institutes* (4.12.14–18) to what he calls the three ends of fasting: to weaken the flesh, to prepare for prayer, and to testify humiliation before God. He is equally careful to warn that "unless there is a corresponding inward feeling of mind, hatred of sin, sorrow, and repentance, external fasting is mere hypocrisy" — Joel 2:13 governing his whole treatment.

Movement I — Seeking God's Guidance and Direction

Fasting as the posture of a church that will not presume.

Exposition

Acts 13:2–3 — "While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."

The participial construction is decisive. Luke's phrase **λειτούργούντων δὲ αὐτῶν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ νηστευόντων** — "while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting" — establishes the setting in which the Spirit speaks. The verb λειτούργέω, "ministering" means "to serve," "to perform sacred service," or "to worship." It is the same word from which we derive *liturgy*, is drawn from the cultic vocabulary of the Septuagint, where it describes priestly service at the altar. Luke thus presents the Antioch leadership in a posture of deliberate, priestly, God-directed attention. **Fasting is not the trigger that produces the revelation; it is the sanctified attentiveness in which the revelation is received.** The distinction matters pastorally: we do not fast to make God speak. We fast so that we are not too full to hear Him.

Observe the double occurrence of fasting in the passage. **They fast before the word comes (v. 2)** and again **after it comes, at the commissioning (v. 3).** **The first is discernment; the second is consecration.** Guidance sought in fasting is guidance obeyed in fasting.

Ezra 8:21–23 — "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, **that we might humble ourselves before our God** to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions... **So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter**, and He listened to our entreaty."

Note Ezra's own stated rationale, which is a study in the **relationship between faith and vulnerability.** He was ashamed to request an armed escort from the king, "because we had said to the king, 'The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him'" (v. 22). Ezra's fast is thus not a substitute for taking sensible precautions in general; it is the deliberate choice to let his public confession of God's sufficiency stand without a military hedge. The fast is the liturgical form of a testimony already given. Verse 23 records the outcome with characteristic restraint: **וַיַּעֲתַר לָנוּ** — "and He was entreated by us," the *niphal* of **עָתַר**, a verb of yielding to supplication.

Ezra's fast is also *corporate* and *proclaimed* — "I proclaimed a fast there" — and includes "our little ones." Biblical fasting is regularly a family and congregational act, not merely a private devotional option.

Acts 14:23 — "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."

The pattern of Antioch becomes the pattern of every church Paul plants. Ordination in the apostolic church is a fasting act. The reason is theologically obvious once stated: to appoint a shepherd is to

make a decision beyond human competence, and fasting is the church's confession of that incompetence. **χειροτονήσαντες** (appointing) is bracketed by **προσευξάμενοι μετὰ νηστειῶν** (having prayed with fasting) and **παρέθεντο** (they committed, entrusted — a banking and depositing term). The men are not installed; they are *deposited* with the Lord.

Synthesis

Fasting for guidance is the church's refusal to presume upon its own wisdom at the precise moments when the stakes are highest: the sending of missionaries, the setting of a journey, the ordaining of elders. In each case, what is renounced is not merely food but self-sufficiency.

Discussion

1. If fasting does not *cause* God to speak, what does it actually accomplish in the one who fasts?
2. Ezra had already publicly confessed God's protection. How does that prior confession shape his decision to fast rather than request troops? Where does this principle apply in congregational decision-making today?
3. What would it mean for a church to recover fasting as a normal part of the ordination process?

Movement II — Repentance and Humility

Fasting as the body's confession.

Exposition

Joel 2:12–13 — "'Yet even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments.' Now return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, and relenting of evil."

This is the controlling text of the entire doctrine, and it must be read with exactness. Joel does **not** say "rend your heart and not your garments" as a repudiation of the outward act. The Hebrew idiom here functions comparatively and priority-wise, as in Hosea 6:6 ("I desire mercy and not sacrifice") — Hosea is not abolishing the sacrificial system, he is subordinating it. Joel likewise commands fasting, weeping, and mourning in v. 12 and then, in v. 13, insists that the tearing reach past the fabric to the organ. The garment-rending is the ancient Near Eastern gesture of grief; the danger is that a man may destroy his clothing and leave his heart intact.

