

Fasting: A Practical Guide

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I. Introduction

Although fasting—especially extended fasting—appears to have fallen on hard times among many modern-day Christians (at least Christians in developed countries), the simple truth is that Scripture teaches us that it is one of the basic disciplines that Christians are to practice. Along with prayer and almsgiving, Jesus elevated fasting to the place of a spiritual fundamental when He said, **“When you fast...”** (Matt 6:16). Jesus furthermore remarked concerning His disciples that **“when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast”** (Matt 9:15). Until Jesus returns, fasting is not merely one of Jesus’ teachings, but one of His assumptions regarding our spiritual life.

Spiritual Heroes Fasted

The reasons behind this assumption are easily seen when we read about fasting throughout the Bible. Major spiritual leaders like Moses, David, Elijah, Jehoshaphat, Daniel, Ezekiel, Esther, and Ezra all fasted—several of them for many days and even weeks. Many, many others are also described as people who fasted or taught fasting. In the New Testament Jesus Himself, along with Paul, Barnabas, and many disciples from churches where they ministered, all fasted. It may be considered remarkable that while these heroes of the faith are proclaimed as examples for righteous living, very rarely is their example of seeking God through fasting included as basic to their spirituality, much less as a possible key to the spiritual power we see in their lives. Yet Jesus clearly draws from these examples as He does from other spiritual principles from the Old Testament, and the disciples continue in His teaching in the book of Acts.

But one must go beyond merely the names of those who fasted and examine important fasts—and the motivation behind them—to begin to understand the purposes and power in fasting.

Consider these examples drawn from many of the Old Testament:

- *Moses fasted for spiritual revelation and intercession for God’s people (Deut. 9).
- *Hannah fasted out of grief in her petition for a son (1 Sam. 1).
- *King David fasted in repentance for sin, and intercession for his ill son (2 Sam. 12)
- *Elijah fasted during a spiritual pilgrimage (1 Kings 19).
- *Jehoshaphat (and later, Ezra) led their people in fasts for protection and guidance (2 Chron. 20; Ezra 8).
- *Daniel fasted to gain spiritual understanding and a breakthrough (Dan 1, 10).
- *Esther fasted for God’s favor so that the Jewish people might be saved (Esther 4).

In the New Testament:

*Jesus fasted for the power and direction of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of His ministry (Matt 4; Luke 4).

*Paul fasted after Jesus appeared to him on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9).

*Paul and Barnabas were fasting when the Spirit spoke to them about a missionary ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 13).

* Paul ordained elders with prayer and fasting (Acts 14).

What Is Fasting and What Is It for?

We can see from these passages that fasting is a multi-purpose discipline. One can fast for anything that one can pray for. Fasting is a powerful act of worship, a type of continual prayer with one's whole being that eliminates inner distractions and "baggage" as nothing else can. It sharpens spiritual sensitivity and inner devotion and breaks down spiritual strongholds. Fasting "supercharges" prayers of repentance and intercession, petitions for a deeper knowledge of God, calls for provision and protection, and cries for divine intervention during crisis. Fasting marks the beginning of the greatest chapters in the history of God's people, revealing itself to be a special form of devotion that makes the difference between *muddling through* and *breaking through* to God's higher purposes.

At the same time, a close reading of these passages also teaches us that fasting cannot be "used" to get what we want—we cannot "twist God's arm" with fasting. Rather, fasting is an exercise in obedience and surrender, inviting God to remove hindrances from our lives and have His way on His terms. While a fast (especially an extended fast) may begin with spiritual goals and seem to be about us, a successful fast always ends up being about the Lord and His plan for us.

Why Don't People Fast?

The question is, if fasting is so essential—so fundamental to the spirituality of so many people in the Bible—why don't more people fast today? The rather obvious reason is that fasting is a matter of serious physical, mental, and spiritual discipline, and many simply consider it too difficult. But the truer reason for most people is likely that they have never been taught—either from the Scriptures or by example—the practice and power of fasting. The combination of a lack of pointed teaching along with the difficulties of fasting conspires to keep most people from ever truly entering into this blessing. (Physical limitations will be touched on in the next section.)

