

The Daniel Fast

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The Daniel Fast has been popularized in the Christian community for a number of obvious reasons. Beyond the fact it provides a biblical pattern for fasting, it also represents a fast that brought the will of God (a promise to the people of Israel) into motion and resulted in an angelic encounter and revelation. Having said that, it is important to understand the qualities of a Daniel Fast if a community or individual is going to participate in one.

The most obvious components of the Daniel Fast, i.e., the avoidance of meat, grain, and wine and the twenty-one day duration, is the least important aspect upon which one should focus. First, the twenty-one day duration is not prescriptive, but descriptive. The answer that Daniel was seeking came after twenty-one days, but would have come earlier if Gabriel had not been opposed by the Prince of Persia (an obvious reference to a demonic principality over that region). By application, a Daniel Fast concludes when the answer one is seeking finally arrives. It may be less than twenty-one days or it may take longer than twenty-one days. It would seem that a longer duration, by what is implied, would depend upon the enormity or level of influence (or impact) the answer entails. Certainly, the opposition of a principality over the Jews, which directly opposed the sovereignty and prophetic will of God, not to mention and the national welfare of an entire people, incurred a conflict of angelic proportions. In short, the purpose of the fast becomes more important than the duration of the fast. Second, the avoidance of meat, wine, and grain products has more to do with the rejection of the culture in which one finds oneself.

In Daniel 1:12-14, Daniel refuses the king's diet and asks that he and his friends be given only vegetables and water to drink.¹ This is a rejection or refusal by Daniel to comply with the authority of an alien king and his proscriptive wisdom, which was against the dietary laws of the Jews. The text infers that Daniel considered the required diet to be a "defilement." Furthermore, we are told that the diet was the same one which the king enjoyed (it was from "the king's table," which implied fellowship or the sharing/participation with the king and his purposes)(1:5). The king intended to both honor (bribe) and assimilate Daniel and his friends into Babylonian culture, as evidenced by the decree that they were to be trained for three years in the language and literature of Babylonia for the purpose of becoming servants of the king. Daniel did not resist the education imposed (God would use it for his purposes when Daniel rose to leadership).²

¹Such a diet precludes, by its nature, wine, meat, and possibly fruits and grains. One would have to investigate the actual dietary law to determine what was offensive to Daniel, because certain meats, grain and even wine are approved in the dietary law. In fact, wine, grain and oil became a metaphor for the blessing of God in the Old Testament. This leads one to suspect that the defilement had more to do with the culture, preparation of the food, or connection to the king's desire to assimilate them

²This proves once again, that education, itself, is not the defilement, but the belief of the heart. Daniel was prepared to deal with this demonic culture, without becoming a part of it.

He nevertheless rejected the diet because it was explicitly against the tenets of his faith. Therefore, God honored the diet and the men prospered.³ In short a Daniel fast is not so much about what one eats or doesn't eat. It is about the resistance to the cultural assimilation into society which corrupts one's allegiance to God and his Christ. Therefore, a Daniel Fast may include a refusal to watch T.V. or to participate in any aspect of daily life that would tend to dull one spiritually. It is not just an avoidance of worldly culture, but it is also the embracing of the spiritual realm through spiritual discipline. Before we come to the heart of what the Daniel Fast is to accomplish, it is necessary to look at and clarify one more factor.

The actual text of the Daniel Fast is Daniel 9:1-10:21. Here, we are told that his fast entails the following: 1. a diet without "choice" (NIV) or "tasty" (NASB) food (translated in RSV as "pleasant bread"), meat, and wine; 2. a refusal to use lotions (to anoint oneself either for comfort, cleansing, or deodorant (the emphasis is probably any comfort to the flesh, but it could be any attempt of personally cleansing or covering up one's sin), i.e., illegitimate means to console oneself or to feed the flesh; and 3. The wearing of "sack cloth and ashes" is the outward expression of mourning or grief (usually expressed as an act of repentance).⁴ In short, a Daniel Fast is a refusal of comfort for the flesh/soul apart from the life of God, a refusal to participate in the ongoing culture in order to set apart one's self for God's purpose and kingdom, and an active seeking of the face of God through repentance for one's sin and participation in the former matters.

What prompted Daniel's fast?⁵ He had read Jeremiah's prophecy that the desolation of Jerusalem would end after 70 years. Concurrently, Daniel also understood it was because of the sin of the people that Jerusalem suffered desolation and that such sin could have an effect on its restoration. In essence, he knew that the ongoing sin of Israel caused the desolation and its continued presence would be counter intuitive to God's plan for its restoration. Consequently, Daniel entered into a time of petition, through repentance and mourning, in order to see Jerusalem restored. He repented of sin for himself and Israel in order to see the will of God accomplished as God had promised. The revelation that took twenty-one days involved a revelation of the end times, which describes the future geopolitical events that affected the people of God. Beyond the previous analytical considerations, the following characteristics of a Daniel fast are noted:

³It could be argued that God was less concerned about a healthy diet than he was about Daniel and his friends retaining their identity and resisting the influence of the Babylonians. This was always a concern of God's from the time he forbade Israel from associating with the residents of Canaan or taking on their culture. The solution to the problem was the wholesale killing of the Canaanite populations. Later, we learn that Daniel and his friends gained weight, from this diet. Unless they ate starch, weight gain is less likely on a vegetarian diet. In short, the Daniel diet is not about health or "a shot in the arm for" vegetarianism, but an example of what it means to refuse to participate or be assimilated into a secular culture.

⁴This is implied from Daniel's fast in the first year of Darius' reign where Daniel mourned over the desolation of Jerusalem and realized that God had promised that the desolation would end in 70 years. The reign of Darius (a Mede or Persian) occurred one year after the fall of Babylon. Under the Persians, God would begin the process of the Jews returning to Jerusalem.

⁵The Daniel Fast is dated the first year of Darius' reign and in the third year of Cyrus, the King of Persia. Darius is the successor of Cyrus, implying that there may be two separate instances of fasting. However, during the time of Cyrus, the angel mentions Darius, thus the writer conflates the two accounts or expounds on the previous one.

1. The fast was motivated to bring about the will of God into reality, i.e., for God to act.
2. The fast was done in order to see a particular prophecy fulfilled.
3. The fast was an act of repentance for sin by the petitioner and his/her people.
4. The fast was characterized by grief/sorrow/mourning over offending God.
5. The fast involved pulling away from the influence of secular culture.
6. The fast involved a refusal to pamper the flesh or engage in any consolation apart from God. All luxury was avoided consistent with mourning.
7. The fast involved a serious dedication to prayer.
8. The fast was for the purpose of revelation and was concluded after an answer was received.
9. The fast involved an outward abstention—in this case only vegetables and water were consumed.⁶
10. The outcome was an angelic visitation.
11. The fast resulted in spiritual warfare and a confrontation with principalities.

To summarize, for the purpose of application, a Daniel Fast is for the purpose of confessing one's sin and the sin of one's community in order to position the heart to come into agreement with the purposes of God; so that He might bring to reality the covenant promises he has made with the individual and the community of which she or he is a part. The result of the fast is greater commitment and holiness toward the purpose of God, a revelation (angelic or otherwise) imparted by God which is the answer to the reason for the fast, and it is an act of spiritual warfare which confronts the forces against the will of God.

⁶Some scholars suggest that this diet was one of only bread and water (Interp. Comm. 501).