The theological ground of the summons is not the sinner's sincerity but God's character, given in v. 13b in the covenant formula of Exodus 34:6 — **חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם** (gracious and compassionate), **אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם** (long of nostrils, i.e. slow to anger), **וְרַב־חֶסֶד** (abounding in *hesed*). Repentance is possible because of who God has revealed Himself to be. Fasting therefore is not an attempt to make God merciful; it is a response to the announcement that He already is.

Note also the arresting temporal marker **וְגַם־עַתָּה** — "yet even now." The fast is proclaimed at the eleventh hour, with the locust army already in the land. There is no point of national or personal ruin past which this call does not reach.

1 Samuel 7:6 — "They gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD; they fasted on that day and said there, 'We have sinned against the LORD.'"

Here fasting is joined to an explicit verbal confession — **חָטְאָנוּ לַיהוָה**, "we have sinned against the LORD" — and to a striking symbolic act, the pouring out of water before God. Whatever its precise significance (self-emptying, life poured out, or a poured libation of contrition), the water and the fast together make the same statement in two media. Israel's repentance at Mizpah is verbal, ritual, and bodily at once. This is the biblical anthropology at work: man is not a soul that happens to have a body, and true repentance will show up in the flesh.

Jonah 3:5–8 — "Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them... let every man turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands."

The Nineveh account supplies the necessary safeguard against ritualism, and it does so from the mouth of a pagan king. The royal decree does not stop at sackcloth and abstinence; it orders that "every man turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands" (v. 8). And God's

response in v. 10 is precisely calibrated to that: "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented." The text says God saw *their turning* — not their fasting. The fast was the frame; repentance was the picture.

Note also the extravagant scope of the fast — "from the greatest to the least," even the livestock (v. 7). The narrator may well intend a touch of comedy in the fasting cattle, but the theological point is serious: this city withholds nothing.

Synthesis

In repentance, fasting is the body's confession — the flesh agreeing with the tongue. Where the tongue confesses and the body continues in comfortable indifference, Joel's warning applies. Where the body afflicts itself and the way of wickedness continues, Jonah's Nineveh convicts us.

Discussion

1. Explain why "rend your heart and not your garments" is not an abolition of outward acts. What comparable idioms elsewhere in the prophets support your reading?
2. What does the pouring out of water at Mizpah add to what the fast already said?
3. God "saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way." What does this tell us about the relationship between fasting and reformation of life?

Movement III — Intercession and Prayer

Fasting as the intensification of petition.

Exposition

Nehemiah 1:4 — "When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

Four verbs stack in Hebrew: he sat, wept, mourned, and was fasting and praying. Nehemiah's response to news of Jerusalem's ruined walls is not immediate strategizing but sustained lament. Notice the duration — יָמִים, "days" — and the object of the fast: not his own trouble but the trouble of a city eight hundred miles away. Fasting here is the fuel of vicarious grief. The cupbearer of Artaxerxes loses his appetite over rubble he has never seen.

Observe further that the prayer which follows (1:5–11) confesses corporate sin in the first person plural — "I and my father's house have sinned" — and concludes with concrete petition. Fasting did not replace planning; chapter 2 shows Nehemiah with dates, materials, and requests ready. The fast preceded and shaped the plan.

Daniel 9:3 — "So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes."

The idiom **וְאָתְנָה אֶת־פָּנַי** — "I set my face" — denotes resolute, directed intent. Daniel's fast is the response to *reading Scripture*: in v. 2 he has been in Jeremiah's prophecy of the seventy years. This yields a pattern of enormous value: Scripture read produces prayer, and prayer that has understood the weight of Scripture reaches for fasting. Daniel does not fast to obtain information he lacks; he already possesses the prophetic word. He fasts because he believes it. The fast is the form of a faith that takes God's promises seriously enough to plead them.

Note the trio — fasting, sackcloth, ashes — the fullest expression of mourning-piety available in the Old Testament, employed here not for personal loss but for national sin, which Daniel confesses in the first person though he himself is presented throughout the book as exemplary.

2 Samuel 12:16 — "David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground."

The most searching of the intercessory fasts, because it is the one that fails to obtain what it asked. The child dies. And David's response, when told, is the theological key to the whole practice (vv. 21–23): he rises, washes, worships, and eats, explaining, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live.' But now he has died; why should I fast?"

