

First 40 Days on Mount Sinai (with Moses Fasting) (Exodus 24:9-18)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

I. Review from the Previous Lessons

- a. After proclaiming the Ten Commandments to the Israelites gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, about two months after departing Egypt, the Lord gives additional laws to Moses.
- b. A covenant is established between the Lord and the Israelite nation. Moses reads the laws of the covenant to the people and writes them down. The people announce “with one voice” that they will obey everything that the Lord commanded.
- c. Then the covenant is confirmed by blood from animal sacrifice. Half of the blood is poured on an altar Moses built to the Lord; and blood from the other half is sprinkled on the people.

II. Moses Ascends Mount Sinai

- a. Read **Exodus 24:9-18**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. Moses goes up, perhaps to the foot of the mountain, accompanied by a larger group. The first stage of the trip includes:
 1. Moses with his assistant *Joshua*;
 - a. Recall that the name ‘Joshua’ is from the Hebrew language.
 - b. The same name in Greek, as found in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament as well as in the Greek New Testament in **Acts 7:45** and **Hebrews 4:8**, is *Jesus*.
 2. Moses’ brother Aaron, along with two of Aaron’s sons: Nadab and Abihu; and
 3. Seventy elders of Israel (this included all of Israel’s “chosen men”).
 - ii. Moses and the larger group go to “the place where the God of Israel stood”.

1. The place is described. "Under the Lord's feet" it was like blocks of sapphire stone. Its appearance is described as like "heaven's firmament" or like "the heavens in its clarity".
 2. The men eat and drink at that place.
 3. From there, the Lord calls Moses to ascend further up the mountain. He says that He will give Moses the stone tablets with the Law and commandments.
- iii. Moses and Joshua ascend the mountain; the others remain behind.
1. If any issues come up, Moses says that they should be brought to Aaron and Hur, who are left in charge. (These are the same two who held up his arms during the battle with Amalek in **Exodus 17**.)
- iv. The "glory of the Lord" descends upon the top of the mountain for six days. On the seventh day, the Lord calls Moses from the cloud.
1. The top of the mountain appears like a burning fire.
 2. Moses goes into the midst of the cloud and is there "40 days and 40 nights".
- c. God dwelling *in darkness*: touching on His deep, mysterious nature
- i. Origen (c. 185-255 AD), a teacher in the church in Alexandria, Egypt, pointed to this unusual encounter that Moses had with God to emphasize the mysterious nature of God.
 1. "Now, according to a Hebrew figure of speech, it is said of God in the eighteenth Psalm, that 'He made darkness His secret place,' to signify that those notions which should be worthily entertained of God are invisible and unknowable, because God conceals Himself in darkness, as it were, from those who cannot endure the splendors of His knowledge, or are incapable of looking at them, partly owing to the pollution of their understanding, which is clothed with the body of mortal lowliness, and partly owing to its feebler power of comprehending God.
 2. "And in order that it may appear that the knowledge of God has rarely been granted to men, and has been found in very few individuals, Moses is related to have entered into the darkness where God was. And again, with regard to Moses it is said: 'Moses alone shall come near the Lord, but the rest shall not come nigh.' And again, that the prophet may show the depth of the doctrines which relate to God, and which is unattainable by

those who do not possess the ‘Spirit which searches all things, even the deep things of God,’ he added: ‘The abyss like a garment is His covering.’

