

## 10 Reasons To Fast – Various Scriptures

Several weeks ago I rolled out 10 major initiatives for our church

And in so doing, I ask you to fast and pray at least one meal a week until Thanksgiving, in order to prepare for all that's ahead

The problem is, fasting is a spiritual discipline that's little known and even less practiced in our day

And several of you asked about what it is and why we do it in the first place

So I thought I'd take a week to teach on it, giving you an overview from the Scriptures . . .

And hopefully convincing u and encouraging u to participate with *10 Reasons To Fast*

So with that in mind, why don't you turn in your Bibles to Mt 6:16-18

And I'll start with a definition

**Fasting is the act of denying yourself one thing, in order to focus on another**

Which could include denying yourself TV in order to focus on your studies . . .

Or denying yourself sugar in order to focus on your health

Technically speaking, those scenarios would be considered a fast

But most often in the Bible, fasting is associated with food and God

That is, denying yourself food, in order to focus on God; That's a biblical fast

And one of the first reasons to do it, is b/c . . .

### 1. God expects it (Mt 6:16)

Mt 6:16; Notice that Jesus says, *when you fast* just like he says *when you pray* in v5&7, and *when you give* in v2

The implication being that he *expects* we will *fast*, just like he expects we will *pray/give*

And we find the same thing in Mt 9:14-15

And since Jesus, the bridegroom of the church hasn't yet returned, the implication is that we should continue to fast; God expects it

That's not to say that fasting is a direct *command*, but rather, a natural part of the Christian life, just like praying and giving and serving and loving – all of which God expects

That's the first reason to fast – God expects it

### 2. To receive God's blessing (Mt 6:18)

(Mt 6:17-18); Or bless you; That's the idea here

That he will give you what's best

Not necessarily what you want, but the very thing you'd give *your* child, if you had the same perspective as God

Which brings up an important point – we don't fast to conform God's will to ours, but ours to his

Or as one person put it – “fasting hoists the sails of the soul in hopes of experiencing the gracious wind of God's Spirit” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines* . . . 179-80)

That's the reward of fasting – the power of God's Spirit beneath our wings, to do what's best, whatever that is

We fast to receive God's blessing – that's the second reason

Third, comes from the book of Ezra, and that is . . .

### 3. To humble yourself (Ezra 8:21)

Ezra 8:21-23; This is where Ezra, a priest/scribe living in Babylon ~458BC . . .

Records his preparations to return to Jerusalem (v21)

*The river Ahava* – just outside Babylon

He proclaimed or declared a fast, first of all, to *humble* themselves before God

To show by their *actions*, in addition to their words, that they were in complete submission to God

It's kind of like *kneeling* in prayer – you show by your action that your heart is in line with your words

That your humility is not just lip service, but heartfelt

That you're *serious* about submitting to God

And the same is true of fasting

You want God to show up in your life? Humble yourself by fasting

You want God to intervene in your situation? Humble yourself by fasting

You want God to lift you up? Then humble yourself under his mighty hand . . .

By fasting as you pray; That's reason number 3

### 4. To get help (Ezra 8:21)

In v21, Ezra proclaimed a fast, *to seek from [God] a safe journey*

They needed *help* to overcome peril and danger, and fasted to get it

And we can too; When faced with *danger*, fast to get help

Second, fast to get help in the face of *opposition* (I have 5 of these obstacles)

That's the story of Esther, remember?

Facing genocide at the hands of Haman, and death at the hand of the King, Esther appealed to her people to hold a fast on her behalf for 3 days and 3 nights

They did it, and so can we – to get help in the face of opposition

Third, fast to get help in the face of *sickness*

That comes from King David's example in **2 Sam 12:16**

After his child became sick, it says that – *David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.*

Which went on for 7 days until the child died \*\*\*\*\*

Which, among other things, shows that fasting is not a magic formula for getting what you want

But it *is* a God-ordained means of appealing to him for help

Help in the face of sickness, and 4<sup>th</sup> – help in the face of *persecution*

Once again, David says in Ps 109 that – *wicked and deceitful mouths were opened against him, encircling him with words of hate and attacking him without cause* (2-3)

That's persecution

To which he says in v4 – *I give myself to prayer*; And apparently fasting as well

B/c in v24 he says – *My knees are weak through fasting; my body has become gaunt*

And then – *Help me, O Lord my God! Save me according to your steadfast love!* (26)

He fasted to get help in the face of persecution, and we can too

And then last, fast to get help in the face of *temptation*

That's one of the many lessons fr Jesus in Mt 4, just before he began his public ministry

He fasted not to *give* Satan an opp to tempt him, but to *prepare* for it

That's right; It says that he was first led into the wilderness to *be* tempted . . .

And then he fasted for 40 days; And then the tempter came to him

He knew he was going to be tempted, then fasted to face it

Implying that he fasted not to *give* Satan an opp, but to *prepare* for it

To be fully in tune with his Father in heaven, and seek his help

And you can too when temptation plagues you, or you know it's coming – fast to get help

And 5<sup>th</sup>, fast . . .

### 5. To pray **earnestly** (Ezra 8:23)

Look back again to Ezra 8:22

22 – IOW having said that God would protect them, Ezra didn't want the king to think

little of their faith, or little of God (23)

*Our entreaty* – God listened to their appeal, their request

And it wasn't some namby-pamby prayer for help . . .

Ezra says they *fasted and implored* our God for this (23)

That is, they begged him, they pleaded with him, they cried out to him . . .