מִי יוֹדֵעַ — "who knows?" — is the entire theology of intercessory fasting compressed into two words. David's fast is not a lever. It is a plea offered into the freedom of God, held with open hands. And when the answer is no, the fast ends without bitterness, and worship begins. Any doctrine of fasting that cannot survive an unanswered prayer is not the biblical doctrine.

Psalm 35:13 — "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting, and my prayer kept returning to my bosom."

Here fasting is intercession *for enemies*. "When they were sick" — the very men who now repay him with malice. David's practice anticipates the ethic of Matthew 5:44. The phrase **עָנִיתִי בְצוּם וּנְפֹשִׁי**, "I afflicted my soul with fasting," reprises the Levitical idiom exactly, confirming that fasting *is* soul-affliction in Hebrew thought. The final clause — "my prayer kept returning to my bosom" — is variously rendered, whether as prayer coming back unanswered, or as the blessing sought for others returning to rest upon the intercessor himself (cf. Matt 10:13). Either reading yields a rich meditation: costly intercession is never wasted, even when it appears to return empty.

Synthesis

Fasting intensifies prayer not by increasing its leverage but by increasing its seriousness. It removes a comfort, and in the space left by the removal the petition is felt in the body. But David at Bathsheba's bedside forbids us any mechanical view: fasting makes us earnest, not God obligated.

Discussion

1. Daniel fasts *after* reading Jeremiah. What does this suggest about the ordinary path from Bible reading to fasting?
2. How does 2 Samuel 12:21–23 protect us from treating fasting as a technique? How should this shape how we counsel a person fasting for a dying loved one?
3. Psalm 35:13 records fasting on behalf of enemies. Whom would you have to fast for if you took this verse literally?

Movement IV — Spiritual Preparation and Warfare

Fasting at the front line.

Exposition

Matthew 4:1–2 — "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry."

Christ's forty-day fast is not primarily a model of ascetic achievement but a redemptive-historical act. The forty days recall Israel's forty years in the wilderness and Moses' forty days on Sinai. Where Israel, fed with manna, murmured and fell, the true Son goes hungry and stands. His first answer to the tempter is drawn precisely from Israel's wilderness catechism: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Deut 8:3). The fast is thus the enacted premise of the reply. Jesus does not merely *assert* that God's word sustains beyond bread; He has spent forty days demonstrating it.

Note the sequence carefully. The Spirit *leads* Him to the wilderness; the fast *precedes* the assault; the hunger is real ("He then became hungry" — the plainest sentence in the passage and among the most consequential for Christology). Preparation for conflict here means the deliberate stripping away of the lesser supports, so that the sufficiency of the Father is not theory but experience.

Matthew 17:21 — "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

A necessary textual note. Honesty requires that we handle this verse with care. Matthew 17:21 is absent from the earliest and most weighty witnesses (including χ , B, and the *Sinaitic Syriac*) and is therefore bracketed or omitted in the critical editions and in most modern translations, which regard it as an early assimilation to the parallel in Mark 9:29. In Mark 9:29 the words "and fasting" (*καὶ νηστείας*) are likewise absent from χ and B, though present in the great majority of manuscripts. Those working from the Textus Receptus or the Byzantine tradition — and thus from the KJV, NKJV, or MEV — will read the clause as canonical; those following the Nestle-Aland text will not.

Two things must be said. First, the *doctrine* does not stand or fall with the verse. Whichever text one follows, Mark 9:29 unambiguously teaches that this order of deliverance "can come out by nothing but prayer," and the whole witness surveyed in this lesson establishes fasting as prayer's companion in extremity. Second, teachers should state the textual situation plainly rather than build a doctrine of deliverance on a disputed clause. A congregation is better served by candor than by a proof-text it may later discover to be contested.

The abiding point stands: certain resistances do not yield to technique, eloquence, or effort. They yield to God, sought with the whole self. Fasting belongs to that whole-self seeking.

Synthesis

Fasting in the context of conflict is not a weapon aimed at the enemy but a posture assumed before God. It does not increase our strength; it exposes our weakness and drives us to the only strength there is.

Discussion

1. Why does Jesus answer the first temptation with Deuteronomy 8:3, and how does the fast itself function as part of that answer?
2. How should a teacher handle the textual question at Matthew 17:21 before a congregation? What is lost by silence, and what is lost by overstatement?
3. Distinguish "fasting as a weapon against the devil" from "fasting as dependence upon God." Why does the distinction matter practically?

