

The **Bible** Unpacked

Comprehensive Study Series

The Bible's teaching compiled
for established believers

Paul Mallison

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The Bible's teaching compiled
for established believers

29. Significant Practices

Paul Mallison

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A Quick Word

This series of studies aims to present a compilation of the Bible's teachings in a clear and readable order. There are 40 booklets in the series, based on the 40 chapters of the book *The Bible Unpacked - Comprehensive Edition*. Each booklet has two sections, which can be used for two or more studies.

The material contains Bible verses. Before the verses are headings, which reflect what the verses say – in particular the parts of the verses in *italics*. The verses are sometimes followed by a comment.

The verses often have a brief introduction. Usually these state who is speaking and often who they are speaking to. Apart from God and Jesus Christ, the main speakers are:

- Moses – who lead the Israelites and taught them God's laws;
- David – Israel's greatest king who wrote many of the psalms, most of which are essentially prayers;
- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and other prophets – who spoke to the people of Israel on God's behalf; and
- Paul, Peter, John and other leaders of the early church – who spoke to various groups and wrote letters to believers.

Much care has been taken in order to correctly interpret the verses. Nevertheless, if you encounter a verse that is used to teach something that is contrary to or goes beyond your understanding, assess its use by doing such things as: reading the passage it is from; and considering how its teaching fits in with Scripture as a whole (e.g. interpret OT teaching in the light of NT teaching).

For more information on *The Bible Unpacked* and free downloads, go to the website: www.thebibleunpacked.net.

Users are asked to pray regularly for persecuted Christians and, if possible, support them financially. These things can be done through organizations that provide aid to them and/or prayer notices, such as those listed under [Persecuted Christians](#).

Suggestions for Study Groups

Preliminary matters:

- Beforehand the leader should: check the context of any verses they are not familiar with; and review the questions. If need be, they should compose questions more applicable to the group.
- Each person should have a Bible, for things such as checking a verse's context. It would also be helpful to have Bible commentaries on hand.
- Pray before beginning the study. Ask God for help in understanding the meaning of the verses and to affect your lives through them. Also pray together at the end.

Doing the study:

- Ideally, read the material and answer the questions prior to the meeting. Then share answers and discuss any issues arising from the material in the meeting.
- Alternatively, read the material and answer the questions in the meeting – reading either aloud as a group or individually (prior to sharing answers). If reading as a group, **try having one person read the headings, another read the verses and another read the comments.** Additionally, a fourth person could read the Bible references.

General or concluding questions:

If time permits, conclude with one or more of the following questions:

- What is something that you either: **did not know** before; gained **greater insight** into; or **needed reminding** of?
- What verse would be helpful to memorize and bear in mind during the next week?
- In taking the verses seriously, is there anything you should change in:
 - (a) how you relate to God and/or to other people; or
 - (b) any other area of your life (e.g. attitudes, values or behavior)?

If so, are there any specific steps you could take to do this?

I. Symbolic Rites

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are considered by many churches to be the Christian rites or sacraments. "Sacrament" comes from a Latin term meaning "military oath". The sacraments are often spoken of as being an outward sign with an inner significance. They are practiced by churches in worship ceremonies. Circumcision was also a rite practiced by God's people, under the first covenant, but has no such relevance under the second covenant.

a) Baptism

The Greek translated as “baptism” denotes washing in water. Opinions differ as to whether baptism need necessarily involve full immersion in water, as opposed to simply pouring or sprinkling water on the person being baptized.

God’s people are baptized in (or into) the “name” of Jesus Christ

ACTS 19:5 On hearing this, *they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.* ESV

Being baptized in or into the “name” of Jesus Christ, is in part a declaration of our identification and relationship with Jesus Christ, and our commitment or allegiance to him. This explanation reflects both the meaning of the Latin from which “sacrament” comes – military oath (as commented above) – and the concept of being united with him (discussed in the following subsection).

Baptism into Jesus Christ signifies being united with him – with the corresponding implications

ROM 6:2B–5 How can we who died as far as sin is concerned go on living in it? ³Or don’t you know that *all of us who were baptized into union with the Messiah Jesus were baptized into his death?* ⁴*Therefore, through baptism we were buried with him into his death so that, just as the Messiah was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too may live an entirely new life.* ⁵*For if we have become united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.* ISV

After indicating that baptism signifies the spiritual union of the believer with Christ (v. 3), Paul draws parallels between baptism and other aspects of this spiritual union. Paul appears to parallel one’s immersion in water at baptism, with being immersed in death with Christ in his death (vv. 3–4a, 5a). As such, baptism portrays the death of our old self which was enslaved to sin (cf. vv. 6–7), and so a death to sin (v. 2b). Subsequently baptism symbolizes one being raised up in union with Christ to live a new spiritual life (vv. 4b, 5b).