This guide is a brief study of the different aspects of fasting: Physical, Mental, Social, and Spiritual. My prayer is that it will enlighten and challenge you to seek God through fasting and prayer in a way you haven't yet known, and as a result see the hand of God move in your life.

II. Physical Issues

The Basics

In the simplest sense, *fasting* means *not eating*. It is a radical reduction or alteration of one's diet made as a sacrifice to God. But without spiritual intention, fasting becomes merely crash dieting. I do not recommend fasting as a good way to lose weight. If done properly, weight loss *may* be a side benefit for some, but the truth is this benefit rarely lasts and if this is a primary goal the fast itself becomes vain and carnal rather than spiritual. If you need to lose weight, I suggest you come up with an exercise and diet plan *exclusive* of your time of fasting.

By the same token, it is my conviction that true fasting always entails a change in diet—either by consuming nothing at all or by cutting back on food significantly. People speak of “fasting” unspiritual and slothful behavior such as watching too much television, indulging in worldly shows, wasting excessive time on video games, shopping for the mere thrill of material acquisition, and the like. The Bible classifies these resolutions as *repentance*—not “fasting.” Fasting is the physical abstention from a *good thing*—the food that sustains us—in order to achieve a *better thing*: **The blessing of God.**

A Word to the Wise on Fasting and Physicians...

Before I go any further something must be said regarding medical restrictions, special health considerations, and consultation with physicians. The nature of my counsel and teaching in this guide is primarily *spiritual*, with the physical aspects of fasting coming from my own experience with fasts long and short. **It is not medical advice** (I'm a doctor, but of theology, not medicine!). Furthermore, the fasts described in the Bible seem to assume that those who participate in them are healthy, or at least healthy enough to fast without it doing them any physical harm. If you are under doctor's orders, are taking medication that depends on diet in any way, are diabetic or hypoglycemic, or have any doubts whatsoever I STRONGLY urge you to consult with your physician before entering into a time of fasting—especially an extended fast. I want you to have a heavenly experience through fasting, but here on earth! I would also add that there are many partial fasts that (which I will detail below) that are extremely beneficial in both the spiritual and physical senses. And as I have often stated, sometimes merely obeying what your doctor has already suggested (or commanded) is a fast enough!

Types of Fasts

Even a cursory examination of the few fasts I have listed above reveals that there are many different ways to fast. Moses and Elijah both fasted 40 days without food or water—fasts impossible without supernatural sustenance. Esther and her companions fasted three days without food or water—a physically possible feat, but very difficult. Jesus fasted 40 days and was hungry—implying that He took water during that time. Daniel chose to eat just vegetables indefinitely as a young man, and later in life fasted 21 days, abstaining from “choice food...meat or wine” (Dan. 10:3). The point is that there are different ways to fast according to one's own situation, ability, and spiritual need. The way I categorize different kinds of fasts for simplicity's sake is as follows:

The Miraculous Fast

It is physically impossible for someone to fast more than a few days without water and not get severely ill. Dehydration and the accumulation of toxins in the body that are eliminated in the

urine will begin to make you very sick after about three days, and death can occur after one to two weeks. The only way Moses and Elijah could have fasted 40 days without food and water is by the miraculous sustenance of God's Holy Spirit. Though some have tried to suggest that these men entered trance-like states that nearly halted their metabolisms, the conclusion is the same: Such a fast should not be attempted (unless EVERYTHING that happened to Moses and Elijah happens to you!). These fasts are testimonies of God's power, not practical examples of a course of action we should take.

The Absolute Fast

This is a fast of all food and all drink for a short, but humanly possible period of time. Esther and her companions fasted this way, and so did the Apostle Paul after encountering Jesus on the Road to Damascus. In both of these cases the fast lasted just three days—in other words, up to the point where illness would have set in if the fast would have continued. This is a very powerful, but very extreme fast and should not be considered if the person has to work or be at all active. It is a “crisis fast” done in seclusion for the most serious of matters.

