

Guide to Fasting

What is fasting?

Fasting is “abstaining from food for spiritual purposes”.¹ Fasting and prayer are disciplines Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, and are inextricably linked. Just as prayer can take place individually and corporately, so fasting can be done alone but also in groups. In the same way that prayer takes place at regular set times but also at special times when the Holy Spirit guides us to pray for a special need, so also with fasting. Fasting should be a regular practice in the life of every believer but, beyond that, there are times at which God leads us to fast for a specific reason.

Should all Christians fast?

From Biblical history and throughout the history of the church, we see that fasting has been a regular part of the life of God’s people. Israel was required to fast collectively on the Day of Atonement and on other occasions. Individuals also fasted – Moses, David, Elijah and Esther, along with many others. In the book of Acts, the church fasted, particularly for guidance when appointing new elders or sending out apostles. The early church fasted on Wednesday and Friday of each week, according to church history.

Jesus presented fasting as a normal part of life. He said, “when you fast”, not “if you fast” (Matt 6:17). He did not address the question “should I fast?” but rather “how should I fast?”

Many people do not fast because they have not had a direct revelation through the Spirit that they should fast, but since the scriptures reveal it to be the Lord’s will, we do not need a special revelation. We do not refuse to pray on the grounds that we don’t have a “word” from God instructing us to pray. It is

¹ D Prince, “How to Fast Successfully” Whitaker House 1976

clearly the will of God that we pray. So also with fasting. We risk missing the purpose of God because we are waiting for a special revelation about something that is clearly stated in scripture.

Why do we fast?

Fasting is the basic way the believer can humble himself before God. David said, "I humbled my soul with fasting" (Ps 35:13). Why humble yourself? "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt 23:12). The way to greatness in the kingdom of God is to go low.

A second reason to fast is to draw near to God. When we are intentional about seeking God's face, He responds by drawing near to us (James 4:8). Why? He loves to be near us, but He wants voluntary lovers. As you fast, you will find that you will be more conscious of the presence of the Lord, and will receive revelation through God's word more freely.

Other reasons to fast are to receive direction (Ezra 8:21), healing (Isaiah 58:8) and deliverance (Matt 17:21), to avert a national crisis (2 Chronicles 20, Esther 4:16) and to intercede for others.

Scripture promises a number of blessings for those who answer the call to fast. In Matthew 6:17-18, we read:

¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Jesus gives a clear promise of reward (blessing) when you fast in the right way, with the right motives. In Isaiah 58:8-12, we find several direct promises for those who fast according to the will of God. These include health, answered prayer, continual guidance, satisfaction, refreshing and restoration.

Through the example of Daniel, we see something of the power of fasting with prayer. 21 days into his fast, Daniel was visited by a mighty angel:

Then he said to me, "Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to *humble yourself before your God*, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words." **Daniel 10:12**

The angel explained that, as Daniel was fasting and praying, God released angels to fight back a demonic principality. When we fast and pray, both angels and demons move. "Because of **your** words," your weak, immature prayers, the Kingdom of God is released and the powers of darkness pushed back.

Jesus was asked why his disciples were not fasting, like those of John the Baptist. This was his response:

"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." **Matthew 9:15**

Jesus was saying that one of the primary reasons the end time church fasts is as an expression of longing for His presence (and ultimately His return). We are now in the period of time between the bridegroom being taken away from us and His second coming. It is in this time period that He said, "then they *will* fast." The friends of the bridegroom won't need to be convinced, they just *will* fast. They will long for His presence.

When we fast, we should come with a positive attitude of faith. Hebrews 11:6 states that "...without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."

How to fast

Going without food for a period of time can not only bring these spiritual blessings, but can also be beneficial to your health, if you follow a few simple guidelines. Fasting can even become a joy – it is God’s will for us, so He will give us grace to do it.

First time fasting?