And they *earnestly* requested his help

Which not only shows that fasting and prayer go hand in hand, but that fasting *changes* our prayers

It doesn't change God's hearing, it changes our praying

Bringing an earnestness and urgency to our prayers, just like a crisis does

In fact, you might think of fasting as a controlled crisis of the soul

Especially since one of the phrases for fasting that's used in the OT, is *inna napso* – which is Hebrew for “afflict the soul” (Lev 16:29-34; 23:26-32)

And the connection's not hard to see

Fasting afflicts the soul while afflicting our body, and causes us to pray earnestly

Imploring God to act *for* us, and sometimes in us

### 6. To seek **mercy** (Deut 9:18-19)

Remember the Golden Calf incident in Israel's sordid history?

Right after that, Moses says in **Dt 9:18-19** . . .

*Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water* [obviously a supernatural fast], *because of all the sin that you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also.*

He fasted in order to seek God's mercy; And we should too \*\*\*\*\*

Whether for your own sin, or the sin of others – he gives us the option to seek his mercy

Whether he grants it or not, is up to him

But it is ours to seek, and one more reason to fast

- And in light of Moses' supernatural fast w/out water, this would be a good time to say – don't try that at home

And even if you *do* drink water, I wouldn't recommend a 40 day fast

It's physically risky, and there's nothing magical about that number

Nor does the length of the fast determine the outcome in your life

It's the sincerity of your *heart* and the will of *God* that determines the outcome

At most, I'd recommend no longer than a 3 day fast

And preferably shorter – even if you *are* in good health

And *always* with water no matter what the length

And if you're *not* healthy, or taking medication – either consult a doctor first, or fast from something other than food

God knows your heart

And it's not about asceticism – you know, beating yourself up to get his attention or win his pleasure; that's not how it works

That's how the *pagan* religions do it, but that's not *God's* design

God's design is that your fast, of any length, would sensitize *your* Spirit to hear his

And in some cases, receive his mercy; Fast to seek mercy

### 7. To **confess** sin (Dan 9:3-5, 19)

That's what the prophet Daniel spends the better part of a *chapter* doing in his prophecy

After realizing how much time the Israelites were to spend in captivity, he writes in . . .

**Dan 9:3-5, 19** – *Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes* [the latter of which Jesus pretty much did away with when he said to wash your face and clean up].

*I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, “O Lord . . . we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules . . . O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive.”*

If you're struggling with a particular sin and can't seem to shake it – fast and confess it

And if you find yourself doing it again, fast again \*\*\*\*\*

I guarantee, if you fast for a day or two every time you indulge in a sin that has become a habit – you'll quit

Not only because you'll tire of afflicting your body, but you'll tire of afflicting your soul, and breaking *God's* heart in the process

Whether it's your own sin, or that of a group of whom you're a part – fast to confess it

### 8. To show **grief** (2 Sam 1:11-12)

In 2 Sam 1, David had just returned from battle, when he heard about the death of King Saul, and his son Jonathan, the same Jonathan with whom he was best friends

**2 Sam 1:11-12** – *Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.*

They fasted for the better part of a day, to show their grief

And you can too if you'd like \*\*\*\*\*

It's not mandated in Scripture, but it *is* demonstrated by godly people

Which puts us on solid ground, should we choose to do the same on occasion

Fast to show grief; And then 9<sup>th</sup>, fast . . .

### 9. To gain clarity (Acts 14:23)

Acts 14:23 – *When they* [Paul and Barnabas] *had appointed elders for them* [the believers] *in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

As Paul and Barnabas traveled around the northern Mediterranean preaching the gospel and making disciples, churches were formed  
And to lead those churches they appointed elders  
And to appoint them, they apparently prayed and fasted to (a) gain *clarity* as to who to choose, and (b) seek confirmation for their decision

Which was the very thing that the church in Antioch did a bit earlier with them – when they commissioned Paul and Barnabas for ministry  
Having been told by the HS to set them apart for the work of ministry . . .  
It says in Acts 13:3 – *Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*  
They fasted and prayed, apparently to gain clarity and confirm their choice

- And we should too for the weighty decisions in *our* lives  
Which is why I asked you to fast and pray re our build-out and capital campaign  
To gain *clarity* in your heart and mind as to *your* part in it . . .  
And *confirm* the initiative in *all* of us, as the time approaches

And while fasting doesn't necessarily ensure the *certainty* of receiving clear guidance from God, it does make us more *receptive* to it  
It heightens our awareness – narrowing the focus of our lives while broadening our perspective on the Kingdom  
That's why I've asked you to fast and pray one meal a week, and that's why I hope you do it

### 10. To worship God (Lk 2:37)

If fasting is denying yourself one thing in order to focus on another  
That focus should first and foremost be on God for the purpose of worship

That's how it was for Anna the Prophetess in **Lk 2:37**; It says . . .  
*She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.*

Contrary to the Israelites of Zechariah's day 400+ years earlier, who fasted w/out any *thought* of worship . . .  
Anna couldn't keep them apart  
She *expressed* her worship by constantly fasting and praying . . .  
*And*, she fasted and prayed *to* worship, to worship God  
And we should too

Before our need for clarity, or help, or mercy, or anything else – God should always be the primary focus of our fast  
He should always be the One *for* whom and *to* whom we afflict our soul  
Which is why fasting, no matter what the outcome – is never a loss, and never a waste  
Learn the Lesson and Live the Life