The Total Fast

This is a fast of all food, but not water. The person drinks water regularly and without limitation during the whole fast, but abstains from food or calories of any kind. It appears that Jesus entered into this kind of fast when He began His ministry. Others throughout the Bible apparently fasted in like manner since there is reference to them not taking food but nothing is said of them not drinking as with certain people who did an Absolute Fast. The Total Fast is very powerful but difficult, especially if someone is very active. A healthy person can fast on pure water for 20-40 days and experience powerful spiritual and physical benefits.

The Liquid Fast

Similar to the Total Fast, the liquid fast allows no solid food, but permits the drinking of low-acid juices, clear broths, light teas, and the like (no sugary sodas, milkshakes, or liquefied cheeseburgers allowed!). This is my fast of choice (for an extended fast) because I have typically engaged in long fasts in connection with a church body and participated in many church activities associated with the fast. Taking some juice gives energy to function, but still subdues the flesh in a dramatic fashion. Many concur because they have demanding work schedules. A healthy person can go for a very long time on this fast, and in my experience it is just as powerful as a water-only (total) fast.

The Partial Fast

This is more of a fasting category than a specific course of action. There are obviously many ways one can go on a partial fast for a long period of time. Here are a few common examples:

The “Daniel Fast”

Drawn from Daniel 1, this fast is an abstention from meat and other luxury foods. When I choose to do the Daniel Fast, I give up all meat, fats like grease, butter, cheeses, and fried foods, “white” starches like white rice, pastas, potatoes, and breads, and all refined sugars. This restricts me to brown rice, 100% whole grain products, and fruits and vegetables that I can eat raw or cooked with salt and pepper if I like. I also allow myself beans (i.e., such as pinto, black, or navy beans) and nuts. Between a crock of homemade vegetable soup in the fridge and whole bean burritos

with 100% whole wheat tortillas, supplemented by fresh fruits and veggies, I can get along quite well even as I subdue my flesh and focus on God. The point is not to restrict the *amount*, but the *kind* of foods you eat (after just veggies for a while, you will find your appetite suppressed and amounts will take care of themselves). Each person will have their own variations, but any way it is done this is a very powerful fast and a healthy person can do it indefinitely.

The “Jewish Fast”

This fast consists of simply abstaining from food all day and eating a single meal at dusk. (It is called “Jewish” for the ancient understanding that one day ended and the next began at sundown) This can be a powerful fast but one must be careful not to undo the blessing of a daily fast by gorging at night. One way to do this is to predetermine what humble meal will be eaten (i.e., a bowl of soup and half a sandwich) each night, instead of allowing oneself to be carried away with whatever “happens.”

One Meal a Day

This is sort of a “reverse” Jewish Fast. The idea is to give up one significant meal per day, at whatever time you choose. I would recommend eating breakfast in any case, then giving up either lunch or dinner. Whatever you do, you must make sure that you don’t overcompensate in your other meals and undo the benefit of fasting in the first place.

Modified Diet

I call it this for lack of a better phrase to use. Daniel modified his diet according to Jewish dietary laws. You may have health restrictions and/or doctor’s orders that require a certain combination of foods for the sake of your health. Yet I have yet to meet a person who cannot sacrifice *something* to God as a form of fasting. The point is to offer Him a pleasure you have in eating, choosing to offer it to Him in exchange for a deeper focus. Remember: Gluttony is not necessarily only a sin of the *quantity* of food consumed; gluttony can also manifest itself in excessively picky attitudes towards food and demands for culinary perfection. Choosing to eat simple, common food and giving up (for instance) fancy restaurants during this period may be just the fast some people could be tremendously blessed by.

Combo Fast

Some start a fast with a Daniel Fast, then go to liquids only, then end with water only. Some do that in reverse. There’s no rule that says the entire fast must be done with exactly the same method the entire time. Come to a peace with the Lord about the fast or combination of fasting that is right for you.

Preparing for a Fast

When a person determines to enter into an extended period of fasting, it is best to prepare in advance rather than to eat and drink at will up to the moment the fast is to begin. Any fast longer than a couple of days requires not only spiritual and mental preparation, but proper treatment of the body as well. How you eat in the days and hours before you begin to fast will determine how easily you will shift into a “fasting mode” so you can concentrate on spiritual matters—which of course is the whole point.

