



Fasting

Purpose & Practice

What Is Fasting?

Fasting is a deliberate abstention from eating, or denial of a regular function, particularly things that attempt to exert control upon us, as a means of humbling ourselves before God. We exchange filling our physical needs for fulfilling spiritual needs.

Fasting Is Not Just “Not Eating”

Fasting is a spiritual discipline. Fasting is intentional. Fasting pulls us into a concerted focus upon God. Prayer and worship are integral to true fasting.

Biblical Foundation for Fasting

Old Testament Examples:

Esther

Esther called a corporate fast for favor with the King to prevent the destruction of the Jews.

“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. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”

Esther 4:16 (ESV)

Moses

Moses fasted as he received the revelation of the covenant between God and Israel.

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.’ So he was there with the LORD for forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.”

Exodus 34:27-28 (ESV)

Ezra

Ezra called a corporate fast and prayed for protection of the people as they returned from exile to Jerusalem.

“Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.”

Ezra 8:21-22 (ESV)



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New Testament Examples:

Jesus

Jesus began his public ministry with fasting, led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

“And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”

Matthew 4:2 (ESV)

Anna

Anna fasted and prayed for over sixty years, and she knew who Jesus was the moment she laid her eyes upon him. She was one of the first to proclaim the coming of The Christ.

“She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.”

Luke 2:37b (ESV)

Early Church

The leaders of the early church fasted for discernment and direction when leading and making decisions in the early church. Paul was sent onto his first missionary journey through fasting.

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”

Acts 13:2-3 (ESV)

“And when they [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

Acts 14:23 (ESV)

Why Fast?

Fasting, like prayer, is expected.

Jesus fasted. If we desire to be conformed to Him, let us also practice His disciplines. “When you give...when you pray...when you fast”.

“And when you fast...”

Matthew 6:16 (ESV)

“The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

Matthew 9:15 (ESV)



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Fasting reminds us we are weak.

When we fast, we engage in voluntary weakness. Even the little things seem harder when we fast.

“The weakness of hunger which leads to death brings forth the goodness and power of God who wills life. Here there is no extortion, no magic attempt to force God’s will. We merely look with confidence upon our heavenly Father and through our fasting say gently in our hearts: ‘Father, without you I will die; come to my assistance, make haste to help me.’”

Joseph F. Wimmer

Fasting reminds us that God alone sustains us.

He is the Living Water and the Bread of Life. The physical hunger we experience when fasting constantly reminds us that God alone is the giver and sustainer of life.

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Matthew 4:4 (ESV)

“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.”

John 4:34 (ESV)

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.”

Psalms 81:10 (ESV)

Fasting humbles our soul before God.

Fasting is a concrete action we can take as a means of humbling ourselves before God.

“I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with my head bowed on my chest.”

Psalms 35:13b (ESV)

“When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting”

Psalms 69:10a (ESV)

Fasting reveals the things that control us.

Fasting exposes our frailty, and we are confronted with it square in the face. Be aware of the mood swings and irritations that seem more pronounced when you fast. God may be revealing to you something in your life that He desires to heal. As you notice these things, bring them before God in prayer.

“Pride, bitterness, anger, jealousy, strife, fear. We may first rationalize that our anger is due to hunger, but then we realize it is the Spirit of anger that is at work within us.”

Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline



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Power of the Holy Spirit

When we fast, we position ourselves before God. Sometimes He chooses to anoint us with greater power in the Holy Spirit for His will and His purpose. This does not always happen, and this is not why we fast. However, the more access we allow God to our heart, the more He can do with us for His glory. Fasting is voluntary weakness, his power is made perfect in weakness.

“And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country.”

Luke 4:14(ESV)

“But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting.”