Baptism signifies belief

ACTS 8:12 *But when they believed Philip as he was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they began to be baptized, both men and women.* NET

Baptism is a declaration and confirmation of belief.

Baptism signifies the washing away of sins

ACTS 22:16 [ANANIAS, TO SAUL:] *And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.* NET

This should not be interpreted to mean that baptism in itself brings the forgiveness of sin. Rather, the external washing in water is symbolic of one's spiritual cleansing.

Baptism signifies or is linked with receiving the Holy Spirit

ACTS 10:47 [PETER:] *"No one can refuse to baptize these people with water. They have received the Holy Spirit in the same way that we did."* GW

Here Peter is referring to Gentiles who had come to faith.

What is meant by being baptized in (or into) the name of Jesus Christ?

What reasons are there for a professing Christian to be baptized?

Have you been baptized? Why or why not?

Pray for persecuted Christians

b) The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is regularly practiced in churches. It primarily symbolizes and commemorates Jesus Christ's death for us. The breaking of the bread symbolizes the breaking of his body, and the pouring out of the wine symbolizes the pouring out of his blood. Eating of the bread and drinking of the wine is in part a declaration of our own belief in Christ's death and its implications – and correspondingly signifies our participation in the forgiveness and other outcomes that it made possible.

Observe the Lord's Supper – in remembrance of Jesus Christ and his death

1COR 11:23–25 [PAUL, TO THE CORINTHIAN BELIEVERS:] For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you, that *the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread,* ²⁴*and after he had given thanks he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* ²⁵*In the same way, he also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, every time you drink it, in remembrance of me."* NET

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (v. 25) speaks of Jesus Christ's blood, shed in his death, introducing the new relationship – or covenant – between God and his people. In part at least this was achieved by his death bringing forgiveness for the sins of God's people. The shedding of his blood inaugurated the new covenant and ratified or sealed it (cf. AMP, GNT, NCV, NLT) – just as the sprinkling of "the blood of the covenant" by Moses ceremonially confirmed the old covenant (cf. Ex 24:5–8).

Sharing in the Lord's Supper also symbolizes sharing in the blood and body of Jesus Christ

1COR 10:16–17 [PAUL, TO THE CORINTHIAN BELIEVERS:] *The cup of blessing that we bless is a sign of our sharing in the blood of the Messiah, isn't it? The bread that we break is a sign of our sharing in the body of the Messiah, isn't it? ¹⁷Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, because all of us partake of the one loaf.* ISV

The two rhetorical questions in v. 16 appear to imply that drinking from the cup and eating of the bread – in addition to remembering Jesus Christ and his death – symbolize one’s participation in what Christ’s death accomplished, i.e. forgiveness and thus salvation. However, in view of v. 17, the second rhetorical question may well additionally or alternatively mean that eating from the one loaf of bread symbolizes one being part of and participating in Christ’s body, the church.

Further insights on the Lord’s Supper

ACTS 2:42 *They [the believers] were devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* NET

This suggests that the Lord’s Supper – “the breaking of bread” – should be practiced regularly.

1COR 5:7B [PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.* NET

Paul is drawing a parallel here between the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (with the resultant salvation) and the sacrificial lamb of the Passover meal (which signified the deliverance/salvation from Egypt). Particularly in light of this parallel, by instituting the observance of “the Lord’s Supper” at a Passover meal (cf. Matt 26:17–19, 26–28) Jesus himself may have been intimating a parallel between it and the Jewish Passover meal. As such, observing the Lord’s Supper similarly celebrates and signifies God’s salvation – but a greater, ultimate salvation.

Do not participate in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner

1COR 11:27–29 [PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *It follows that if anyone eats the Lord’s bread or drinks from his cup in a way that dishonors him, he or she is guilty of sin against the Lord’s body and blood. ²⁸So then, you should all examine yourselves first, and then eat the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹For if people do not recognize the meaning of the Lord’s body when they eat the bread and drink from the cup, they bring judgment on themselves as they eat and drink.* GNT

The instruction to “examine” oneself before participating in the Lord’s Supper (v. 28) refers primarily to examining the manner in which one is approaching the Lord’s Supper, so as to not do so in a flippant,

unworthy manner (v. 27), not bearing in mind its significance (v. 29). Paul may also have in view the need – in preparing to participate – to examine the right state of ourselves before God, examining our hearts for unconfessed sin.

