

AN INTRODUCTION TO FASTING

What is fasting?

Fasting is abstaining from our everyday bread to put ourselves in a position of need before the Bread of Life. It is to empty ourselves of physical pleasures to seek to be filled with God's presence and power. Biblical fasting is to go without food. To clarify, the common practice of abstaining from various activities or treats such as chocolate, media, sports, or coffee is healthy, but is not a biblical "fast." Fasting is the specific habit of denying ourselves food in order to discipline ourselves and seek God. It is a tangible way to crucify the flesh (our sinful desires) and deny ourselves and it has transformative results.

Should we fast?

Fasting is beneficial and there are appropriate times to fast as can be noted in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 9:14-15 (cf. Mark 2:18-20). But fasting is not required. The only time we see fasting as a requirement was for Israel, under the law of Moses, with the annual fast on the Day of Atonement.¹ Fasting is a humble response to God and an opportunity to grow closer to him. It is not a way of earning God's love. We are free to respond to God in this way and then grow and benefit as his people have through the ages. Our motives matter as we approach fasting as an opportunity rather than an obligation.

It can further be noted that Matthew records Jesus' teaching on fasting in the same passage as his teaching on the practices of prayer and giving (Matt. 6). It is helpful to pay attention to all three of these practices and not ignore fasting.

*"Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it."
- John Wesley*

Types of Biblical Fasting

- i. **Full fast:** eating no food. This is the most common.
- ii. **Partial fast:** only vegetables with no meats or treats (i.e Daniel. Daniel 10:3).
- iii. **Absolute fast:** no food or liquids. This is an extreme fast. Esther and Moses are examples.

There are also **personal private fasts** and **corporate fasts**.

Examples of private fasts are:

- David (Ps. 69:10), Jesus (Lk. 4) and Anna (Lk. 2:37).
- Historical examples include: Athanasius, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Wesley, Edwards and more.

Examples of corporate fasts include:

- The Israelite exiles prior to traveling (Ezra 8:21) and the people of Judah when under attack (2 Chr. 20:3). The early church also fasted (Acts 13:3, 14:23).

¹ See Lev. 23:26-32. It is called "the fast" in Acts 27:9. In the time of Jesus, pious Jews had a practice of fasting twice a week but this was not a requirement from the scriptures.

- Historically, Charles Spurgeon's church fasted together seeing results. John Wesley notes how Britain fasted during the French invasion in 1756.²

Purpose of Fasting

- *Breakthrough & Longing.* There are times when we feel the desire to seek God earnestly and we choose to fast. In the Bible, people fasted in emergency's and times of desperation.
- *Repentance & Cleansing.* It can be an expression of repentance as we desire to shed the things that control us as we seek God. Our sin can be revealed as we fast.
- *Dedication & Discipline.* Fasting can be our response to noting how need for increased spiritual discipline and focus. It focuses us and reminds us of how God is the source of life (Mt. 4:4).
- Fasting can also be a response to our corporate life together or even poverty and injustice.

Health & Fasting

- *It can be healthy.* Toxins are released as the body is cleansed. Though this process over the first few days can involve headaches, bad breath, etc. for most people it isn't unhealthy.
- One cannot last longer than 3 days without water and hydration is very important.
- Most people will not hit the point where fasting becomes unhealthy until after a few weeks. The body lasts on reserves for that period.
- Feelings of hunger occur because our stomach has been trained to eat at certain periods. This is why the first 3 days are the most difficult.
- Certain people such as those who are pregnant, diabetic, working through eating disorders or issues of personal image should avoid fasting and seek wise counsel.

Practical Advice for Fasting

- **Start small.** It can be helpful to start with one day before doing numerous days.
- **It is good to be stretched.** Though difficult, we can often go longer than we think. There are challenges and benefits that come with multi-day fasts that cannot be experienced if we only fast a meal or two.
- When starting to fast, pray about a length, make a decision, and if necessary, let a friend know for accountability.
- **Have a clear purpose.** Why are we fasting? What are we responding to?
- If working a labor job, consider your physical needs. It may be wise to have protein shakes or to fast on one's day's off. An extended full fast may not be possible and one may consider doing an extended partial fast to discipline eating and seek God yet also keep physically strong. Be careful to not justify avoiding fasting because of one's job.
- **There is never a convenient time.** There are always obstacles and the possibilities of awkward dinners. Just do it.
- Eat small amounts to start and end the fast.
- During a personal fast, keep it a secret (Mt. 6:17-18) and ensure it is not a way of getting attention.

"Fasting is a physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence "I want and need you!"

- John Piper

² *The Didache*, an early church document from the first two centuries comments on regular fasting by Christians (D.1.3; 7.4) Athanasius (4th cent.) speaks of fasting occurring during Lent, which is a widespread season of fasting for Christians. The Royal Catholic church has had obligatory Fast Days such as Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.