My suggestion is that a person shift over to easily digestible foods like fruits and vegetables several days before the fast begins. If fruits and vegetables *are* your fast, then opt for easily digestible meats (poultry and broiled fish, for example) and pastas. In any case avoid sugary foods, fatty and fried dishes, and caffeine. Make sure you get used to drinking more pure water. All of this will enable your body to make the transition without a negative “jolt.” Many negative side effects (which I will describe below) come from lack of proper preparation and can often be avoided. **People who try to “stock up” to last through the fast are the ones who actually suffer the most in the early stages.**

What to Expect during a Fast

It is my experience that the fear of the unknown is what keeps most people from the blessing of an extended fast. Yet if the effects of fasting are described and understood before we start, then we may have an advantage as we move forward. Below are some of the “negative” physical sensations that come with fasting, followed by some positive ones. Again, these will vary from person to person. They are my personal observations and should be weighed in the light of professional medical advice, especially if health concerns.

“Negative” Effects

Hunger

This is greatly overplayed. The problem is that we confuse “hunger” and “appetite.” True hunger (genuine bodily need) does not set in on a healthy person for many days. The human body is designed to withstand long famines, our grumbling bellies notwithstanding. Most hunger pangs are psychological and come from conditioning the stomach to eat at given times regardless of whether or not we are hungry. A tall glass of water and a determined will do wonders to quell our pampered appetites.

Acid Stomach/Heartburn

Sometimes at the outset of a fast people get heartburn. This is because the stomach is conditioned to produce acid at meal times, or the intense thought of food (and sometimes its smell, if you have to be around it) will provoke this physical response. Take an antacid and some water; this reaction goes away after a couple of days. I would also recommend avoiding highly acidic juices, like orange, grapefruit, or lemonade, and spicy hot drinks, such as V-8 with Tabasco sauce. If you stick with apple and white grape juice you will likely have less trouble in this area. If you are eating something on your fast, avoid pepper and extra spicy dishes.

Headache

After hunger, this is the biggest fast-ender around. The “fasting headache” is brought on by toxins (often caffeine) being eliminated from the system. The headache can make the first 1-3 days difficult, but it does pass and leads to a sense of clarity and peace. Drink plenty of pure water and perhaps some juice, *but no caffeine*.

Bad Breath

Fasting has a diuretic effect, which leads to a dry mouth. Couple this with the fact that many drink most of their fluids at meals (which they are no longer taking), and it can slightly dehydrate you. A dry mouth combined with the toxins being worked out of your system (many through

your tongue) can lead to bad breath. Drink lots of pure water, and keep sugarless breath mints (or gum) with you (please!).

Lightheadedness

If (while fasting) people sit for long periods, then stand quickly or do strenuous exercise (perhaps even climbing stairs quickly), they may experience some sense of being lightheaded. It is temporary and normal, and the cure is to move a bit more slowly so your blood doesn't rush around your body so quickly. If this symptom goes beyond anything other than a minor irritation and occurs regardless of your movement and posture, you should modify your fast immediately to take in more calories (even if that just involves more fruit juice)—especially if you operate equipment or drive.

Sleeplessness/Sleepiness

Sleep patterns can be disrupted by fasting. Depending on your system, you may be very sleepy, or you may feel “wired” or jumpy. You'll have to tough this one out—it just comes with the territory. A small comfort is that even after much lost sleep, you still have energy during the day, and if you are sleepy, short naps can get you going again quickly.

Backache

Sometimes people experience lower back pain with a fast. This is a sure sign you are not drinking enough, and your kidneys are hurting because of the toxins building up there. Drinking *at least* a half gallon of pure water a day will cure this, and if you start to hurt, drink a quart as quick as you can get it down. The pain should subside very quickly.

Leg ache

Pain in the legs comes from a lack of salts and potassium. Taking vitamins and some salt as you fast, and a juice high in potassium, it will help. Also be sure to drink purified water so that chemicals in tap water do not accumulate in your system.