3. “No; our Lord and Saviour, the Logos of God, manifesting that the greatness of the knowledge of the Father is appropriately comprehended and known pre-eminently by Him alone, and in the second place by those whose minds are enlightened by the Logos Himself and God, declares: ‘No man knows the Son, but the Father; neither knows any man the Father but the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him.’
 4. “For no one can worthily know the ‘uncreated’ and first-born of all created nature like the Father who begat Him, nor any one the Father like the living Logos (= *Word*), and His Wisdom and Truth. By sharing in Him who takes away from the Father what is called ‘darkness,’ which He ‘made His secret place,’ and ‘the abyss,’ which is called His ‘covering,’ and in this way unveiling the Father, everyone knows the Father who is capable of knowing Him.”
 5. (Source: Origen, *Against Celsus*, book 6, chapter 17; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 581)
- ii. Some of the points made by Origen here:
1. This event from **Exodus 24**, where the Lord is found in darkness, points to the fact that God (the Father) is mysterious and unapproachable by normal human means.
 2. The *only way a human can possibly begin to understand the Father* is through his Son (the Word of God made flesh) and the Spirit of God.
- iii. Origen understood from the Scriptures that the nature of God is that He is far beyond our human comprehension.
1. Read **Psalm 18:7-16** (designated **Psalm 17** in LXX)
 - a. “He made darkness His hiding place”
 2. Read **Psalm 104:1-7** (designated **Psalm 103** in LXX)
 - a. “The deep [in the LXX, literally *the abyss*] like a garment is His covering”
 3. “I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep this commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ’s appearing, which He

will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.” (1 Timothy 6:13-16, NKJV)

- iv. It is only through Jesus (whom we can see) and the Spirit dwelling in us (who understands the deep things of God) that we can know God.
 - 1. “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he *has made him known*.” (John 1:18, ESV)
 - 2. “...For the Spirit searches all things, *yes, the deep things of God*. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, *that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God*.” (1 Corinthians 2:10-12, NKJV)
- d. Moses was “forty days and forty nights” with the Lord.
 - i. **Question:** What other important references to the number “40” can you think of from the Scriptures?
 - ii. Significant examples of the number ‘40’ in the Scriptures:
 - 1. It rained for “40 days and nights” during the flood of Noah (**Genesis 7:12**).
 - 2. Moses here and in two other places has an intense 40-day period with the Lord.
 - 3. The 12 spies were 40 days exploring Canaan (**Numbers 13:25**).
 - 4. As a result of the unfaithfulness of most of the spies and the people, the Israelites must spend 40 years in the Wilderness before entering Canaan (**Numbers 14:34**).
 - 5. Elijah fasted for 40 days and nights before encountering the Lord at Horeb, which is Mount Sinai (**1 Kings 19:8**).
 - 6. Jesus went into the Wilderness for 40 days, during which He fasted and was tempted by Satan (**Matthew 4:1-2**).
 - iii. **Question:** What do these examples have in common? Is there something important that the Lord is trying to communicate to us by repeatedly using this number “40”?

1. **Answer:** It seems to me that the common element is a period of *difficulty, trials and testing*. This is a time of suffering and spiritual refinement.
2. Since the 40 years in the Wilderness is foreshadowing the Christian life (based on what Paul says in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**), we should expect this time to be one of trials, tests and suffering to refine us.
3. Likewise, Jesus *our forerunner* went through a period of trials “in the Wilderness” after He was baptized, during which He was tempted.
 - a. In this He shows us the way by the example of His own life. (We also must expect a time of temptation and testing after we are baptized.)
 - b. He responded to Satan with the word of God; and *overcame* when He was tempted.
4. It should be very clear that the so-called ‘prosperity gospel’ (which encourages people to become Christians so that they can enjoy a better life here and now), in all its mutant forms, is *a false gospel!*

III. **Moses Fasted 40 Days and 40 Nights**

- a. Read the parallel account of this event, **Deuteronomy 9:7-18**.
 - i. The first time that Moses went up to receive the Ten Commandments, he fasted 40 days and nights (**Deuteronomy 9:9**).
- b. Actually, it is recorded that Moses fasted for a period of 40 days and nights on three separate occasions, all within a relatively short amount of time (several months).
 - i. He fasted 40 days and nights when he was on Mount Sinai to receive the stone tablets the first time.
 - ii. Then he fasted 40 days and nights after he came down and was angry with the people for worshipping the golden calf. He prayed that the Lord would not wipe out the people.
 - iii. Finally, when he went up on Mount Sinai to receive the second set of stone tablets (the first set being smashed), he prayed and fasted *again* for 40 days and nights!
 1. Read **Exodus 34:1-5** and **34:27-28**.
- c. **Question:** What does this tell us about Moses?

