

INTRODUCTION TO FASTING

THE WHAT, WHY, WHEN, & HOW

INTRODUCTION TO FASTING

WHAT IS FASTING?

Biblical fasting is, very simply, denying oneself food for the sake of seeking God and drawing closer to Him. Pastor Stovall Weems says that “prayer is connecting with God; fasting is disconnecting ourselves from the world.” That’s a great way to describe how prayer and fasting work so powerfully together.

WHY WE FAST AND PRAY

Fasting is like hitting a reset button, both physically and spiritually. As we go about our daily lives, there are things that can build up over time and we can start to lose our spiritual focus. Fasting is like a deep cleaning both spiritually and physically that helps us take our minds off the things of this world and instead gives us a fresh spiritual focus. It’s all about drawing closer to God.

There are several reasons for times of fasting and prayer. Here are five:

1. We fast and pray as we return to the Lord, longing for him. (Joel 2:12-13; Matthew 9:14-15). David Mathis wrote about finding God in fasting:

“God himself, in Christ, is the one who satisfies more than the best of foods, and quenches our thirst more than the purest of water, the richest of milk, and the best of wine. In him, our souls “eat what is good” and we “delight [our]selves in rich

food” (Isaiah 55:2). He is the one who says, “To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment” (Revelation 21:6). We who have tasted and seen his goodness (Psalm 34:8) now join his Spirit in saying, “Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Revelation 22:17).”

2. We fast and pray for greater Holy Spirit empowerment and anointing for ministry/service (Luke 4:1-21).
3. We fast and pray for church leaders (Acts 14:23; 13:3-4).
4. We fast and pray for the Lord's direction (Acts 13:1-2).
5. We fast and pray for spiritual breakthroughs, such as deliverance from demonic oppression (Mark 9:28-29).

The late Christian leader, Bill Bright, wrote,

"I believe the power of fasting as it relates to prayer is the spiritual atomic bomb that our Lord has given us to destroy the strongholds of evil and usher in a great revival and spiritual harvest around the world."

Stovall Weems writes, "There is a closeness to God that you simply won't experience from prayer or personal devotions alone. You must fast."

TYPES OF FASTS

Ask the Lord what kind of fast you should follow. Also, be sure that your body is ready and able to endure such a fast. Consult a medical professional before fasting or if you have questions.

There are several possible fasts:

- Complete fast: Drink only liquids, typically water with light juices as an option, for the duration of the fast.
- Selective fast: Remove certain elements from your diet; for example, in a "Daniel" Fast, remove meat, sweets, and bread from your diet and consume water and juice for fluids and fruits and vegetables for food.
- Partial fast: Is sometimes called the "Jewish Fast" and involves abstaining from eating any type of food in the morning and afternoon. This can either correlate to specific times of the day, such as 6:00 am to 3:00 pm, or from sunup to sundown.
- Soul fast: Is a great option if you do not have much experience fasting food, have health issues that prevent you from fasting food, or if you wish to refocus certain areas of your life that are out of balance. For example, you might choose to stop using social media or watching television for the duration of the fast and then carefully bring that element back into your life in healthy doses at the conclusion of the fast.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL FAST

- Set goals: Why are you fasting? Is it for spiritual renewal, for guidance, for healing, for the resolution of problems, for special grace to handle a difficult situation? Ask the Holy Spirit to clarify His leading and objectives for your prayer fast. This will enable you to pray more specifically and strategically.
- Expect some physical and emotional reactions: You may experience fatigue and lethargy. You may also feel cranky and irritable as your body craves sugar or caffeine. This will usually pass after a day or two.
- Prepare your heart to meet with the Lord: The very foundation of fasting and prayer is repentance. Unconfessed sin will hinder your prayers.
- Exercise Cautiously: Don't overdo physical efforts while missing meals.
- Gradually cut back on food intake before you start missing meals.
- End your fast gradually by eating small meals.
- See a Physician: Some physical conditions prohibit fasting from food.

THIS IS WAR

We are at war with an unseen, powerful, and evil enemy (Ephesians 6:12). Just as Jesus encountered strong satanic temptation during his 40 days of fasting and prayer, so should we expect spiritual warfare. The devil does not want us to draw close to the Lord. Do not be discouraged; the Lord has made every provision for your victory (Ephesians 6:10-18).

PLAN FOR SUCCESS

By failing to plan, we are planning to fail. It is a good idea to prepare and to follow a schedule your 21 days of prayer and fasting. Use a calendar or planner to mark the days on which you will fast. Set aside times to be alone with God. Create a Bible reading plan and follow this prayer guide. Be careful not to schedule social activities that will interrupt your fast.