Positive Effects

Fasting will purify your taste buds, remove toxins from your system, and (if you fast long enough) cleanse the bowels and give new energy. Fasting can also break poor dietary habits and clear the way for lasting diet and weight reform. It is true that the health benefits (like the spiritual benefits) of fasting can be overplayed and have been by some. But there is no doubt fasting has some significant physical benefits.

The Stages of a Fast

To summarize, someone embarking on a long fast (especially of water or liquids only) for the first time should anticipate a series of thresholds—the one day threshold, the 3-4 day threshold, the 7 day threshold, the 14-15 day threshold.

*After one day, hunger pangs and edginess begins to set in. The body isn't sure if this is for real.

*Between day 2 and day 4, impurities are being swept from the system. The result is discomfort, bothersome hunger pangs, and headache (sometimes crushing if the person consumes a great

deal of caffeine and hasn't led into the fast properly). This can be the toughest time, and the person who hasn't been through it before often breaks the fast out of fear that the whole fast will be this uncomfortable. Unfortunately for them, they were just about to get the breakthrough...

*After day 7 comes affirm sense that this is possible, and the person can start to feel euphoric. Strength returns and they believe they could fast like this indefinitely.

*After day 14 there is a strong sense of victory as one enters the "stretch." Certain physical discomforts (mostly aches) come and go, as there are good days and bad days both mentally and physically, but if the person has made it this far they will likely be able to finish.

Breaking a Fast

In my view this issue is just as important as getting through the fast itself. If you have been fasting all food for an extended period of time, you must come off the fast very, very carefully. Generally speaking, and for the best health results, the process of coming off the fast properly is as long a process as the fast itself. A return to eating meat should be very slow, in small portions and of low-fat poultry. Avoid fish that may have bones, red meat, and pork. Avoid fats and fried foods. In general, a return to normal eating should be incremental and slow, and done in moderation. The foods you eat should be soft and easily digestible, and eaten in small portions. Don't gorge! Those foods will be there for you to enjoy later, so you don't need to eat them all this minute to make up for lost time! Once bowel movements begin to return to regularity, then you will know that you can gradually step things up.

If there has been a bondage in your life in connection with food and you want it permanently broken, there's no time like this to leave it behind. Avoid that particular eating habit like the plague as you break the fast and God will help you stay free.

On another note, if you get hungry during the fast and buckle to the pressure and eat, let me suggest a path to victory:

- 1) Don't fall into condemnation.
- 2) Go right back to your fast (modified if you have to). There is no rule that says you cannot simply pick up where you left off and continue the fast. We fast unto God, not unto each other or unto some "standard"—completing a fast so we can say we did so. The point is to subdue the flesh and offer ourselves a sacrifice unto God. If we realize what a fast is about, we won't fall into condemnation when we "fail" in this way, and we will get right back into it to the glory of God.

Exercise

I recommend light exercise both during the fast and when breaking it, if you are in physical condition to do so. Light exercise increases a sense of well-being and stokes the metabolism, which is especially beneficial when coming off a fast to avoid excessive "rebound" weight gain.

III. Mental & Emotional Issues

A fast is not merely a physical discipline. In fact, those who engage in longer fasts soon learn the discipline is one of mental and emotional toughness even more than it is a physical endeavor. Below are listed a few of the challenges people face during longer fasts.

Irritability

Not eating makes people cranky. That's just the way it is. Until we cross the thresholds described above (and at times even after they have been reached) we can be bears to be around. If several people in the same household are fasting (let's say, two adults who have to manage children who are not fasting), it can be pretty tough. Isaiah 58 warns us that fasting can be nullified if we do not keep our attitudes and our tongues in check. My experience is that 1) My wife is very gracious, and 2) fasting must be coupled by prayer and time in the Scriptures to truly keep this under control.

I would add that fasting brings spiritual impurities to the surface and the Holy Spirit convicts us in answer to our fasting and prayers. In other words, we fast not because we are nice, spiritual people, but because by nature we are carnal and sinful. Our carnal nature isn't very happy to relinquish its control, so it puts up a fight. Just as toxins come out of our pores and tongue, so "spiritual toxins" come to the surface as we fast in the form of bad attitudes, thoughts, and speech patterns. The answer goes deeper than merely biting our tongue—it has to do with repentance.