- i. It seems to me that he must have been a *very thin* man! (At least at this point in his life.)
 1. Fasting for 40 days is approaching (if not *beyond*) the limit of survival for most people. Your body consumes whatever stores it has and then goes after the muscles and anything not absolutely essential.
 2. I assume that God was miraculously assisting Moses in this fast, since no one (to the best of my knowledge) can survive 40 days without fluids and survive by normal means.
- ii. I see Moses coming down the mountain, when he smashed the stone tablets in anger, as *gaunt and intense*!
- iii. Stephen said that Moses was “... learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.” (**Acts 7:22**, NKJV) However, Moses was not simply a gifted leader and man of knowledge and action. He was also a *spiritual giant* in his walk with the Lord. He was willing to deny the flesh to an extent that very few have ever done.
- iv. He was a very spiritual shepherd of the people. He cared much more about them than about his own comfort.
 1. He embodied the characteristics of a good shepherd of God’s people, as described in **Ezekiel 34**.
 2. When Moses was told he would die in the Wilderness before the people entered the Promised Land, he was concerned that the people left behind would not be left “like sheep without a shepherd” (**Numbers 27:17**).
- v. Moses had to be a very humble man, recognizing that all the power came from the Lord.
 1. “(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.)” (**Numbers 12:3**, NKJV)
 2. Regardless of whether Moses himself wrote that statement or it was added by a scribe or by Joshua later on, it is a *true statement either way*!
- vi. He saw fasting as vitally important when everything was at stake.
- vii. He was one of a very elite group of those who fasted and prayed for such an extended period of time: in the company of Elijah and Jesus.
 1. All three worked amazing miraculous wonders.

2. All three were there at the Mount of Transfiguration (**Matthew 17:3, Mark 9:5 and Luke 9:30**).
- d. **Question:** Was fasting *just for people in the Old Testament* (or perhaps only through the time of John the Baptist)?
- i. One of the criticisms of Jesus was that His disciples (unlike those of John the Baptist) did not fast.
 1. “And the Lord said, ‘To what then shall I liken the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, saying: “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not weep.” For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, “He has a demon.” The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” But wisdom is justified by all her children.’” (**Luke 7:31–35, NKJV**)
 2. “Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but *Your disciples do not fast?*’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But *the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.* No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.’” (**Matthew 9:14–17, NKJV**)
 - a. **Question:** Jesus said, “In those days [when He, the bridegroom, is taken away] they [His disciples] will fast.” *What did He mean* by that statement?
 - i. Does He mean that during the three days in the tomb (after He is crucified but before He is resurrected) his disciples will fast?
 - ii. Or does He mean that after He is crucified and ascends to heaven (*the period of time we are now in*), His disciples (*also referring to us*) would fast?
 - ii. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if we would see the kingdom of God (**Matthew 5:30**).

1. Note that the Pharisee in **Luke 18:12** said that he fasted *twice a week*.
 - a. The old Jewish custom was to fast twice a week, on the second and fifth days of the week (Mondays and Thursdays).
 - i. See *Didache* chapter 8; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 379.
2. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:
 - a. "*When you pray, you shall not pray like the hypocrites...*"
 - i. **Question:** Imagine that you met someone who claimed to be a Christian. you asked them, "How often do you pray?" and the person answered "*Never*", or "*The last time I prayed was six years ago.*" What would you think?
 - ii. What if the person responded, "I am *already* a Christian, so *why do I need to pray?*"
 1. What would you think?
 2. Would you question whether that person really is a Christian?
 3. What would Jesus think?
 - iii. Jesus is not saying, "Don't pray." He is saying, "Don't pray *like the hypocrites*" (who had bad hearts and were doing it publicly to make a show of it to impress other people).
 - iv. Now let's consider asking the same question, but about *fasting* instead!
 - b. Read **Matthew 6:16-18**.
 - i. Jesus said, "*When you fast*, do not be like the hypocrites..."
 - ii. Jesus says that if we *fast in secret* (with the right heart, not like the hypocrites) we will be *rewarded openly* by God!
 - iii. Jesus clearly *expects His followers to be fasting!*
3. Some examples of fasting after the resurrection of Jesus.