EXPECT RESULTS

If you sincerely humble yourself before the Lord, repent, pray, and seek God's face; if you consistently meditate on His Word, you will experience a heightened awareness of His presence (John 14:21). The Lord will give you fresh, new spiritual insights. Your confidence and faith in God will be strengthened. You will feel mentally, spiritually, and physically refreshed. You will see answers to your prayers. Let's believe Stovall Weems who wrote:

"You get a greater revelation of God's Word when you fast that you simply cannot get any other way. Disconnecting from distractions of

the world through fasting, and connection into the power and presence of God through prayer brings a supernatural freshness and newness to our souls."

A word of caution is in order: It takes time to build your spiritual fasting muscles. If you fail to make it through your first fast, do not be discouraged. You may have tried to fast too long the first time out, or you may need to strengthen your understanding and resolve. As soon as possible, undertake another fast until you do succeed. God will honor you for your faithfulness.

CONSIDER A LIFESTYLE OF FASTING & PRAYER

A single fast is great, but, just as we need fresh infillings of the Holy Spirit daily, we also need new times of fasting before God. A 24-hour fast each week has been greatly rewarding to many Christians.

RESOURCES FOR PRAYER AND FASTING

- The Anglican Book of Common Prayer is a great daily guide to prayer. It's available here as an online resource that works well on mobile and desktop devices: gregorians.org/office/
- Seven Basic Steps to Successful Fasting and Prayer by Bill Bright is a brief overview available online here:
- 21days.churchofthehighlands.com/resources/seven-basic-steps-to-successful-fasting-and-prayer
- A Hunger for God by John Piper: Available for free download at www.desiringgod.org/books/a-hunger-for-god

- Fasting by Jentezen Franklin. Available on our book table.
- Awakening by Stovall Weems. Available on our book table.
- A list of fasting articles, sermons, books and other resources is available online here: <https://www.desiringgod.org/topics/fasting/all?sort=shares>

Fasting for Beginners

Article by David Mathis, Executive Editor, desiringGod.org:
www.desiringgod.org/articles/fasting-for-beginners

Chances are you are among the massive majority of Christians who rarely or never fast. It's not because we haven't read our Bibles or sat under faithful preaching or heard about the power of fasting, or even that we don't genuinely want to do it. We just never actually get around to putting down the fork.

Part of it may be that we live in a society in which food is so ubiquitous that we eat not only when we don't need to, but sometimes even when we don't want to. We eat to share a meal with others, to build or grow relationships (good reasons), or just as a distraction from responsibility.

And of course, there are our own cravings and aches for comfort that keep us from the discomfort of fasting.

Not So Fast

Fasting is voluntarily going without food — or any other regularly enjoyed, good gift from God — for the sake of some spiritual purpose. It is markedly counter-cultural in our consumerist society, like abstaining from sex until marriage.

If we are to learn the lost art of fasting and enjoy its fruit, it will not come with our ear to the ground of society, but with Bibles open. Then, the concern will not be whether we fast, but when. Jesus assumes his followers will fast, and even promises it will happen. He doesn't say "if," but "when you fast" (Matthew 6:16). And he doesn't say his followers might fast, but "they will" (Matthew 9:15).

We fast in this life because we believe in the life to come. We don't have to get it all here and now, because we have a promise that we will have it all in the coming age. We fast from what we can see and taste, because we have tasted and seen the goodness of the invisible and infinite God — and are desperately hungry for more of him.

Radical, Temporary Measure

Fasting is for this world, for stretching our hearts to get fresh air beyond the pain and trouble around us. And it is for the battle against the sin and weakness inside us. We express our discontent with our sinful selves and our longing for more of Christ.

When Jesus returns, fasting will be done. It's a temporary measure, for this life and age, to enrich our joy in Jesus and prepare our hearts for the next — for seeing him face to face. When he returns, he will not

call a fast, but throw a feast; then all holy abstinence will have served its glorious purpose and be seen by all for the stunning gift it was.

Until then, we will fast.

How to Start Fasting

Fasting is hard. It sounds much easier in concept than it proves to be in practice. It can be surprising how on-edge we feel when we miss a meal. Many an idealistic new fast-er has decided to miss a meal and only found our belly drove us to make up for it long before the next mealtime came.

Fasting sounds so simple, and yet the world, our flesh, and the devil conspire to introduce all sorts of complications that keep it from happening. In view of helping you start down the slow path to good fasting, here are six simple pieces of advice. These suggestions might seem pedantic, but the hope is that such basic counsel can serve those who are new at fasting or have never seriously tried it.