Concentration

Not eating can lead to an inability to concentrate—to maintain our focus on one thing. This is simply a byproduct of fasting, especially in the early stages. Clarity of thought returns as we continue in the fast.

It is also important to remember in regard to concentration during prayer that fasting itself is a sort of "long prayer." My prayer life changes during a fast because much of prayer is mental. In the end there is greater power and focus, but there is a road to tread to get there.

Boredom

Food occupies such a central place in our daily routine that removing it immediately creates a void. If beyond this typical condition we have unwittingly exalted food to the place of entertainment, then the void is felt even more acutely. Many eat out of boredom, and to occupy themselves with something that stimulates their sense. Restaurants clearly play to this entertainment aspect of eating, constantly catering to the whims of our "dining experience." When this source of gratification is taken away, our dependency upon food for more than strength and sustenance is revealed. The first sense is that we have more time on our hands. Next, we wonder what to do with it. A fast is intended to reveal these things and refocus us—spirit, soul, and body—upon the Lord Jesus and His plan for us. We are to take the energies we had invested in food and eating, and redirect them to spiritual activities for the duration of the fast. Thus equilibrium is restored to us that lasts far beyond the fast itself.

Fear

It can be spooky to stop eating, or even drastically change our eating habits for longer than a few days. We come into unfamiliar territory if we haven't done it before, and the "unknown" is usually one of the most fearful things we can deal with—especially when it comes to our bodies. Even as my warnings about consulting with a physician should be carefully considered, I also want to say that we shouldn't make excuses if we are healthy and know that we could fast if we are determined to do it. It's a question of what we value most, and what we fear more. Personally, I fear going without God's blessing more than anything else in my life—and certainly more than the temporary physical discomfort of fasting.

IV. Spiritual Issues

As I have previously stated, the primary goal for a proper fast should always be spiritual. But it is this very truth that makes it difficult and maybe even unnecessary to spell out more than the basics in this area. The reason is that each person's spirituality is as different as their personality, and even with the same person each period of fasting they pursue will likely be different than previous ones. I cannot explain how the fast will impact you spiritually. Fasting is a spiritual adventure—a pilgrimage. As you press into God, He will show you what He wants to show you. There is no formula or system. There is only the Lord. Nevertheless, the following basic points are major issues to keep in mind as you proceed with the fast:

Worship

As I stated before, at the core this is what fasting is, or at least should be. The impact of the fast on our life is that we are reminded of the Lord and His infinite worth 24 hours a day, day after day, in a very powerful way. A fast brings home to our whole being that God is the most important thing in our life. For all the strategies that one can come up with to keep a fast physically (and these are important), the best way I have found is to press into the Lord, seek Him, and use time and mental energies that a fast creates to glorify Him. Fasting is about spiritual determination (like the will to pray) more even than physical determination (such as the will to exercise).

Repentance

I have found that fasting is always connected to repentance sooner or later. Fasting brings the light and conviction of the Holy Spirit to us in a way that nothing else can. As we fast, we become very aware of our human weaknesses and limitations, we are humbled, and we are less prone to keep our excuses and hide behind self-justification when it comes to our sins. This is biblical, as we can see that throughout the Bible people fasted during times of repentance and seeking God. A prayer of repentance, fervently prayed, can permanently alter the direction of your life and the life of your family. It is a prayer that gets God's attention.

Temptation

Paradoxically, fasting is often a time of temptation and testing. When Jesus fasted in the desert, He came under attack from the devil and was tempted (though He did not yield to it). Many people fast expecting a "spiritual high," only to be disappointed that the time itself is difficult, not only physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The reality is that fasting is a time of spiritual training. World-class athletes have to pay the price of many long hours training their

bodies and practicing in order to achieve mere moments of glory. What we gain by seeking the Lord in fasting lasts far longer, but there is a parallel: Hard training comes first, victory follows. “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14)—after the fasting, and the temptation that came with it, was completed.