Explain the significance or meaning of the Lord's Supper?

How does your church celebrate the Lord's Supper? Are you aware of any differences to how it is practiced in other churches?

Should you do anything differently when you take part in the Lord's Supper (either before or during it)?

c) Circumcision: Its Needlessness

Circumcision of males is the cutting off of the foreskin. Jewish males undergo circumcision in keeping with both God's covenant with Abraham (their ancestor), and God's covenant and law for Israel, i.e. the Mosaic Law.

In regard to God's covenant and law for Israel, being circumcised signifies one's adherence to the law – on which the covenant was based – as the way to righteousness. This is in contrast to and at odds with the way of faith in Jesus Christ, which God introduced in conjunction with the new covenant.

Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham – and included in the Mosaic Law

GEN 17:9–11 *And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.* ESV

JOHN 7:22–23 [JESUS, TO THE JEWS:] *Moses ordered you to circumcise your sons (although it was not Moses but your ancestors who started it), and so you circumcise a boy on the Sabbath. ²³If a boy is circumcised on the Sabbath so that Moses' Law is not broken, why are you angry with me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?* GNT

Circumcision does not bring salvation

ACTS 15:1–2, 11 *Now some men came down from Judea [to the church at Antioch] and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ²When Paul and Barnabas had a major argument and debate with them, the church appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them to go up to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this point of disagreement. ...[PETER:] ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are.”* NET

In v. 11 the apostle Peter sides emphatically with Paul and Barnabas, indicating that circumcision and adherence to the OT law (which circumcision symbolizes) do not bring salvation.

For believers, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any consequence

GAL 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision carries any weight – the only thing that matters is faith working through love. NET

It is our hearts that must be circumcised – as is ultimately accomplished by God

DEUT 10:16 [MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] Therefore, circumcise your heart and stop being stubborn. ISV

DEUT 30:6 [MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] Then the LORD your God will circumcise both your hearts and those of your descendants so that you can love him with your heart and with your soul and therefore live. ISV

Circumcision of the heart involves changing to become responsive to God. It involves “cutting off” the rigidity of sin from a person’s heart.

Why do you think God might have chosen circumcision as the sign of his covenant with Abraham? In what ways was circumcision significant?

Some Christians still have their boys circumcised. Is this permissible?

What part do we play – if any – in having our hearts circumcised by God?

Pray for persecuted Christians

II. Other Significant Practices

It is important for each Christian to understand all significant church practices. The practice of confessing Jesus Christ is one such practice that we need to understand – and be prepared to do. The weekly Sabbath is to some extent ignored by a lot of Christians, many seeing it as not relevant in the new covenant – but many evangelical theologians would “beg to differ”. Reasons both for and against observing it are included in this section. Fasting, when undertaken with a godly focus, is a significant practice that is a very valuable supplement to such things as prayer and worship. The laying on of hands is a further common practice, and so we should also be familiar with its significance and use in the Bible.

a) Confession of Jesus Christ

The NT speaks of confessing or acknowledging Jesus Christ. Usually it is implicit or suggested – as the word “confess” implies – that this is done in the presence of others. Confessing Jesus Christ is an expression of allegiance to him, as Lord, and involves stating what one believes about him. It is often done formally at one’s baptism and corporately in church with the recital of creeds or “confessions”. In addition, many Christians will experience times in which they should acknowledge Jesus Christ and their faith in him before unbelievers – often at the cost or risk of being persecuted.

Confess (or acknowledge) Jesus Christ, before others

HEB 3:1 Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, partners in a heavenly calling, take note of *Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess*, ... NET

LUKE 12:8 [JESUS:] I tell you, whoever *acknowledges me before men*, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before God’s angels. NET

Note that the Greek translated here as “acknowledge” or “acknowledges” is at times translated as “confess” or “confesses” in other Bible translations – as is the case with this verse (cf. AMP, NASB, NKJV).

