

WOWC Prayer and Fasting:

What does the Bible teach about fasting?

Biblical fasting involves abstaining from eating (and/or drinking) foods for spiritual purposes. In the Old Testament, Israel celebrated certain annual fasts, the most prominent being the Day of Atonement. There were also occasional fasts tied to specific historical events, sometimes individual and sometimes corporate. Here are a few of the occasions for fasting: at a time of grief (I Sam. 31:13; Nehemiah 1:4), at a time of repentance (I Sam 7:6; I Kings 21:27), as an expression of humility (Ezra 8:21; Psalm 69:10), and as an expression of a need for God's guidance and help.

What all of these fasts share in common is that they were an expression of dependence on God. Several New Testament passages give us insight about fasting. Fasting teaches us:

- God's Word nourishes us: Matthew 4:1-4 records the only example of Jesus fasting, just prior to His being tempted in the wilderness. He faced temptation with these words, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3-5 which talks about the 40 years Israel spent in the wilderness, depending daily on manna to sustain them. He says that God humbled them and let them be hungry in order to teach them to depend on God's Word to sustain them. By His example of fasting, Jesus reminds us that food alone can't sustain us. We need to be nourished by God's Word.
- God's will sustains us: John 4:31-35 records Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. When the disciples return, they encourage Jesus to eat. He responds by saying, "I have food to eat that you know not of." Then He adds, "My food is to do the will of the Father." Again, Jesus reminds us that food alone is not enough. We are sustained by doing God's will.
- Jesus Himself sustains us: In John 6:48-50 Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die." We see this pictured symbolically in the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper. Jesus is the source of eternal life. Fasting is feasting on Jesus. Jesus assumed that fasting would be a part of His disciple's spiritual life. In Matthew 6:16-18, He says, "when you fast," not "if you fast."

He warns us not to fast to impress people, but to be near to the heart of God.

What is the purpose of fasting? Fasting is designed to intensify our dependence on God by weakening our dependence on food/flesh and other things. How does it do that?

- Fasting reveals and heals our dependence on food (and other things) to fill the discomfort caused by low self-esteem, unfulfilling work, unloving relationships, uncontrollable circumstances, etc. It removes the false peace derived from the pleasure of eating. Richard Foster says, "More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately.

David writes, "I humbled my soul with fasting" (Psalm 69:10). Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting."

- Fasting teaches us that we can go without getting what we want and still survive. Fasting can free

us from having to have what we want. Therefore, fasting can teach moderation or self-control, not only in relation to food, but in other areas as well. It teaches contentment. (I Timothy 6:6)

- Fasting expresses and deepens our hunger for God. Richard Foster says, “Fasting reminds us that we are sustained “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God:” (Matt. 4:4). Food does not sustain us; God sustains us. In Christ, “All things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). Therefore, in experiences of fasting, we are abstaining from food or other activities and feasting on God’s Word.

Fasting must always, first and foremost, center on God. It must be about Him.

Step 1: Clarify the purpose of your fast Why are you fasting? Ask the Holy Spirit to clarify His leading and objectives for your prayer fast. This will enable you to pray more specifically and strategically. Fasting is God-led and God-initiated. That means that He fuels a desire to fast and pray. He loves it when we fast.

Step 2: Specify the kind of fast you will do Pray about the kind of fast you should undertake. Jesus implied that all of His followers should fast. (Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14,15)

For Him it was a matter of when believers would fast, not if they would do it.

Before you fast, decide the following up front:

- How long you will fast - one meal, one day, one week, several weeks, certain days (beginners should start slowly, building up to longer fasts)?
- The type of fast God wants you to undertake - discussed in the “Types of Fasts” section below.
- What physical or social activities you will restrict
- How much time each day you will devote to prayer and God’s Word. Making these commitments ahead of time will help you sustain your fast when physical temptations and life’s pressures tempt you to abandon it.

Step 3: Prepare your heart, mind, and body for fasting.

Fasting is not a spur-of-the-moment thing. It is planned. We must prepare. The very foundation of fasting and prayer is repentance. Un-confessed sin can hinder your prayers. There are several things you can do to prepare your heart

- Fasting requires reasonable precautions. If you are on medications, consult your physician first, especially if you take prescription medication or have a chronic ailment. Some persons should never fast without professional supervision.
- Do not rush into your fast. Prepare your body. Eat smaller meals before starting a fast. Avoid high fat and sugary foods. Eating raw fruit and vegetables prior to your fast is helpful. Physical preparation makes the drastic change in your eating routine a little easier so that you can turn your full attention to the Lord in prayer.
- Prepare your heart and mind: Remember that God is your Father and He loves you and is for you.
- Confess every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance and accept God’s forgiveness 1 John 1:9. Seek forgiveness from all whom you have offended, and forgive all who have hurt you (Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4; 17:3, 4). Make restitution as the Holy Spirit leads you.
- Surrender your life fully to Jesus Christ Romans 12:1, 2. Meditate on the attributes of God, His love, sovereignty, power, wisdom, faithfulness, grace, compassion, and others. (Psalm 48:9,10; 103:1-8, 11-13)
- Begin your time of fasting and prayer with an expectant heart. (Hebrews 11:6) • Do not underestimate spiritual opposition. Satan sometimes intensifies the natural battle between body and spirit. (Galatians 5:16, 17)
- Finally, and of great importance, Jesus instructs us in Matthew to not let others know about your fasting. Let it be done as much as possible to the Father in secret and He will reward you

openly. Yet there are times in corporate fasting that we are sharing the burden together.

Types of fasts-

1. The complete fast-
 - You eat nor drink anything
 - Maximum time for this is 3 days & nights.
 - Going longer without fluids is very dangerous to your health, endangering your digestive system, damage to your key internal organs, and rapid cell breakdown.
 - Scriptural examples:
 - Ezra 8:21, 10:6- called by the prophet – priest Ezra.
 - Esther 4:16- called by queen Esther & the Jews.
 - The complete fast is one of desperation, a fast of all out hunger and urgency for the presence of God to come on the scene.
2. The normal fast-
 - Jesus observed in the wilderness, involves total abstention from food, but regular intake of water.
 - Distilled water is best for purification of the body.
 - Fresh lemon squeezed into the water adds flavor and enhances the cleansing effect.
 - If fasting longer than three days, a little honey in the water would give you some energy.
 - Avoid caffeinated beverages.
3. The Daniel fast-
 - Good for beginners.
 - Daniel honored and pleased the Lord by fasting this way.
 - Dan. 10- “He ate no pleasant food, no meat, no wine, for three full weeks.” (21 days).
 - A good fast for persons with conditions such as diabetes, hypoglycemia, and anemia.
 - Practical for persons who have physical/mentally demanding jobs.
 - I Kings 17- Elijah went on a partial fast of cakes made of meal/oil.
 - John the Baptizer ate only wild honey and locusts, which is a bean pod type of food.
4. The group/corporate fast-
 - This kind of fast turned god’s wrath away from the wicked city of Nineveh. Jonah.
 - Ezra called this fast
 - Esther called this fast
 - King Jehoshaphat called this fast.
 - Joel called this fast.