

Prayer and Fasting

I. What is fasting?

Fasting is not something that excites most people in the Western world. The thought of going without food and even water for any length of time is not something that appeals to cultures that are not extremely familiar with the concept of self-denial.

A. The definition of fasting

Fasting is simply the abstinence from food or certain kinds of food either totally or partially for a specified length of time. The actual Greek word used for fasting literally means “not eat” (*nesteia*).

B. Fasting in the natural realm

In the natural realm people often fast as a regular discipline in their lives for health reasons. Many studies show that regular fasting can help to cleanse the body and give the systems of the body a rest. Fasting can, in fact, purge our body of toxins.

C. Fasting in the spiritual realm

Fasting is common in many religions of the world and it is promoted by Christ in relation to his followers. This fasting is done for the purpose of deepening one’s relationship and enhancing one’s communion with God.

II. What are the various types of fasting?

A. There are varying methods of fasting.

1. The normal fast

The normal fast is abstaining from food while drinking water. This is the most common type of fasting referred to in the Bible. It is also the most common type of natural fasting.

2. The partial fast

The partial fast is abstaining from certain types of food. Daniel and the three Hebrew children practiced this fast in Babylon when they abstained from the king’s pleasant meats and opted for a vegetarian diet (Dan. 1:15; 10:3). This fast is sometimes called a “Daniel Fast.” *But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.* 9 *Now God had brought Daniel into the favor and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs.* 10 *And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, “I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and drink. For why should he see your faces looking worse than the young men who are your age? Then you would endanger my head before the king.”* 11 *So Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12 “Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king’s delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants.”* 14 *So he consented with them in this matter, and tested them ten days. 15 And at the end of ten days their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king’s delicacies. 16 Thus the steward took away their portion of delicacies and the wine that they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.*

A partial fast may also include:

- a. Fasting certain items such as sugar, caffeinated beverages, meat or desserts.
- b. Limiting intake to natural fruit juices.

3. The absolute fast

The absolute fast is the most rigorous type of fasting in that it involves a complete abstinence of both food and water. Obviously, this fast should not be attempted for a long time without the approval of a medical professional and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

4. The non-food related fast

Some people find it spiritually beneficial to fast other things during a time of separation to the Lord. The most common type of fast in this area is fasting television, movies and other non-Christian forms of entertainment including the internet, Facebook, etc.

B. There are varying durations of fasting.

Fasting can be practiced in a variety of ways. The length of the fast is usually determined by the purpose for the fast in the first place. The fasts that are mentioned specifically in the Bible include the following:

1. One day fast

- This is the most common fast (Judg. 20:26; II Sam. 1:12; 3:35). It involves fasting for a 24 hour period. The Jews commonly fasted from sunset to sunset or approximately 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. the following day (commonly called the Jewish Fast which can also be sunrise to sunset). Other people fast from breakfast to breakfast. The word breakfast literally means “breaking the fast.”

Most people who live a “fasted lifestyle” would practice a normal fast one day each week. The Pharisees of Jesus day fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12).

2. Three day fast

- This is the next level of fasting. Esther is an example of someone who proclaimed a fast of three days as the nations looked to God for deliverance (Est.4:16-17; 5:1).

3. Seven day fast

- This is the next level of fasting. David fasted seven days when his child was sick (II Sam. 12:16-18). When Saul and his sons were buried there was a fast of seven days mourning their unfortunate end (I Sam. 31:13; I Chr. 10:12).

4. Twenty-one day fast

- Daniel fasted twenty-one days (Dan. 10:1-3). However, in his case it was not a total fast.

5. Forty day fast

- This is the highest level of fasting. Three men in the Bible fasted forty consecutive days. Moses has to be the “king of fasting.” He fasted forty days three times, two of which were apparently back to back—80 days with no food or water (Deut. 9:9, 18; Ex. 34:28). Elijah and Jesus also fasted for forty days (I Kgs. 19:8; Mt. 4:2). Fasting at this level is supernatural fasting and should only be done at the specific beckoning of the Lord. This type of fast should not be done without consulting with your physician prior to its inception. In some cases it could be physically dangerous.