Movement V — Proper Motivation and Critique

The two ways fasting dies.

Scripture is candid that fasting is among the most easily corrupted of the disciplines, precisely because it is visible, difficult, and impressive. Two texts diagnose the two characteristic corruptions: fasting for an audience, and fasting divorced from justice.

The First Corruption: Fasting for an Audience

Matthew 6:16–18 — "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

The word **ὑποκριταί** is the Greek term for stage-actors, and Jesus presses the theatrical metaphor: they "have received their reward in full" — **ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν**, a commercial term found on ancient receipts meaning "paid in full, account closed." The applause *is* the payment. There is nothing further coming.

The prescribed remedy is not the abolition of fasting but its concealment: anoint the head, wash the face, look ordinary. Note that Jesus does not command a somber-free fast but a *disguised* one. The grooming is deliberate misdirection, undertaken so that the transaction remains between the disciple and the Father "who is in secret."

A pastoral qualification. This text does not forbid corporate or announced fasts. Joel proclaims one; Ezra proclaims one; Nineveh proclaims one; the church at Antioch fasts together. The Lord's target is not visibility but *performance for visibility's sake* — the same distinction He draws regarding almsgiving (6:2–4) and prayer (6:5–6) without thereby forbidding public offerings or corporate prayer. The question is not "will anyone know?" but "for whose eyes am I doing this?"

The Second Corruption: Fasting Divorced from Justice

Isaiah 58:3–7 — "'Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?' Behold, on the day of your fast you pursue your own desire and drive hard all your workers... Is this not the fast which I choose: to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

The chapter opens with the people's grievance, and it is a grievance about *unrewarded ritual*: we fasted, why don't You notice? God's answer is devastating in its specificity. On the very day of their abstinence they were **driving hard all their workers** (v. 3) and quarreling and striking with wicked fists (v. 4). The fast had become a religious observance performed on top of, and in no tension with, an oppressive economic practice.

Then comes the redefinition. God's chosen fast (צום אֶבְחָרְהוּ) is described almost entirely in transitive verbs directed at other people: *loosen, undo, let go free, break, divide, bring in, cover*. This is a startling rhetorical move — the LORD defines fasting not by what one abstains from but by what one *releases*. The clause "and not to hide yourself from your own flesh" (וּמִבְשָׁרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם) closes the escape route: the poor man is your own flesh, and you may not disappear from him.

Note the logic. Isaiah does not say that food-fasting is worthless and social justice is the real thing; he says that a fast which leaves the oppressed still bound has not understood what abstention *means*. To renounce one's own bread for a day while withholding bread from the hungry is a self-contradiction. The promised consequence is spectacular: light breaking forth like the dawn, healing springing up speedily, and the LORD answering "Here I am" (vv. 8–9). The prayer they complained went unheard is answered the moment the yoke comes off.

Synthesis

Fasting is destroyed in two directions: upward, when it becomes a performance for human eyes; and outward, when it coexists with injustice toward human neighbors. Matthew 6 guards the vertical dimension; Isaiah 58 guards the horizontal. Both are guarding the same thing: that the abstention actually mean what it claims to mean.

Discussion

1. "They have their reward in full." How does understanding ἀπέχουσιν as a commercial receipt-term sharpen the warning?
2. Reconcile Matthew 6:16–18 with the proclaimed public fasts of Joel 2, Ezra 8, and Acts 13. What precisely is Jesus prohibiting?
3. Isaiah defines God's chosen fast with verbs of release rather than verbs of abstention. What would it look like for a congregation to fast in Isaiah's sense?
4. Self-examination: which of the two corruptions is the greater danger in your own practice and in your congregation's?

Movement VI — Devotion and Dedication

Fasting as a settled way of life.

Exposition

Luke 2:37 — "and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers."

Anna is the New Testament's portrait of fasting not as crisis-response but as *vocation*. Luke's language is deliberate: **λατρεύουσα νηστείαις καὶ δεήσεσιν νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν** — "worshiping with fastings and petitions night and day." The verb λατρεύω is cultic, the same root behind our word *liturgy* in its priestly sense; the plural νηστείαις indicates repeated, habitual fasts rather than one heroic episode.