- a. The apostle Paul prayed and fasted for three days from the time of his first encounter with Jesus, until he was baptized by Ananias (**Acts 9:1-18**).
- b. Read **Acts 10:1-6, 10:30-32**.
 - i. Cornelius was fasting when the angel said to him, "Your prayers and alms [gifts to the poor] have come up as a memorial offering before God..."
- c. Read **Acts 13:2-3**.
 - i. Disciples in the church in Antioch were fasting and praying when the Holy Spirit directed them to send Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for a special missionary trip.
- d. Read **Acts 14:23**.
 - i. Paul and those with him prayed and fasted when they appointed elders in the various cities.
- e. Read **1 Corinthians 7:5**.
 - i. The married Christians in the church in Corinth are instructed not to withhold marital affection from their spouses "...except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer..." (**1 Corinthians 7:5**, NKJV)
 - ii. This shows me that fasting was *a normal part of the Christian life* and that it included abstaining from physical intimacy during the time of the fast.
- f. Read **2 Corinthians 6:3-7**.
 - i. Paul describes what they went through as a "ministers of God", the various trials and sufferings involved, including "in sleeplessness, *in fastings...*".
- iii. **Question:** Are you a disciple of Jesus?
 1. Do you pray?
 2. Do you fast?
 - a. When was the last time you fasted?
 - b. Is this a *normal part* of your spiritual life?

3. **Personal note:** If you find these questions challenging, you are not alone. These questions are very convicting to me also. I (like almost everyone) enjoy food and eating. During my own spiritual journey, there have been times when fasting was part of my life and (more) parts where it was lacking. In preparing this lesson, it was clear that *I need to make immediate changes in my own spiritual life.*
 - a. I encourage you to take this seriously as well!
- iv. Jesus said that *His followers would fast after He was taken away.*
 1. We see in the New Testament that in the beginning, Christians took this statement of Jesus *seriously and literally.*
 2. **Questions:** Do you believe Jesus was telling the truth when He made that statement? Are you *one of His followers?*
- v. Years ago I was teaching a class to a group in a large church, and I asked the question: “Which of the following three groups of people do you most associate with fasting: Muslims, Christians or Jews?”
 1. The response: everyone in the class said they most associate *Muslims* with fasting, due to their well-known practice of fasting during the month of Ramadan each year, from sunrise to sunset.
 2. Some said they would think of the *Jews second*, due to their practice of fasting on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.
 3. **HOWEVER**, in the beginning the Christians typically fasted at least twice a week, therefore they fasted *over 100 days per year.* (In comparison, Muslims are supposed to fast for 30 days each year during Ramadan.)
- vi. Attitude and practice of fasting in the early church.
 1. An early Christian custom was fasting two days per week (Wednesday and Friday). Note the significance of Friday, the day that Jesus was crucified.
 - a. See *Didache* chapter 8; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 379.
 - i. Note that the *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, is considered one of the earliest Christian writings we have outside the New Testament, likely composed c. 80-140 AD.