If you have not fasted before, start by missing one meal. Try having no snacks after lunch, and not eating until breakfast. This means you have fasted for a substantial period of time (about 18 hours) without a massive change in routine. Don’t compensate by having much bigger meals either side – you can harm your body by doing this. Next time, skip lunch and the evening meal, with no snacks in between. That’s almost a full 24 hours without food. Next, miss all three meals with no food between your meal on the previous evening and breakfast on the following morning. That’s around 36 hours. Now that you know you can do this, you will be able to aim for a more extended fast. If you build up like this to a longer period of fasting, you will avoid becoming disheartened by starting with a long fast and being unable to sustain it.

Guidelines for fasting:

1. Take extra time to meditate on scripture and pray
 - meditating on scripture gets your mind in line with God’s thoughts and helps you pray according to God’s will.
 - use the time you would have spent preparing and consuming your meals as an opportunity to pray.
2. Guard against spiritual attack
 - the enemy hates those who realise that, through fasting, they can do real damage to his kingdom and advance the Kingdom of God.

- you may begin to feel emotions and feelings that you don't normally have (doubt, fear, loneliness). Take these as a reminder that you are worrying the enemy and that God is using you. Don't yield to them, but instead meditate on the truths of God's word, which are true regardless of your feelings.

3. Avoid religious pride

- Matthew 6:16 warns against making a show of your fasting. Some people will have to know that you are fasting, but do it with humility. If you seek praise from man, you have received all the reward you are going to get.
- the Lord resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. We need grace (empowering) to fast!
- you should be able to continue your daily routine while you are fasting. Carry on your normal activities as much as possible.

4. Consume lots of liquids, especially water

- your body is not designed to function without water for long periods.
- water is very good for your health.

5. Be aware of the physical effects of fasting

- because of our lifestyles, most people experience some less pleasant reactions at the beginning of a fast. Consider adjusting your diet to make this easier!
- make your last couple of meals before your fast something which will help guard against constipation (extra fruit, fruit juice, salad or bran cereal can help).
- be aware that if you normally drink lots of coffee or consume other products high in caffeine, then

you are likely to experience headaches and nausea after about a day of fasting. This will pass!

- at meal times, you may feel real hunger pains. Your body operates by habit, and the feelings do pass. Drinking lots of water will help you feel full.
- you may feel lacking in energy - get plenty of rest, and get some fresh air and exercise each day.

6. Break your fast wisely

- always begin with a very light meal. Resist the temptation to have a large cooked meal, as this can have very unpleasant effects.
- the longer you fast, the more gradually you should break it. As a general guide, take one day to gradually build back up to full meals for every two days you have fasted. This takes as much self control as did the beginning of the fast, but is very important.
- your stomach will have contracted as you fasted, and you will feel full sooner. Habit will make you go on eating, but wisdom says, "Why not stop? You've had enough." This is an opportunity to better control your diet. Most people in this country eat more than they should – let your body tell you how much is enough.

7. What if I have a medical condition?

- if you are diabetic, pregnant or have a serious medical condition, consult your GP before fasting.
- if you are advised that you are unable to fast completely from food, then a partial fast may be more suitable (see overleaf).
- most people can fast safely.

Different types of fasts

1. Total fast (no food or fluids)
 - fasting without fluids for extended times can be very dangerous physically. The normal limit on a total fast is three days (Esther 4:16).
 - the Lord may, at times, lead you to do a total fast for one, two or three days, but this would not usually be the type of fast to do regularly.
2. Liquid-only fast (no food but plenty of fluids)
 - this can safely be done for extended periods, if you follow the guidelines in this booklet.
 - can be water-only or you may decide to include juice and other liquids.
3. Partial fast (some food and plenty of fluids)
 - in Daniel 10:2-3, Daniel described a fast in which he ate no “pleasant bread”, “flesh” (meat) or wine.
 - during this fast you eat simple, basic food and drink lots of water (“no meats, no sweets”).

Fasting is our duty and our privilege as Christians. God is calling us to partner with Him in His Kingdom, and inviting us to a deeper place of encounter with Him. Let us answer the call to fast and pray, trusting in God’s promises to bless those who diligently seek after Him.

Updated Jan 2011