Matthew 17:21 (ESV)

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV)

Rewards of Fasting

Please don't be mistaken, there are rewards in fasting. Jesus himself said as much when he warned us about by whom we're seen:

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

Matthew 6:1 (ESV)

You may experience the rewards of greater revelation as you read the Word and pray, greater power to break strongholds, greater discernment in decision-making when committed to seeking His wisdom, strengthened sense of spiritual identity as a child on God, and many others as God is the giver of good gifts. Consider it a “spiritual download”, God is pouring into all kinds of good things and you don't even know it.

Encountering God, the Greatest Reward

More than anything else, God alone is why we fast. Encountering Him in prayer and fasting is the greatest reward. We may pray for specific requests; we may seek more power in the Holy Spirit; we may want a greater understanding of how to handle a specific situation. Let us never forget that we fast because we desire God. We fast because we want to give Him more access to our heart. We fast because we want to know Him, because he is altogether excellent.

“The weakness of our hunger for God is not because he is unsavory, but because we keep ourselves stuffed with ‘other things.’ Perhaps, then, the denial of our stomach's appetite for food might express, or even increase, our soul's appetite for God.”

John Piper, A Hunger for God



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The Practice of Fasting

From what should I fast?

In the Bible, fasting refers to an abstention of all food, certain types of food, and sometimes even water. However, there may be other things in your life that seem to consume a disproportionate amount of your attention and draw your focus from God. Some people fast from TV, others from all media. You may be led to fast from soda or sweets. Daniel fasted from everything but vegetables and water (*Daniel 1:12*). Anything that crowds out God in your life is appropriate to fast from. I encourage you, if medically possible, to fast from food at some point every year. Seek the Lord in prayer before you fast and ask Him how you should fast.

How long should I fast?

If you're just beginning, follow a progression into fasting, unless the Holy Spirit clearly indicates otherwise. You may begin by fasting from two meals, dinner one night and breakfast the next day. After a few weeks of fasting in this manner, consider fasting from three meals: dinner, then breakfast and lunch. Then progress into fasting a few consecutive days, and so on.

What should I consume during the fast?

Drink plenty of water; try to stay away from caffeine. Some people drink diluted fruit juice. Get plenty of exercise. However the Lord leads you to fast is how you should fast. It is very critical to seek the Lord's leading before you begin the fast and define concrete parameters.

How do I break the fast?

Consider breaking your fast first with The Lord's Supper. Communion takes on an entirely new dimension when you haven't eaten for a period of time. If you've been fasting for an extended period of time, follow with a light meal of vegetables and fruit. Ease your body back into digestion.

Develop an action plan to guide the fast.

There just isn't any way around it: fasting is only "not eating" if you neglect to intentionally connect with God during your fast. God is eager to reveal the mysteries of Christ, and oftentimes it's when you're fasting that you're in a position to hear from Him.

Prayer & Worship: When you feel hungry, pray! The physical hunger for food prompts us to realize our hunger for God. I believe as you progress in the discipline of fasting, you'll be surprised at just how much you pray and worship during the course of your day.

Serve Others: Serving others gets your mind off yourself and the hunger, and you'll find you're more sensitive to what God is doing as you're serving.

Keep a journal: As you begin the practice of fasting, consider keeping a journal. Record the insights the Lord reveals to you. Note your attitude as you fast. You may find that your attitudes change as you practice fasting throughout the weeks and years. It's okay to have negative feelings about fasting, keep pressing in and wait on God.



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Feast on the Word of God: Take time to read the Bible and meditate on the Word of God. Consider reading a specific passage, Psalm, book of Scripture for the duration of the fast. Allow God to satisfy you with His Word. Allow the Word of God to satisfy your physical needs. I believe God will encounter you with revelation through His Word.

"I have food to eat that you do not know about."

John 4:32

"Open your mouth wide and I will fill it,"

Psalm 81:10b

"Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him."

Psalm 34:8

I ate! Now what?

Confess, ask forgiveness, and keep going! God is really excited that you are seeking Him through fasting, and nothing will change that.



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Cautions

When you purpose in your heart to fast, remember this is a vow before God.