- b. For more on early Christian attitudes and practices related to fasting, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, article on “Fasting”. Also, see audio lesson by David Bercot, *What the Early Christians Believed about Tithing and Fasting* (currently available free for listening online, or from Scroll Publishing).
- 2. The practices regarding the length of a one-day fast varied. Some Christians would fast until 3 pm; some until sundown; some all day.
 - a. The significance of 3 pm (“about the ninth hour”, with the day starting at sunrise, around 6 am): that was the time at which Jesus died and was taken down from the cross (**Matthew 27:45-50**).
- 3. In addition to the regular times of fasting, sometimes Christians *also* fasted for special occasions.
- 4. There were *different practices* of fasting (no food at all, bread only, water only, etc.)
 - a. (**Warning:** Please don’t start by attempting a full 40-day Moses-style fast! I encourage everyone to start simply with one-day fasting that was customary for Christians in the beginning. If ever you want to embark on a longer, more severe fast first talk to someone who is experienced with that, to make sure you are doing it safely.)
- vii. Thoughts on fasting from early Christian writer Tertullian (c. 160-230 AD, from Carthage in North Africa). You may notice his biting sarcasm and sense of humor in some of his comments:
 - 1. The Epicurean philosophers would say, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (Paul recalls this pagan saying, in 1 **Corinthians 15:32**.) However, Tertullian insisted that Christians should say *the opposite*: “Let us **NOT** eat and drink [in other words, let us *fast*], for tomorrow we die.”
 - 2. While Olympic wrestlers would try to bulk up and gain weight for their contests, we Christians should be doing the opposite in our training: fasting (thereby losing weight) in preparation for *our* contest.
 - 3. Tertullian said (presumably tongue-in-cheek), “It is easier to enter through the narrow gate *if one is thin* (from fasting).”

- a. He also said, in the same vein, “It is easier for one to be raised from the dead if one is *lighter in weight* (from fasting).”
 - b. He further remarked, “Those who are over-fed [due to eating too much and fasting too little] may be of *greater benefit to the lions and bears* [in the arena, where they can be eaten by wild animals during persecution] *than they are to God.*”
4. (Source: Tertullian, *On Fasting*, chapter 17; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, pp. 113-114)
- e. What happened to the Christian faith and lifestyle regarding fasting
 - i. **Question:** Clearly, fasting was an important part of the Christian life in the beginning, but it has become so neglected in most of the modern Christian world. What happened? How and why did fasting become so unpopular in most Christian groups today?
 - 1. **Possible Answer:** When I listen to the radio, I often hear advertisements for financial advisors who are looking to manage the financial assets of those approaching or in retirement. They almost always offer a free dinner and seminar at some well-known restaurant to draw in prospective clients.
 - a. People love to eat, and food is a great lure to pulling many people in.
 - b. Likewise, many churches imitate this approach when trying to pull in unbelievers or “the unchurched”. They *initially lure people in with the promise of good food* (barbecues, fellowship meals, etc.), and use the opportunity to expose visitors to some form of the gospel. Some modern “mega-churches” have even gone so far as to offer espresso bars and gourmet coffees at their services!
 - c. People generally love to eat, and the flesh does NOT want to fast.
 - d. The trend toward “seeker-friendly” churches that use modern marketing-type approaches to draw in new customers by meeting “felt needs”. For example, lures that many churches use today to draw others in include promises of close community, good friends, physical exercise, improved finances, better marriages and help in raising children.

- e. Voluntary fasting for spiritual reasons is *extremely unappealing* to most people in the world (and to worldly Christians)!
- f. **In Closing:** The attitude God wants us to have regarding fasting.
 - i. Read **Isaiah 58**.
 1. The kind of fasting that Christians are to strive for is highlighted here: it includes *fasting from wickedness and sin*. We should devote our times of fasting to *help those in greatest need*.
 2. This description of the kind of righteous fasting that will be blessed by God makes me think of the fast of Cornelius in **Acts 10**, and the description of the sheep (in contrast to the goats) in the Story of the Sheep and Goats in **Matthew 25**.
 3. As Jesus said, if we fast (righteously) in secret, *God will reward us openly*. (**Matthew 6:18**)
 - ii. **Challenge to Christians:** Study these things out, take inventory of your lives, and make spiritual fasting a regular part of your life from now onward!
 1. Imitate *the heart of Moses*, a hero of faith who saw the importance of fasting as a foundation to spiritual life. He fasted for 40 days and nights, *three times*!