Things to confess about Jesus Christ

JOHN 9:22B For the Jewish leaders had already agreed that anyone who *confessed Jesus to be the Christ* would be put out of the synagogue. NET

PHIL 2:11 And everyone will *confess that Jesus Christ is Lord* and bring glory to God the Father. NCV™

1JN 4:15 If anyone *confesses that Jesus is the Son of God*, God resides in him and he in God. NET

Outcomes of confessing Jesus Christ

MATT 10:32 [JESUS:] *Whoever, then, acknowledges me before people, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven.* NET

ROM 10:9–10 [PAUL:] ... because, *if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* ¹⁰For with the heart one believes and is justified, and *with the mouth one confesses and is saved.* ESV

One will be saved if one confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord and believes that God raised him to life (v. 9). Presumably the latter has in view also believing the implications of Jesus Christ's resurrection for our salvation. Note that a literal interpretation of these verses, which a number of commentators do take, would mean that one has to make such a verbal confession to be saved. Another view is that Paul is drawing on the "mouth"/"heart" terminology in the quotation from Deuteronomy 30:14 (v. 8b) to emphasize the need for genuine belief in Christ.

Note: If we deny Jesus Christ, he will deny us

MATT 10:33 [JESUS:] *But whoever denies me before people, I will deny him also before my Father in heaven.* NET

MARK 8:38 [JESUS:] *For if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.* NET

Although the gravity of the above warnings should not be diluted, the verses should not be interpreted to mean that a single act of denial will necessarily result in Jesus Christ disowning that person. This is illustrated in Peter's experience (cf. Matt 26:33–35, 69–75; John 21:15–17).

What does confessing Jesus Christ involve doing?

Why is it important to confess Jesus Christ?

What situations are you likely to encounter in the near future where the opportunity to confess Jesus Christ may well arise?

Pray for persecuted Christians

b) Keeping the Sabbath Holy

God made the seventh day of the week holy by setting it apart as a day of rest. It is called the “Sabbath”, which means “to cease”. Thus to observe or keep the Sabbath we cease from work and rest. In conjunction with this, rather than engaging in our usual activities we dedicate the day to God. As such we keep the Sabbath day holy, set apart from the other days as sacred to God.

In following God’s example by resting on the Sabbath day, people imitate and associate themselves with God, even fellowship with him. Accordingly, for Israel observing the Sabbath was a sign of being God’s people. The necessity for Christians to likewise observe it has been the subject of debate.

On finishing creation, God rested on the seventh day – and made it holy

GEN 2:2-3 *By the seventh day God finished the work he had been doing, so he rested from all his work. ³God blessed the seventh day and made it a holy day, because on that day he rested from all the work he had done in creating the world.* NCV™

Keep the Sabbath holy by resting on it

DEUT 5:13 [MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] *Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.* ESV

EX 35:2A [MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] *In six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there must be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of complete rest to the LORD.* NET

Observance of the Sabbath was given as a sign between God and his people Israel

EX 31:16-17 [GOD:] *The Israelites must keep the Sabbath by observing the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷It is a sign between me and the Israelites forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.* NET

Doing as God had done was to be a sign that the Israelites were of God (v. 17), with them being his people and he being their God. These verses are also often interpreted to indicate that the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant with Israel at Sinai (cf. GNT, NLT).

Further reasons for keeping the Sabbath holy

Ex 20:8–11 [GOD, TO THE ISRAELITES:] *Remember the Sabbath day to set it apart as holy. ⁹For six days you may labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; on it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your male servant, or your female servant, or your cattle, or the resident foreigner who is in your gates. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.* NET

Verse 10a is in effect saying that the seventh day is a Sabbath “dedicated to” the LORD (GNT, NLT), in honor of him (cf. NCV NIV). As such, observing the Sabbath honors God. Verse 11 appears to indicate that the Sabbath is to be observed to commemorate God’s rest from his creative work and perhaps also his completion of it. Additionally there is the suggestion that humankind should – even needs to – follow God’s example of resting on the Sabbath. Such an assertion seems only logical as they are made in his image (cf. Gen 1:26–27).

Ex 23:12 *For six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you must cease, in order that your ox and your donkey may rest and that your female servant’s son and any hired help may refresh themselves.* NET

This points out that resting on the Sabbath enables people to “refresh themselves.”

It is permissible to do good and necessary things on the Sabbath

MATT 12:10–13 A man was there who had a withered hand. And they asked Jesus, “*Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?*” so that they could accuse him. ¹¹*He said to them, “Would not any one of you, if he had one sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, take hold of it and lift it out? ¹²How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! So it is*

lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out and it was restored, as healthy as the other. NET

On the Sabbath God’s people assemble for worship . . .