One might say, “If fasting is a time of temptation, why do it?” Temptations will come no matter what. The issue is preparation, and the terms under which temptation comes. A fast sets favorable terms for the one who seeks God. We deliberately (and sometimes corporately) choose to enter a time of spiritual training, knowing we enter battle. We are prepared physically, mentally, and spiritually. We are focused and determined. As a result we have “home field advantage.” The victories we win are real and will have an effect when the terms are not so favorable. The fact is, if we don’t fast, the roots of those temptations remain untouched, unmolested, and spring up to do us harm when we are least prepared.

Promises

I am convinced that all the promises in the Word of God are ours. I also recognize that many promises are conditional upon our actions. As Jesus *assumed* we would fast, broadly speaking I am convinced that the highest degree of spiritual blessing and manifestation of God’s fulfilled promises in our lives cannot be experienced without fasting. As someone said, “When I pray, coincidences happen, when I don’t, they don’t.” I can say the same thing about fasting.

I stated above that a time of fasting can be a time of testing and temptation. Most importantly, it can also be (and often is) a time of great spiritual blessing. I have had breakthroughs during a fast, and

A Word on Asceticism

“Asceticism” refers to the belief that harsh treatment of the body has an effect upon the virtue of the soul. In the history of the Christian church in Western civilization, asceticism has its roots in Greek pagan philosophy. It is rejected by both Jesus (Matt 11:18-19), and the Apostle Paul (Colossians 2:16-23). Nevertheless, many people are still influenced by it. When it comes to fasting, this is a touchy issue, since most ascetics will fast as part of their regimen. *But while all ascetics will fast, not all fasting is necessarily asceticism.* Jesus was clearly not an ascetic, but He fasted. *What determines whether we are falling into asceticism is the posture of our heart.* Asceticism is the error of exalting the discipline as the key to reaching the goal of true spirituality.

True biblical fasting does not reach for spiritual perfection, but for Jesus Christ in worship, and as a result Jesus works His will in us. There is no tool or tactic, however great, which can empower us to directly achieve Christlikeness. Only Jesus can save and work His will in us by grace. If we keep fasting as a discipline of worship rather than of perfectionism, we avoid error and lay the groundwork for Christ to have His way in us. Pure fasting brings perspective, and therefore humility. One who fasts quickly realizes that they are fasting not because they are a spiritual superhero, but because they want to draw near the only spiritual superhero there is—Jesus.

V. Social Issues

Human beings are social creatures, and much of our interaction with one another is done as we eat together. In fact, studies show that social eating can have tremendous benefits in our relationships. The good feelings we get from eating with our family is not just our imagination—it's very real. Jesus ate often with His disciples, and the defining ceremony for Christians is the Lord's Supper.

But when it comes to fasting, those social aspects of eating can become a major stumbling block. Most people (even Christians!) will simply not understand the idea of fasting, will not be sympathetic to you doing it. Family members may get offended by you not eating food they have prepared, and will attempt to force the issue. "How long are you going to do this?" "What's this for, anyway?" "Can't you have just a little? I worked so hard on this for you..." These are typical questions and statements that fasting Christians hear.

My suggested approach to these social pressures is *balance*. First and foremost, we live unto God, not unto each other. If Jesus demanded that we love Him above our family, that could certainly include keeping a fast even if our family or friends pressure us to break it. We should also keep in mind that the very people who don't understand our fast are the ones who will benefit from our prayers for them. While in seminary I boarded with an 83 year-old widow. She fussed and fussed about my fasting, but it was fasting that led to her being healed of rheumatoid arthritis in her hands! Sometimes, in the interest of the higher good, we need to just go on with God if that person never seems like they will understand.

