

“Fasting on the Day of Atonement”

This article is from the “Edifying the Body” section of the Church of God Big Sandy’s website (churchofgodbigandy.com). It was posted for the weekend of Sept. 27, 2025. (A version of this article was posted in the “Among Friends” section of this website on Oct. 12, 2024—where it remains in that archive section.)

By Dave Havir

BIG SANDY, Texas—On Oct. 9, 2024, I gave a Wednesday-night Bible study to precede our congregation’s observance of the Day of Atonement on Saturday, Oct. 12, 2024. The purpose was to help my friends to have a successful and meaningful fast last year. The title of the presentation was “Fasting on the Day of Atonement.”

Types of fasting

- “Dry fasting” (often called “absolute fasting”) is abstaining from both food and water.
- “Water fasting” is abstaining from food, but allowing water intake.
- Some people have said: “One day of dry fasting is equivalent to two or three days of water fasting.”
- Some medical experts suggest that dry fasting should not exceed 24-72 hours due to the risk of severe dehydration and other health complications.

Famous biblical examples

- Exodus 34:28—Moses was with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights—he neither ate bread or drank water.
- Esther 4:15-16—Esther instructed that the Jews should fast with her—neither eating or drinking for three days (night or day).
- Matthew 4:2—The Son of God fasted 40 days and 40 nights—with most Bible students assuming that He matched the example of Moses in Exodus 34:28.

Old Testament history

Let’s look at some Old Testament history about the Day of Atonement. Notice some verses in Leviticus 23.

- Leviticus 23:27—The Day of Atonement was a holy convocation, where the people “afflicted” their souls and made an offering by fire to the Lord.

■ Leviticus 23:32—The people were to “afflict” their souls from evening to evening.

Notice some verses in Leviticus 16.

■ Leviticus 16:2—The Lord said to Moses: “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil . . . lest he die.”

■ Leviticus 16:29—“You shall afflict your souls.”

■ Leviticus 16:31—“You shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever.”

■ Leviticus 16:34—“This shall be an everlasting statute for you to make atonement for the children of Israel, for all their sins, once a year.”

Here are three reminders about the difference between the Old Testament and New Testament.

■ There is no longer a physical tabernacle (or temple).

■ There is no longer a physical priesthood.

■ There are no longer physical sacrifices.

While many of my friends and I love fasting on the Day of Atonement, we are thrilled to have the New Testament teaching about the power of the day.

Fasting in the New Testament

■ Matthew 6:16-18—The Son of God gave some instruction about “when you fast.”

■ Matthew 9:14—The disciples of John asked the Son of God why His disciples did not fast like the disciples of other religious people fasted.

■ Matthew 9:15—The Son of God replied: “The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

■ 1 Corinthians 7:5—Paul taught that married couples could temporarily sexually abstain at their discretion.

■ Hebrews 5:7—During the days of His flesh, the Son of God offered up effective prayers and supplications (intense fasting).

No mention by name in New Testament

There was no mention of the Day of Atonement by name in the New Testament.

■ Acts 27:9—The author of the book of Acts (Luke) mentioned the “Fast” as a calendar point of reference talking about the weather getting worse for sailing.

Only one mention of “atonement”

There is only one place in the King James Version of the New Testament where the word *atonement* is mentioned—and that Greek word (*katallage*) is translated as “reconciliation” in the New King James Version.

■ Romans 5:11—We have received the “atonement” (or “reconciliation”) through the Son of God.

■ 2 Corinthians 5:18-20—Notice how many times the Greek noun *katallage* is translated reconciliation and Greek verb *katallasso* is translated reconciled.

Day of Atonement

While the words *Day of Atonement* are not mentioned in the New Testament, the concept of the Day of Atonement is absolutely mentioned in the New Testament—in a powerful way.

■ Hebrews 9:1—The first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary.

■ Hebrews 9:2—The tabernacle had the lampstand, the table and the show-bread.

■ Hebrews 9:3-5—Behind the second veil (which was called the Holiest of All) were the golden censor and the Ark of the Covenant (which included the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron’s rod that budded and the tablets of the covenant)—and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.

■ Hebrews 9:6—The priests regularly performed services in the first part of the tabernacle.

■ Hebrews 9:7—But the high priest went alone once a year into the second part of the tabernacle—on the Day of Atonement.

■ Hebrews 9:8—The full meaning of the Holiest of All was not fully manifest while the first tabernacle was standing (in the Old Testament).

■ Hebrews 9:9—The Holiest of All was symbolic of the coming of the Son of God.

■ Hebrews 9:10—Fleshly ordinances were imposed until the time of reformation.

■ Hebrews 9:11-13—The Son of God came as High Priest into a perfect tabernacle.

■ Hebrews 9:14—The Son of God offered Himself (without spot to God) to cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Many modern-day disciples choose to fast to show their appreciation and submission to the High Priest who offered Himself one time to give us reconciliation with the Father.