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When you fast...



A Guide to Biblical Fasting

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"When you fast..."

Fasting is a serious topic with many ramifications, but we are going to attempt to simplify it today. At the end are some additional resources for your own study and edification. We are going to ask and answer some significant questions:

What is fasting?

What kinds of fasts are there?

What does the Bible say about fasting?

Why do some Christians fast and other's do not?

Getting Practical:

How should we go about fasting ?

Preparing

Managing and Maintaining

Finishing the Fast

What is fasting?

For our purposes, fasting is refraining from eating for a period of time. There is also a kind of fast for Lent where some people don't watch TV or they limit their social media involvement. I call this "Abstaining" if it does not deal with food. Some people abstain from sex or other pursuits. So I differentiate between Fasting and Abstaining. Today we are talking about voluntarily going without food for a period to time. The word fasting comes from the Greek nestia: ne, a negative prefix and esthio which means to eat. So it literally means not to eat.

We fast in this life because we believe in a life to come. That this life is more than food and drink. (Fasting is temporary and for this season, because we are eternal beings.) We have tasted the goodness of God and we are hungry and thirsty for more of Him. Recently we had our congregation write on sticky pads what they most desired and many said a deeper relationship with the Living God. When we fast we draw closer to God. We are not gaining His favor, but we are focusing on our spiritual lives by depriving our physical life. Jesus said in the Beatitudes, **"Blessed are those that hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled."** Matthew 5:6 His brother James said, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." (James 4:8) Fasting increases our sensitivity to things not of this world. And God is faithful to His promise to meet us in our fast and minister to us. Bill Bright said when we fast we are humbling ourselves before God and seeking His face, not His hand.

What kinds of fasts are there?

There are many kinds of fasts. Most are personal and private but the Bible also talks about public and corporate fasts, national fasts, and both occasional and regular designated fasting.

Some fasts limit the type of foods eaten, such as the Daniel fast. Some do liquid protein and others limit it to water alone.

There is no set time frame. Some fasts go from sun up to sun down, some are one day a week, some last for several days. Moses, Elijah and Christ all fasted for 40 days straight. There are many kinds of fasts and it is up to you to determine which type of fasting you will pursue. It is a good idea to try several different kinds and journal your experiences.

What does the Bible say about fasting?

In Matthew 9:15 the Pharisees questioned Jesus as to why His followers did not fast. Jesus essentially said, because I am with them. When I am taken away, then they will fast.

Matthew 6:17-18 **"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting, Truly I tell you they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."** Notice Jesus did not say, "if" you fast, but "when" you fast. This is significant.

Examples in the Bible:

- Moses fasted 40 days on behalf of Israel's sin: Deuteronomy 9:9, 18, 25-29; 10:10. Then he did another back to back 40 days!
- David fasted and mourned the death of Saul and his child's death: 2 Samuel 1:12. 2 Samuel 12:16.
- Elijah fasted 40 days after escaping from Jezebel 1 Kings 19:7-18.
- Ahab fasted and humbled himself before God: 1 Kings 21:27-29.
- Darius fasted in concern for Daniel: Daniel 6:18-24.
- Daniel fasted Daniel 9:1-19. and Daniel 10:3-13. *"I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over."*
- Esther fasted on behalf of her people: Esther 4:13-16. *"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."*
- Ezra fasted and wept for the sins of the returning Jews: Ezra 10:6-17.

- Nehemiah fasted and mourned over the broken walls of Jerusalem: Nehemiah 1:4-2:10. *"When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."*

The people of Ninevah fasted after hearing the message of Jonah- ch. 3.
New Testament Fasting

- Anna fasted for the coming Messiah: Luke 2:37. *"She was eighty four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day fasting and praying."*
- Jesus fasted 40 days before his temptation and beginning of His ministry: Matthew 4:1-11. Luke 4:2-4 *"where for forty days He was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and at the end of them He was hungry. The devil said to Him "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread" Jesus answered, "**It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone.**"*
- The disciples of John the Baptist fasted: Matthew 9:14-15.
- The elders in Antioch fasted before sending off Paul and Barnabas: Acts 13:1-5. Then Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted before appointing elders Acts 14:23
- Cornelius fasted Acts 10:30.
- Paul fasted three days after meeting Christ on the road to Damascus Acts 9:9.
Paul fasted 14 days as a prisoner Acts 27:33-34.

This is representative of fasting in the Bible, it is not a complete list. The Bible only commanded one fast in the Old Testament on the Day of Atonement. In no other place does the Bible specifically command fasting, but it is an expected discipline.

The Bible also gives us four reasons that God gave us food: for enjoyment (so many varieties), sustenance, fellowship and worship with thanksgiving. Paul said that *"every bit of food should be taken with thanksgiving."* I Timothy 4:3, This is one reason we give thanks before a meal.