III. Who are some of the people who fasted and why did they fast?

A. God's people in the Old Testament fasted.

1. They fasted on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31; 23:26-32; Num. 29:7).

2. They fasted during a special encounter with the Lord (Deut. 9:9-11).

3. They fasted for direction and help in battle (Judg. 20:26; II Chr. 20:3-4).

4. They fasted as part of their repentance and return to the Lord (I Sam. 7:6; I Kgs. 21:27). Even the animals had to fast when Nineveh repented (Jon. 3:5-10). *So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. (6) Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. (7) And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. (8) But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. (9) Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? (10) Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.*

5. They (David) fasted for healing (II Sam. 12:16-23; Ps. 35:11-13).

6. They fasted in a time of mourning for the death of a leader (I Sam. 31:13).

7. They fasted for deliverance from impending doom (Est. 4:3, 16).

8. They fasted for preservation and guidance on a difficult journey (Ezra 8:21).

B. God's people in the New Testament fasted.

1. They fasted in a special time of seeking the Lord (Acts 13:1-3). *As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.*

2. They fasted in the context of appointing elders in the church (Acts 14:21-23).

3. They fasted as a regular discipline (II Cor. 6:5; 11:27).

IV. What did Jesus teach about fasting?

Not only did Jesus give us a great example of fasting in His personal life and relationship to His Father, He also said some important things about fasting.

A. Jesus said that fasting would characterize His disciples (Mt. 6:16; 9:14-15). *Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "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 9:14-15*

B. Jesus gave practical instructions about fasting (Mt. 6:16-18). *Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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.*

C. Jesus demonstrated the power of a fasted lifestyle (Mt. 17:14-21). *And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, 15 "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 16 So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him." 17 Then Jesus answered and said, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me." 18 And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. 19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" 20 So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. 21 However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."*

V. What are some of the reasons why we might decide to fast?

A. Wrong reasons for fasting

1. Fasting to lose weight.

- Diet and exercise are important for the body. Fasting one day a week can be beneficial to almost anyone, but doctors will tell you that fasting is a very poor method of losing weight.

2. Fasting as a way to force God's hand.

- Fasting is not a hunger strike where we are blackmailing or trying to manipulate God into doing what we have determined as our own agenda. God does not respond to this type of fasting (Jer. 14:12). This type of fast can be very disappointing and will not draw us closer to God. The Bible does record one such incident of fasting that could have had a very bad result (Acts 23:12-22). *But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." (12) And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. (13) Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. (14) They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. (15) Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near." (16) So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. (17) Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." The Romans ended up sending an armed guard of 470 soldiers to escort Paul safely out of town.*

3. Fasting as a way to prove your own spirituality (Mt. 6:16-18).

- The Pharisees were concerned about how they looked on the outside. They tried to perform all of their religious duties in an exaggerated way because they wanted to have the praise of men. For this reason they disfigured their faces to create an outward look of suffering. They were fasting for men not for God. They were fasting because that is what "good people" are supposed to do.

4. Fasting as an empty form or ritual (Is. 58:3-9; Zech. 7:5)

- This is when we fast or abstain from eating, but we do not truly seek God. Fasting is to be a time of humbling ourselves before the Lord. It is a time to set aside our own agenda and hear from the heart of God. Our time of fasting should be “prayer and fasting.” Remember you can always pray without fasting but you cannot fast in a biblical way without praying.

B. Right reasons for fasting

The following are twelve good reasons for fasting:

1. Fasting for the healing of yourself or others.

2. Fasting for deliverance from bondages for yourself and others (Is. 58:6-11). Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, “Here I am.” If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 if you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. 11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

3. Fasting as part of the process of coming back to the Lord (Neh. 9:1-3; Joel 2:12). Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. Nehemiah 9:1-3

4. Fasting to mortify the works of the flesh.

5. Fasting to gain a greater sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

6. Fasting to receive needed guidance from the Lord.

7. Fasting for wisdom in dealing with some of life’s difficult issues.

8. Fasting for a greater release of miracle power in our ministry life (Mt. 17:14-21). Fasting helps to remove unbelief.

9. Fasting to get a fresh revelation of and from God.

10. Fasting in anticipation of a fresh move of the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:36-38; Acts 10:30). Fasting helps one to be spiritually prepared for what God wants to do. Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her ; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

11. Fasting to simply obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit. At times God will lead us into a fast even though we do not fully know why. As we respond in obedience to the Lord we will usually understand the “Why” after the fast is completed.