The flip side is that sometimes we must make the decision that it just isn't worth the fight. If family or business obligations demand that you eat, you would do better to take a modest meal (of the most digestible food available in that circumstance), not draw attention to yourself, and then go back to fasting. I would also add what I call the "bridegroom" principle. Jesus said His disciples couldn't fast while the bridegroom (Jesus) was with them (Matt 9). He meant before He suffered and died, but there is another truth found here. When it is time to party, go ahead and party. Being a killjoy when there is a wedding, a special anniversary, a birthday, or a preplanned vacation does not glorify God. If the party or social function is optional for you, avoid it entirely rather than go and stand around "politely" declining food, drawing attention to yourself and making others self-conscious simply because they are having a good time. Again, you can always go back to fasting afterward, and you can eat modestly to "rejoice with those who rejoice." The point is to keep a low profile by joining the others in their harmless celebration.

Private vs. Public Fasting

Many people make much of Jesus' teaching about keeping our fasting a secret (Matt 6). It is true that Jesus tells us to keep our fasting to ourselves and fast sincerely. Yet Jesus was speaking to a particular abuse—the vainglorious attitudes of the Pharisees—and not giving an absolute rule on the matter. His primary concern was *sincerity*, not secrecy.

The fact is, of all the fasts in the Bible, roughly half are "open," or "declared" communal fasts. Joel tells us, "**Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly**" (Joel 2:15). By definition, a group fast must be declared. In fact, many of the fasts the ancient

Hebrews celebrated were part of their calendar—they were *scheduled* (contrary to the mindset of some who won't fast unless they feel God "calling" them to do so). "Crisis" fasts to deal with emergencies—such as Esther's fast, Jehoshaphat's fast, and Ezra's fast—were all done in groups. And paradoxically, it seems most of the fasts in the Book of Acts were communal fasts—praying for God's blessing on new ministers and ministries.

When we declare a fast and set a particular time of the year aside as a first-fruits offering, we honor God if we keep a clear heart and make sure our motive is not to impress anyone other than the Lord with our devotion. There is no need to constantly tell others what we are doing, but neither is it a terrible secret that we have to avoid at all costs. We should live and act as normally as possible, and keep our eyes on the Lord instead of how others perceive us.

I would add that while both kinds of fasting have their place, a group fast carries a particular power with it. Each community of believers has a corporate anointing. When they fast together, that anointing increases. Communal fasting is also easier to do than fasting alone, since others are doing it and encouraging it along the way. The longest fast I have completed by myself is 10 days. Yet I was able to do a 40-day fast and multiple 21-day fasts when participating in a group. If you have never fasted (to speak of), fasting in a group can serve as a training ground for fasting as an individual.

VI. Final Thoughts

What I have written here is but a primer to the subject of fasting. Much, much more could be said. But my goal is to present some practical aspects so that people will be encouraged to fast and reap the benefits of this powerful biblical discipline. In closing, let me mention a couple of tips:

Go into a fast with spiritual goals. I usually make a short list of special needs and concerns so I can fix my prayers on something. If they change, (and likely they will) that's fine. But beginning with spiritual goals is healthy to have an inner focus. If you don't have goals, about 2 ½ days into a fast your stomach will ask you, "So, why are we doing this?" If you don't have a firm answer, you will eat and drop the fast.

Stay in prayer and the Word. Consider your life patterns and determine to be more habitual with prayer and Bible reading. To fast for a long period but not increase in these disciplines is a golden opportunity lost. Remember, the point of the fast is not to simply "make it," completing the time so you can say to yourself and others that you did so. The point is to draw close to God.

Go to church. I have found that being in the house of God, especially during a group fast, is a powerful aid. There is an anointing to pray in church like nowhere else, and when others are there fasting as well, God lends strength and grace. Be there as much as you can when the doors are open.

Have a firmly defined strategy and “mode” of fasting before you start.

If you start out with a sloppy plan for what and how you will fast, invariably you will slip to the lowest denominator and miss a blessing. Determine precisely the nature of your fast and you will have a greater chance at success.

Think ahead of time about social challenges. Work out what you might say when you are questioned about your fast, so you can answer discreetly and tactfully. Have the foresight to avoid situations that might compromise your fast or make things more difficult for you and others than they need to be.

Don't give up. Fasting is biblical and it is powerful. If we seek the Lord, as so many of His favored saints in both the Old and New Testaments did, we will experience the victories they did. If we don't, we won't. It's just that simple.