Why do some Christians fast and other's do not?

This is a multifaceted question. For many Evangelical Christians who separated themselves from Catholicism, fasting was part of the Catholic religious system and so they did not choose to fast. However, the church, as early as 300 years after Christ was commemorating Lent. Lent is from the Anglo-Saxon word Lencten, meaning "spring" and has no particular religious significance other than what the Church gave it. Lent is traditionally honoring the 40 days that Christ was in the wilderness prior to His earthly ministry. This year, 2019, it began on March 6 with Ash

Wednesday and goes to Easter on the 21'st. If you are doing the math that is 46 days, but they don't count Sundays.

Getting Practical:

For many years, I have made it a practice to fast the first day of the month when it is practical. I have not been real open about this. Some people think it should be private and other's think you should let other people know. Susan, my wife has had to know when I am fasting and she will often also fast at the same time. It helps to be allied when you are fasting, especially when you are in Costco and they are handing out chocolate covered Macadamias! I have often wondered if I should be more open about my experiences fasting. There is something to be said about telling others, especially Christian brothers and sisters that you are either fasting or have completed a fast. If we are open about it, it makes it less intimidating for those who are considering doing it, and it make it seem a more a normal part of the Christian walk. We can encourage and support one another with our experiences.

How should we go about fasting ?

Disclaimer: Some people should not fast. If you have physical concerns, please consult your doctor. If you are emaciated, anorexic or have eating disorders or are anemic, if you have tumors, bleeding ulcers, cancer, blood or heart disease, chronic problems with kidneys, liver, lungs, or other vital organs or are taking insulin or are hyperglycemic or are a woman who is pregnant or nursing you should not fast or only do so under a doctors supervision. Also if your job requires strenuous physical activity (or you are a mother!) or on prescription medication, be wise about what fast you choose.

Also, water only fasts, called radical or absolute fasting, if done over several days could result in a buildup of toxins, breakdown of vital body tissues and a loss of electrolytes. Again, if this is done for an extended period of time it should be done under doctor supervision.

Most of us would be ok if we consumed water and juices during our fast from solid foods. Some people will have broth but most all will continue to take their vitamins and medications. The most common type of fast lasts between one and three days.

Preparing

Determine what kind of fast you will be doing. Determine how long and what your goals are physically and spiritually that you are moving toward. Fasting is not about the number of days but about the condition of your heart. Have a plan. What are you going to do with the time you aren't eating? Will you carve out time for meditation, prayer and Bible

reading? Someone said that unless your fast has a plan it is not true fasting it is just going hungry. Connect a spiritual purpose to your fast.

Begin slowly, perhaps eating smaller portions leading up to the fast. Avoid the tendency to have one last splurge or binge before you begin.

Managing and Maintaining

Be considerate of others. If someone invites you to lunch when you are fasting, you don't have to make a big deal about it, just tell them it won't work today because of other plans, but how about getting together on say, Thursday (or pick some time when you aren't fasting.)

When your stomach growls, it is a good time to stop and offer up a prayer. Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up. Seek God's power and strength in order to successfully navigate your fast.

Finishing the Fast

Just as important, or probably more important is how you finish a fast. You certainly don't want to binge, your body isn't ready for it. (Take it from me!) Many nutritionists who espouse fasting say that when you break a fast it is best to do it with vegetables, raw or steamed. Avoid starches, meats and dairy products until your body adjusts. Slowly pick up your exercise regimen if you have ceased it.

There are some marvelous health benefits that accompany fasting. After three days the body begins to break down stored fat. A 2016 Nobel prize was awarded to a doctor (Yoshinori Ohsumi) who described "autophagy" which in Greek literally means eating yourself, or how the bodies cells break down stored fat recycling it into energy.

Bill Bright said, "Expect Results; If you sincerely humble yourself before the Lord, repent, pray, and seek God's face; if you consistently meditate on His Word, you will experience a heightened awareness of His presence (John 14:21). The Lord will give you fresh, new spiritual insights. Your confidence and faith in God will be strengthened. You will feel mentally, spiritually, and physically refreshed. You will see answers to your prayers. A single fast, however, is not a spiritual cure-all. Just as we need fresh infillings of the Holy Spirit daily, we also need new times of fasting before God."

Other Resources (I wish I had had when I started.)

Bill Bright, the former president of Campus Crusade for Christ regularly fasted for 40 days at a time. His website is full of helpful information: <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/fasting/personal-guide-to-fasting.html>

Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough, Elmer Towns, 1996

God's Chosen Fast. A Spiritual and Practical Guide to Fasting. Arthur Wallis, 1980.