LEV 23:3A [MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] You have six days in which to do your work, but remember that the seventh day, the Sabbath, is a day of rest. *On that day do not work, but gather for worship.* GNT

. . . During Sabbath worship there is teaching

ACTS 17:2 Paul went to the Jews in the synagogue, as he customarily did, and *on three Sabbath days he addressed them from the scriptures, ...* NET

Verses alleged to indicate that Christians do not need to keep the Sabbath

COL 2:16–17 [PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] Therefore *do not let anyone judge you with respect to food or drink, or in the matter of a feast, new moon, or Sabbath days –¹⁷these are only the shadow of the things to come, but the reality is Christ!* NET

ROM 14:5–6 [PAUL, REFERRING TO BELIEVERS:] *One person regards one day holier than other days, and another regards them all alike. Each must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶The one who observes the day does it for the Lord. The one who eats, eats for the Lord because he gives thanks to God, and the one who abstains from eating abstains for the Lord, and he gives thanks to God.* NET

What Paul is referring to here is possibly inclusive of the Sabbath, although the reference to eating suggests that a special day of feasting may be what is foremost in view. Regarding contentious issues like those in question here, Paul is primarily concerned that his readers be convinced in themselves (v. 5b), so they can act with a clear conscience; and the chosen course of action be taken for the Lord’s honor (cf. CEV, GNT, NLT) and with thanksgiving (v. 6b).

Note: Early Christians met together on the first day of the week

1COR 16:2 [PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *On the first day of the week, each of you should set aside some income and save it to the extent that God has blessed you, so that a collection will not have to be made when I come.* NET

This verse is quite probably speaking of money being brought to Christian gatherings held on the first day of every week. The fact that the early Christians are recorded meeting together on the first day of the week – probably in view of Jesus rising from the dead on this day – has influenced most Christians to celebrate the Sabbath and meet for worship on this day rather than on the seventh day of the week.

Apart from going to church, do you treat Sunday (or Saturday) any differently to the other days of the week?

What are the advantages or benefits of keeping the Sabbath holy?

Should Christians feel obliged to keep the Sabbath holy? Why or why not?

Pray for persecuted Christians

c) Fasting

Fasting involves abstaining from food and drink, though not necessarily water which provides no calories or energy. Ordained fasts in the OT were usually from sunrise to sunset. People who fast regularly today often do so once or twice a week, for one or two successive meal times. In the Wesleyan revival, fasting was observed from after the Thursday evening meal to mid-afternoon Friday. In the NT there are examples of fasting, but it is not commanded.

Fasting involves abstaining from food and drink, for a period of time

EST 4:16A [ESTHER, TO MORDECAI:] Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and *hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do.* ESV

JUDG 20:26B They [the Israelites] sat there before the LORD and *fasted that day until evening*; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. NKJV

Fasting can be done regularly – as an adjunct to prayer and worship

LUKE 2:37 She [Anna] had lived as a widow since then for eighty-four years. She never left the temple, *worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.* NET

Fasting implies and promotes earnestness in worship and prayer. When fasting, the ache and craving of hunger brings an earnestness and intensity to our worship and prayers. Fasting also promotes clarity of thought. Furthermore, our hunger serves as a reminder to worship and/or pray throughout the fasting period.

Fasting can be done on particular occasions, in petitioning God – as in seeking God’s help . . .

EZRA 8:21, 23 [EZRA:] Then *I announced a fast there at the Ahava River so that we might humble ourselves in the presence of our God to ask him for a safe journey for ourselves, for our little ones, and for all our*

goods. ... ²³So we fasted and asked our God for a safe journey, and he answered our prayer. GW

. . . or as in asking God to relent from punishing sin

JONAH 3:7–10 He [the king of Nineveh] issued a proclamation and said, “In Nineveh, by the decree of the king and his nobles: *No human or animal, cattle or sheep, is to taste anything; they must not eat and they must not drink water.* ⁸*Every person and animal must put on sackcloth and must cry earnestly to God, and everyone must turn from their evil way of living and from the violence that they do.* ⁹*Who knows? Perhaps God might be willing to change his mind and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we might not die.*” ¹⁰When God saw their actions – they turned from their evil way of living! – God relented concerning the judgment he had threatened them with and he did not destroy them. NET

As such, fasting expresses one’s distress in trouble or remorse over sin

EST 4:3 Throughout each and every province where the king’s edict and law [to kill all Jews] were announced *there was considerable mourning among the Jews, along with fasting, weeping, and sorrow.* Sackcloth and ashes were characteristic of many. NET

NEH 9:1–2 On the twenty-fourth day of this same month the Israelites assembled; *they were fasting and wearing sackcloth, their heads covered with dust.* ²Those truly of Israelite descent separated from all the foreigners, standing and *confessing their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors.* NET

As per the subheading, these verses illustrate that fasting can express one’s distress in trouble (Est 4:3) or one’s remorse over sin (Neh 9:1–2).