Her reward is the theological center of the vignette. Having spent perhaps sixty years in this hidden and unremunerated attentiveness, Anna is present at the precise hour when the Consolation of Israel is carried into the temple courts, and she "continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38). A lifetime of fasting positioned an octogenarian widow to recognize the Messiah in an infant that everyone else in the temple walked past. There is a doctrine of spiritual perception buried here: the long habit of self-denial trains the eyes.

Note too that Anna's fasting is *expectant*. She belongs among those "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Christian fasting is likewise eschatological in shape — hunger held onto deliberately, as a rehearsal of longing for the Bridegroom's return.

Deuteronomy 9:9 — "When I went up to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the LORD had made with you, then I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water."

Moses' fast is unique in Scripture in that it includes abstention from *water*, which places it outside normal human capacity and marks it as a sustained miracle — a man kept alive not by bread but by the presence of God, in exact anticipation of Deuteronomy 8:3, which Moses himself had already spoken (8:3) and which Christ would later quote in His own wilderness fast. Note also that Moses repeats the forty days a second time in intercession after the golden calf (9:18; Exod 34:28). The pattern is covenantal: revelation received in fasting, and covenant restored through fasting intercession.

The typological line is unmistakable. Moses forty days on the mountain receiving the covenant; Elijah forty days to Horeb in covenant crisis (1 Kgs 19:8); Christ forty days in the wilderness inaugurating the new covenant. Fasting, in each case, attends a hinge of redemptive history.

The Redemptive-Historical Question: Do Christians Fast?

The lesson would be incomplete without addressing Matthew 9:14–17 (par. Mark 2:18–22; Luke 5:33–39). John's disciples ask why Jesus' disciples do not fast. His answer: "The attendants of the

bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? **But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."**

Three conclusions follow:

1. **Christian fasting is expressly predicted by Christ.** "Then they will fast" is not permission but forecast. The book of Acts records its fulfillment (13:2–3; 14:23), and the apostolic church fasted as a matter of course.
2. **Christian fasting has a new center.** It is now bridal — the fasting of those who have known the Bridegroom's presence and await His return. It is therefore never merely penitential; it is also *anticipatory*, an ache pointed toward the marriage supper.
3. **Christian fasting is not old-wineskin religion.** The parables of the patch and the wineskins that immediately follow warn against fitting the new thing into old forms. Fasting under the new covenant cannot be calendar-driven obligation performed for merit; it must be the spontaneous expression of a joy that is temporarily absent from its object.

Synthesis

Anna and Moses together frame the discipline's full range: the hidden, decades-long faithfulness of an unnoticed widow, and the mountaintop, covenant-making fast of the mediator. Both are fasting; neither is negotiating with God. And Christ's word in Matthew 9 places the church squarely between the two comings, fasting as a bride whose husband has stepped out of sight.

Discussion

1. What is the connection between Anna's lifelong fasting and her recognition of the infant Christ?
2. Moses' fast becomes the ground of Deuteronomy 8:3, which Christ quotes in Matthew 4:4. Trace the theological thread.
3. Explain "then they will fast" (Matt 9:15). How does the bridal framing change the emotional register of Christian fasting compared to Old Testament penitential fasts?

Doctrinal Summary: Eight Theses on Fasting

1. **Fasting is nowhere commanded of the church and everywhere assumed of the disciple.** Christ says "when," not "if" (Matt 6:16).
2. **Fasting is soul-affliction expressed in bodily abstention.** The Levitical idiom *'innāh nepeš* defines the act by its inward reality, not its outward mechanics.
3. **Fasting has no meritorious value whatsoever.** It does not purchase, pressure, or persuade. David's "who knows?" (2 Sam 12:22) is the only posture Scripture permits.
4. **Fasting is always the servant of something else** — prayer, confession, discernment, commissioning, worship. Detached from these it becomes either theater (Matt 6) or hypocrisy (Isa 58).
5. **Fasting is both private and corporate.** Scripture records proclaimed national fasts and hidden personal ones, and commends both.
6. **Fasting must issue in justice.** A fast that leaves the yoke unbroken is the fast God does not choose (Isa 58:5–6).
7. **Christian fasting is bridal and eschatological.** It is the hunger of those who have tasted the Bridegroom's presence and wait for His return (Matt 9:15).
8. **Fasting is a means, not an end.** Its object is God Himself. When the fast becomes interesting in its own right, it has already begun to fail.