Do not take the discipline of fasting lightly. Prepare your heart and your mind. The enemy tempted Jesus in the wilderness; he will do the same to you. Be aware and watchful, and continue in your fast until the designated time of the fast is complete. If you do eat and break the fast, do not give up! Press on; you can do all things through Him who strengthens you (*Phillipians 3:19*).

Continually check your heart attitude.

Outwardly, go about your usual daily tasks. Inwardly, continue in worship, adoration, and prayer. You may also find that confession and repentance are needed as He reveals issues in your life He wants to heal. Fasting is matter of the heart, expressed in the flesh. He will purify your motives very quickly as you fast.

Don't call attention to yourself, and try not to draw attention to others.

Only the people who "need to know" should know you are fasting. Likewise, if you notice someone is not eating, don't ask him or her if they are fasting. We fall into a trap when the goal of fasting is that others will see us and we therefore "look" spiritual. This kind of fast is not the fast of God.

"...that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret."

Matt 6:17

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them."

John Piper, A Hunger for God

God is our desire, encountering Him is the reward.

Zechariah 7 and Isaiah 58 offer some serious cautions as one seeks the Lord in fasting. Read these scriptures as you fast and heed the warning that your fast should be for God alone.

The Time is Now

There is no time like the present to begin fasting. Developing the discipline of fasting is a process, but I encourage you to begin now.

"If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great. God did not create you for this. There is an appetite for God. And it can be awakened. I invite you to turn from the dulling effects of food and the dangers of idolatry, and to say with some simple fast: 'This much, O God, I want you.'"

John Piper, A Hunger for God



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Books

The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting by Mahesh Chavda, Destiny Image Publishers, Inc.

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth by Richard J. Foster, Harper Collins Publishers, Inc

A Hunger for God by John Piper, Crossway Books

Prayer and Fasting by Dr. Kingsley A. Fletcher, Whitaker House

Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough: A Guide to Nine Biblical Fasts by Elmer L. Towns, Regal Books

The Rewards of Fasting by Mike Bickle with Dana Candler, Forerunner Books

Online Resources

A Hunger for God, online version:

http://www.desiringgod.org/media/pdf/books_hfg/hfg_all.pdf

How to Fast: Your Personal Guide to Fasting and Prayer:

<http://www.billbright.com/howtofast/>

7 Basic Steps to Successful Fasting and Prayer:

<http://www.billbright.com/7steps/>



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Some Ideas to Fan the Flame

One-Day Fast:

Fast from lunch, using your lunch break to read Scripture, pray, journal, worship. Fast in this way for month. For the next month, fast from breakfast and lunch, perhaps serving others during breakfast and continuing your lunch focus from the previous month.

Three-Day Fast:

Fast from breakfast, lunch, and dinner for three consecutive days. Fast in this way once per month for several months. Be sure to remain hydrated with drinking plenty of water during this fast.

The Daniel Fast:

This fast is based on Daniel 1:8-14. Eat only fruits and vegetables and drinking only water for 10 days.

Partial Fast:

Fast from soda, sweets, snacks, or eat out restaurants for meals for three days. Consider progressing up to 40 days. When you desire these items, pray a quick prayer. Consider giving away the money you save.

Distraction Fast:

Fast from TV, video games, media for three days. Consider progressing up to 40 days. When you normally engage in these activities, use your time to pray, worship, read Scripture, serve, journal. Consider giving away the money you save.

Get Started!

1. Prayerfully consider the type of fast to practice, and pray for God's grace over it.
2. As you're beginning fasting, try to be focused on one fast. "Double fasting" can lead to discouragement.
3. Pick a day or sequence of days that have the least amount of distractions or meal obligations, stick to that day to stay on a regular schedule.
4. Put together a fasting plan: people to pray for, book of Scripture to study, specific prayer requests between you and God, specific service to help others.
5. Whatever fast you practice, keep these questions in mind, journal them if you're so inclined:
 - What do you notice about your moods, your spiritual well-being, your heart attitude?
 - How do you see God working?
 - How is He responding to prayer?