Note: Fasting in itself is not significant

ISA 58:3–4 [THE PEOPLE, TO GOD:] *‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’* [GOD:] *Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.* ⁴*Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to*

fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. ESV

Godly fasting should be accompanied by such things as obedience to God and treating others appropriately. Without such conduct, fasting itself is of no significance.

What are some of the practicalities of fasting (i.e. things it involves doing; things to bear in mind)?

Explain in your own words either: how fasting helps in prayer; or how fasting helps a person in expressing distress?

How could you use fasting in your life as a believer?

d) The Laying on of Hands

In conveying the gift of the Holy Spirit

ACTS 8:17 *Then Peter and John placed their hands on the Samaritans, and they received the Holy Spirit.* NET

Note that the laying on of hands to convey the gift of the Holy Spirit is generally done in conjunction with the recipients coming to faith – rather than at a time chosen by those performing the act. Also, it is not essential for a person to have hands laid on them for them to receive the Holy Spirit.

In conveying blessing

MARK 10:16 *After he [Jesus] took the children in his arms, he placed his hands on them and blessed them.* NET

LUKE 24:50 *Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them.* NET

Here a group of people (the disciples) is being blessed. So instead of hands being laid on each of them individually, the hands are used to convey blessing by being lifted towards the group.

In conveying God's healing

ACTS 28:8 *The father of Publius lay sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and after praying, placed his hands on him and healed him.* NET

Those who have the gift of healing, generally convey God's healing through laying their hands on sick people – as Jesus often did.

In commissioning for ministry

ACTS 13:2–3 *While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³Then, after they had fasted and prayed and placed their hands on them, they sent them off.* NET

Note that generally at least, the laying on of hands is done in conjunction with prayer (cf. Acts 28:8 ↑).

Note: The OT use of oil to anoint and consecrate people for God's service

Ex 40:9, 13 [GOD, TO MOSES:] Then you shall *take the anointing oil* and anoint the tabernacle and all that is in it, and consecrate it and all its furniture, so that it may become holy. ... ¹³and put on Aaron the holy garments. And you shall *anoint him and consecrate him, that he may serve me as priest.* ESV

2Ki 9:6 Jehu got up and went into the house. *The prophet poured olive oil on his head* and told him, “This is what the LORD God of Israel says: *I have anointed you king of the LORD's people, king of Israel.* GW

In the OT, a person being ordained or inducted into a role in God's service – notably as a priest (cf. Ex 40:9, 13 ↑), a prophet or a king (cf. 2Ki 9:6 ↑) – was anointed with oil. It signified them being set apart by God and consecrated for such a role. This practice is imitated in some churches today, in commissioning people for ministry.

What is the reason/s for laying hands on people?

Have you been involved in the laying on of hands – either in doing it or having it done to you? How was it helpful?

How might the use of oil be of help in the commissioning of people for ministry?

Pray for persecuted Christians

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Over 200 million Christians in at least 60 countries are denied basic human rights solely because of their faith. (Source: World Evangelical Alliance) Every year many Christians are killed because of their faith.

Through prayer, encouragement and practical assistance we can assist and fellowship with persecuted Christians in their suffering. You can play a vital part in this through contacting one of the organizations listed below. Most produce regular news/prayer letters.

Barnabas Fund – www.barnabasfund.org

It provides material and spiritual support based on locally identified needs.

Christian Solidarity International – csi-usa.org

CSI works to defend religious liberty and help persecuted Christians.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide – www.csw.org.uk

It advocates for freedom of religion and justice for persecuted believers.

Open Doors – www.opendoors.org; www.opendoors.org.au

It equips believers for persecution and maintaining a witness to the Gospel.

Religious Liberty Commission – www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/rlc

RLC defends and aids persecuted Christians. See also www.idop.org.

Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin – rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com

This site provides weekly prayer bulletins.

The Bible League – bl.org.au/get-involved/bibles-for-the-persecuted

It supplies Bibles to persecuted Christians and provides training.

Voice of the Martyrs – www.persecution.com

VOM helps persecuted Christians spread the gospel. It also gives material aid.

World Watch Monitor – www.worldwatchmonitor.org

It reports the story of Christians under pressure for their faith.

Then the King will answer, 'I tell you the truth, anything you did for even the least of my people here, you also did for me.' Matthew 25:40 NCV

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