12. Fasting when the local church is called to a special time of fasting and seeking the Lord (Acts 13:1-3). Andrew Murray said, “Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything—to sacrifice ourselves—to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.”

VI. What are we actually doing when we fast?

A. We are afflicting or chastening our soul (Lev. 16:29; Ps. 69:10). *When I wept and chastened my soul with fasting... Psalm 69:10a*

B. We are humbling ourselves before God (Ps. 35:13; 1 Kgs. 21:29; Ezra 8:21). *But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting... Psalm 35:13a*

C. We are starving our natural man and feeding our Spirit man.

D. We are focusing all of our energies on hearing from God (Jer. 29:13-14). *And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.*

VII. What are some practical things to keep in mind when fasting?

There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to fasting. Fasting in the New Testament appears to be totally voluntary. The believer is to be led and guided by the Holy Spirit regarding when to fast, how long to fast and what type of fast to do. However, there are some things that will make your overall experience better.

A. Use wisdom while fasting and try to lighten your schedule and physical activity (1 Sam. 14:24-30). *And the men of Israel were distressed that day, for Saul had placed the people under oath, saying, “Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies.” So none of the people tasted food. (25) Now all the people of the land came to a forest; and there was honey on the ground. (26) And when the people had come into the woods, there was the honey, dripping; but no one put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath. (27) But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the people with the oath; therefore he stretched out the end of the rod that was in his hand and dipped it in a honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his countenance brightened. (28) Then one of the people said, “Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, ‘Cursed is the man who eats food this day.’” And the people were faint. (29) But Jonathan said, “My father has troubled the land. Look now, how my countenance has brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. (30) How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now would there not have been a much greater slaughter among the Philistines?”*

B. Limit activities that will distract from seeking the Lord (Is. 58:3-4).

- Television
- Sports
- Hobbies
- Video Games
- Entertaining Guests
- Non-Christian Reading
- Sexual Activity (I Cor. 7:3-5) *Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

C. Focus on activities that will enhance your ability to hear from God.

- Bible Reading
- Prayer and Meditation
- Laying before the Lord (napping)
- Reading a challenging Christian book
- Singing and Worship

D. Keep a note pad available at all times to write down spiritual impressions from the Lord. Expect God to speak to you and to reward your time with Him (Mt. 16:18).

E. Unless you are doing an absolute fast, drink lots of water while you are fasting. It will help you to keep from getting dehydrated.

F. Check with a doctor before you fast especially if you have a medical condition that requires the use of medications. Do not be presumptuous in this area. Pregnant women should never fast on any level without consulting their doctors.

G. If you have never fasted, start small and work up. Start with fasting one or two meals. Remember the whole purpose of missing the meal time is to use the time in seeking the Lord.

H. Expect your body to react with withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms may include headaches, nausea, and lightheadedness. In longer fasts, most of these symptoms will eventually subside.

I. Come off of an extended fast slowly. Large quantities of food will be a shock to your system after not eating for a while. You may not like the body's reaction.

J. Remember it is ok to let people know you are fasting. When Jesus spoke of the Pharisees they would boast and brag and draw attention to the fact they were fasting. If you are on your job and someone invites you to lunch it's ok to decline their offer by saying you are fasting. It is the attitude and purpose behind you letting people know you are fasting that God is looking at.

K. Also know that God will honor anything you are able to do. Don't let the enemy beat you up because you had to modify your fast or ate a meal or was not able to finish or complete your fast. God will not withhold his blessing from you because of a cup of coffee or because you ate after a certain number of days into the fast. If you have to stop and start God understands; remember it's about where your heart is during the fast.