1. Start small.

Don't go from no fasting to attempting a weeklong. Start with one meal; maybe fast one meal a week for several weeks. Then try two meals, and work your way up to a daylong fast. Perhaps eventually try a two-day juice fast.

A juice fast means abstaining from all food and beverage, except for juice and water. Allowing yourself juice provides nutrients and sugar for the body to keep you operating, while also still feeling the effects

from going without solid food. It's not recommended that you abstain from water during a fast of any length.

2. Plan what you'll do instead of eating.

Fasting isn't merely an act of self-deprivation, but a spiritual discipline for seeking more of God's fullness. Which means we should have a plan for what positive pursuit to undertake in the time it normally takes to eat. We spend a good portion of our day with food in front of us. One significant part of fasting is the time it creates for prayer and meditation on God's word or some act of love for others.

Before diving headlong into a fast, craft a simple plan. Connect it to your purpose for the fast. Each fast should have a specific spiritual purpose. Identify what that is and design a focus to replace the time you would have spent eating. Without a purpose and plan, it's not Christian fasting; it's just going hungry.

3. Consider how it will affect others.

Fasting is no license to be unloving. It would be sad to lack concern and care for others around us because of this expression of heightened focus on God. Love for God and for neighbor go together. Good fasting mingles horizontal concern with the vertical. If anything, others should even feel more loved and cared for when we're fasting.

So as you plan your fast, consider how it will affect others. If you have regular lunches with colleagues or dinners with family or roommates, assess how your abstaining will affect them, and let them know ahead of time, instead of just being a no-show, or springing it on them in the moment that you will not be eating.

Also, consider this backdoor inspiration for fasting: If you make a daily or weekly practice of eating with a particular group of friends or family, and those plans are interrupted by someone's travel or vacation or atypical circumstances, consider that as an opportunity to fast, rather than eating alone.

4. Try different kinds of fasting.

The typical form of fasting is personal, private, and partial, but we find a variety of forms in the Bible: personal and communal, private and public, congregational and national, regular and occasional, absolute and partial.

In particular, consider fasting together with your family, small group, or church. Do you share together in some special need for God's wisdom and guidance? Is there an unusual difficulty in the church, or society, for which you need God's intervention? Do you want to keep the second coming of Christ in view? Plead with special earnestness for God's help by linking arms with other believers to fast together.

5. Fast from something other than food.

Fasting from food is not necessarily for everyone. Some health conditions keep even the most devout from the traditional course. However, fasting is not limited to abstaining from food. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose."

If the better part of wisdom for you, in your health condition, is not to go without food, consider fasting from television, computer, social

media, or some other regular enjoyment that would bend your heart toward greater enjoyment of Jesus. Paul even talks about married couples fasting from sex “for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Corinthians 7:5).

6. Don't think of white elephants.

When your empty stomach starts to growl and begins sending your brain every “feed me” signal it can, don't be content to let your mind dwell on the fact that you haven't eaten. If you make it through with an iron will that says no to your stomach, but doesn't turn your mind's eye elsewhere, it says more about your love for food than your love for God.

Christian fasting turns its attention to Jesus or some great cause of his in the world. Christian fasting seeks to take the pains of hunger and transpose them into the key of some eternal anthem, whether it's fighting against some sin, or pleading for someone's salvation, or for the cause of the unborn, or longing for a greater taste of Jesus.

David Mathis is author of the book, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines*.

Why Do Christians Fast?

John Piper: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-do-christians-fast>

Fasting is the act of going without food for a certain amount of time. The act is not distinctly Christian, nor is it distinctly spiritual either. It could just be physical. And so, Pastor John, we get questions all the time about Christian fasting. What is it and why do we do it? How would you frame this discussion and introduce Christian fasting?

Fasting Defined

First of all, let's define fasting. Here is a generally accepted definition of fasting among Christians over the centuries. Fasting is a temporary renunciation of something that is in itself good, like food, in order to intensify our expression of need for something greater — namely, God and his work in our lives.

Now defined like that, fasting is not explicitly commanded in the Bible for Christians. Fasting doesn't have the same place in Christianity that it does, for example, in Islam. The fasting that Muslims do during the month of Ramadan in Islam is a requirement of every real Muslim. You can't really claim to be a Muslim if you say, "I am just not going to do Ramadan." Fasting doesn't have that kind of place in Christianity. But even though there is no command to fast in the New Testament, nevertheless there are indications that it was normal and that Jesus expected it would happen among his followers.