Practical Guidance for Implementation

Beginning

- **Begin with the object, not the method.** Decide what you are seeking God for before deciding how long you will abstain. A fast without a petition is an empty gesture.
- **Begin modestly.** One meal, or the daylight hours of a single day, is a legitimate biblical fast. Nowhere does Scripture make forty days normative; the two forty-day fasts in Scripture (Moses, Christ) are unique redemptive-historical events, and Christ's was Spirit-led.
- **Fill the vacated time with prayer and Scripture.** Fasting without prayer is merely hunger. Use the meal hours themselves for the Word.
- **Break the fast gently**, both physically and spiritually. David washed, worshiped, and then ate (2 Sam 12:20).

Cautions

- **Health.** Those who are pregnant or nursing, diabetic, in recovery from an eating disorder, elderly, adolescent, or on medication requiring food should not undertake food fasts without medical counsel. Abstention from other lawful goods — media, entertainment, certain comforts — may serve the same spiritual end without physical risk. Fasting is not a test of toughness, and there is no piety in harming the body God gave you.
- **Conscience and liberty.** Do not impose your practice on others, and do not measure others by it (Rom 14:1–6; Col 2:16–23). Do not disclose your fasts casually.
- **Marriage and household.** Corporate household or congregational fasts should be entered by agreement, in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 7:5.
- **Legalism.** The moment you begin to feel that God owes you something, stop and read 2 Samuel 12:22 again.

Corporate Application for a Congregation

Given the biblical pattern, a church might reasonably call fasts at the following junctures: the calling of a pastor or the ordination of elders (Acts 14:23); the sending of missionaries (Acts 13:2–3); seasons of open sin or discipline within the body (1 Sam 7:6); grave illness or crisis affecting the congregation (2 Sam 12:16); and periods of significant decision or transition (Ezra 8:21). In each case the fast should be *announced with its purpose stated, voluntary as to participation, and joined to an appointed gathering for prayer* — and, in obedience to Isaiah 58, to a concrete act of mercy toward the poor.

Assessment

Short answer (define or identify):

1. Give the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary of fasting and explain what *'innāh nepeš* contributes to the definition.
2. What is the one fast commanded in the Torah, and where is it legislated?
3. State the textual issue at Matthew 17:21 and its bearing on doctrine.

Exegetical:

4. Exegete Joel 2:12–13, giving particular attention to the relationship between v. 12 and v. 13a, and to the function of the covenant formula in v. 13b.
5. Explain how Isaiah 58:6–7 redefines fasting, and account for the shift from intransitive to transitive verbs.

Synthetic:

6. Using 2 Samuel 12:16–23, construct a doctrine of intercessory fasting that accounts for unanswered prayer.
7. From Matthew 9:14–17, argue whether and how Christians ought to fast.

Applicatory:

8. Draft a one-page call to fasting for a congregation facing a specific decision, incorporating the safeguards of Matthew 6 and Isaiah 58.

Scripture Index

Reference	Occasion
Deut 9:9	Moses; covenant reception
1 Sam 7:6	Israel at Mizpah; corporate confession
2 Sam 12:16	David; intercession for his son
Ezra 8:21–23	Ezra; guidance and protection for the journey
Neh 1:4	Nehemiah; lament and intercession
Ps 35:13	David; intercession for enemies
Isa 58:3–7	Critique of empty fasting
Dan 9:3	Daniel; confession and prayer over Scripture
Joel 2:12–13	Call to national repentance
Jonah 3:5–8	Nineveh; repentance and reformation
Matt 4:1–2	Christ; preparation and temptation
Matt 6:16–18	Proper motivation; secrecy
Matt 17:21	Spiritual conflict (textually disputed)
Luke 2:37	Anna; lifelong devotion
Acts 13:2–3	Antioch; missionary commissioning
Acts 14:23	Appointment of elders

Supporting texts for further study: Lev 16:29–31; 23:27–32; Judg 20:26; 2 Chr 20:3; Esth 4:16; Isa 58:8–9; Zech 7:1–7; 8:19; Matt 9:14–17; Mark 2:18–22; 9:29; Luke 4:1–2; 18:12; Acts 9:9; 10:30; 27:33; 1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 6:5; 11:27; Col 2:20–23.

Confessional and historical sources: Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) 22.5; Westminster Confession of Faith 21.5; Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 108; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.12.14–18.

Prepared for Pine First Baptist Church