Fasting in Secret

For example, in Matthew 6:16–18, Jesus says, “When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

So several things stand out in that passage. One is that Jesus says, “When you fast,” not “If you fast.” That is what I mean when I say it seems that he expects that his followers will be fasting. But even more clear in this passage is that Jesus insisted that our fasting not be for the sake of impressing other people. In fact, we should go out of our way, he says, as much as possible — washing our face, combing our hair — to keep other people from knowing that we are fasting. And that gives fasting for Christians a radically Godward focus. And in that sense fasting is a great test and confirmation that God is real to us, since in many situations God is the only person who knows you’re fasting. And the discipline can’t impress anybody, and all it can do is test whether you and God are really having a transaction here.

Fasting in Anticipation

Another important passage for the meaning of Christian fasting is Matthew 9:14–17. Jesus compares the old pre-Christian fasting to old wineskins and the fasting that his disciples will be doing as new wine that won’t fit into the old wineskins. It blows them up. In other words, there is something new about Christian fasting that sets it apart from

the Old Testament fasting. They are not the same thing. So here is what he says:

Then the disciples of John came to him [Jesus], saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

Jesus says that his disciples are not fasting while he is with them. He is the Bridegroom present. We don't fast when the Bridegroom is present. But when he is gone away, he says, which he has, he has gone back into heaven, then the disciples will fast. And what that seems to indicate is that Christian fasting is a way of expressing our longing for the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our King, to return. That is the connection between the fasting and the second coming of Christ. One of the meanings of Christian fasting is that we are expressing our hunger for the Lord Jesus to come back and to take up his kingship in this world. What sets Christian fasting apart as unique — new wine that can't fit into the old wineskins — is that Christ has already come. The Bridegroom, the King, has already been here. We have seen him and known him. We love him, because we have tasted of his presence. We have already tasted the presence of the kingship of Jesus.

So Christian fasting is not merely hoping and longing and hungering and aching for something future. It is based on an already and not just a not yet. The King has come. He has died for our sins. He is risen from the dead. He is gone away into heaven. We already have the down payment in our hearts of his presence and his Spirit, but we long and we hunger for the consummation of the day of his return, his coming and reigning. So Christian fasting is unique in all the fasting of the world. It is unique in that it expresses more than longing for Christ or hunger for Christ's presence. It is a hunger that is rooted in, based on, an already present, experienced reality of Christ in history and in our hearts.

Fasting in Need

Let me give one more passage that gets at the meaning of what fasting is for Christians. In Acts 13:1–3 there is this beautiful illustration of how fasting became instrumental in the laying hold of God for the shaping of world-changing ministry. Here is what it says.

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 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.

So the leaders of the church were fasting, it seems, in order to express to God their own need and longing and desire with their bodies for God's guidance in missionary breakthroughs. And God

responded with an answer that totally transformed the world, because the mission Barnabas and Saul (or Paul) was one of the most important missionary endeavors in the history of the world, because the advancement of the gospel broke into the western Roman Empire and nothing in the world has ever been the same since that breakthrough.

Fasting As Worship

So let me summarize the heart of Christian fasting and why we Christians do it. One way to say it is that fasting is the hungry Christian handmaid of faith. Fasting is not a replacement for faith in Jesus. It is a servant of faith in Jesus. Fasting is a way of saying with our stomach and our whole body how much we need and want and trust Jesus. It is a way of saying that we are not going to be enslaved by food as the source of our satisfaction. We will use the renunciation of food from time to time to express that Jesus is better than food. Jesus is more needful than food.

Food is good. Let there be no mistake about this. We are not ascetics in that we deny the goodness of God's creation. Food is good. It is a gift of God and we glorify God with it in two ways, not just one way. We feast on it with gratitude for God's goodness and we forfeit food out of hunger for God himself. When we feast we gladly taste the emblem of our heavenly food, the bread of life, Jesus himself.

And when we fast we say: I love the reality more than I love the emblem. Both feasting and fasting are worship for the Christian. Both magnify Christ. And, of course, both have their peculiar dangers. The danger of feasting is that we fall in love with the gift. And the danger of

fasting is that we belittle the gift and boast in our willpower, our discipline.

But at its best, Christian fasting is not a belittling of the good gift of food. It is simply a heartfelt, body-felt exclamation point at the end of the sentence: I love you, God. I need you more than I need food, more than I need life.

John Piper is the author of an excellent book on fasting: *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer*.

Piper's book is available as a PDF for free download here:
www.desiringgod.org/books/a-hunger-for-god