

FASTING



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1. THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

Fasting is the deliberate abstinence from food and/or fluids for a specific period of time.

As we look at the Biblical examples of fasting, we find there are many reasons why people fasted.

1. Fasting can be a form of emotional and spiritual mourning.

In the following examples the people were fasting because they were mourning. What were they mourning about?

- 2 Samuel 1:1-4,11-12

- Ezra 10:1-6

Read Matthew 9:14-15. According to Jesus why will we fast?

What is the result of the fasting and mourning in the following examples?

- Nehemiah 9:1-3

- Joel 2:12-13

- Jonah 3:1-10

2. Fasting can accompany prayer to see prayers answered.

Read the following verses and write down what the prayer was and how God answered it.

- 2 Chronicles 20:1-30 (particularly v. 1-6,22-30)

- Ezra 8:21-23,31-32

- Daniel 9 (particularly v. 1-4,16-27)

- Jonah 3:1-10

- 2 Samuel 12:15-23

3. Fasting can accompany prayer to help prepare us for ministry.

In the following passages, who fasted and what ministry was being prepared for?

- Acts 13:1-4

- Acts 14:19-23

So from these principles, we can see that fasting is a form of humility – it humbles us before God (*1 Kings 21:25-29; Ezra 8:21; Isaiah 58:3*).

Prayer humbles us before God because when we pray we recognise and show that God is greater than us and that we need his help, guidance etc. In many ways fasting is like prayer. Fasting removes the focus away from ourselves, and the desires of our body, and directs our focus and complete dependability on God. We concentrate our time communicating with him rather than spending time on the desires of our body.

Fasting also humbles us before God because when we fast we recognise and show that we are mortal, weak and need God, so we turn our attention fully to God's omnipotence to deal with the situation at hand.

What other reasons can you think of to show that fasting humbles us before God?

What are some other ways we can humble ourselves before God?

If you've fasted in the past, what were the reasons?

What was the result of your fast? What challenges and victories did you experience?

2. THE VARIETIES OF FASTS

1. What do we fast from?

Read the following passages and write down who fasted and what they fasted from.

- Exodus 34:27-28

- Daniel 10:2-3

- Luke 4:1-2

2. How long do we fast?

Read the following passages and write down who fasted and how long they fasted.

Exodus 34:27-28 _____

2 Samuel 1:11-12 _____

Daniel 10:2-3 _____

Matthew 4:1-2 _____

3. How often do we fast?

In the Law of Moses, God commanded the Israelites to “afflict themselves” on the Day of Atonement (*Leviticus 16:29-31*) – this involved fasting. We are no longer under the Law of Moses so this command does not apply to us today. Other than that, the Bible never commands us specifically about when we should fast or how long we should fast for. It is just expected that we will fast (*Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14-15*).

So we can see that there are no hard and fast rules about what we should fast from, how long we should fast or how often we should fast. God allows his people to fast in many different ways.

What type of fasts have you undertaken?

Unfortunately most Christians have never fasted, or don't fast on a regular basis. Why do you think this is so?

What do you believe God wants you to do personally about fasting?

3. FASTING AND SIN

1. Read Matthew 6:16-18. According to Jesus, why do some people look gloomy when they fast? What are these people trying to achieve?



What does Jesus tell us we should do when we fast?



Where will our reward come from? What type of reward is Jesus talking about?

Pride is sin – so God hates pride (*Proverbs 8:13; 21:4*). When we are proud, we become the focus rather than God; we elevate ourselves rather than give glory to God. Since we are to glorify God in all we do (*1 Corinthians 10:31*), he will oppose proud people who want to elevate themselves (*James 4:6-10; 1 Peter 5:5-6*). Remember that just like prayer, fasting is a way of humbling ourselves before God. Any thought or action of pride will destroy the effectiveness of your fast.

What pride issues need to be addressed and confessed in your life?

2. We know that sin stops prayers being answered by God (*Isaiah 59:1-2; 1 Peter 3:12*). In the same way, sin can make our fasting useless and a waste of time. The people of Israel experienced this problem (*Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 14:10-12*). According to Isaiah 58, what were at least 4 things the people of Israel did which did not please God and ultimately led to him not listening to their prayers or take notice of their fasting?

What did God want the Israelites to do if he was going to take notice of their prayer and fasting?

Recognising that sin hinders the effectiveness of prayer and fasting, what should you do before you begin your fast? What areas in your life need God's forgiveness?

3. Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights! The Bible tells us that Jesus was hungry and that the devil came to tempt him. Read Matthew 4:1-4. What did the devil tempt Jesus to do? Why?

How did Jesus respond? What did he mean by his response?

Keeping in mind how Jesus responded, how can you gain strength to overcome the temptation to break a fast?

How can the following passages be applied to help you maintain a fast?

- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

- Galatians 5:22-23

What are some practical things you could do to help stop you from breaking your fast?

4. ADVICE ON FASTING

1. The purpose of the fast

You need to determine the purpose of your fast. Ask God what he wants you to do.

- Is it for spiritual renewal of yourself, others, your church, your community etc.?
- Is it to seek God's guidance or to see specific prayers answered?

2. Set the limits

You need to determine the type of fast you will undertake. Again, seek God and find out what he wants you to do.

- **The length of the fast** – one meal, one day, a week or several weeks. If you're fasting for the first time, you may want to start off with skipping one meal. Then, after your spiritual fasting muscles have developed, work your way up to longer fasts.
- **The type of fast** – some foods, all foods, some fluids, all fluids or all food and fluids.
- **The time of the fast** – weekdays, weekends, holidays etc. Keep in mind family celebrations like birthdays and anniversaries – your family may be inconvenienced by your fasting and temptations to eat can be overwhelming.

3. Prepare yourself spiritually

- Remember that sin in your life will destroy the effectiveness of prayer and fasting. Therefore you need to confess any sin and repent before you begin the fast (this is something you should do anyway – whether or not you fast!).
- Pray that God will help you through the fast to deal with the spiritual and physical issues that you'll face. It's easy to become hungry, impatient, cranky and anxious during a fast. Keep praying about these things during the fast.
- Do not underestimate spiritual opposition. Satan will try and tempt you to break the fast as he tried to do with Jesus, or he may tempt you in some other way. Pray for protection from him before and during the fast (*Luke 22:31-32; John 17:15*). If tempted, remember that God always provides you with a way out (*1 Corinthians 10:13*).

What are some other ways you can prepare yourself spiritually?

4. Prepare yourself physically

Physical preparation will make your fast a little easier so that you can turn your full attention to the Lord in prayer.

- If you are taking medication you should ask your doctor or pharmacist about any problems you may encounter if you fast. You may be advised to stop some medication or continue as normal.
- If you are pregnant, breastfeeding an infant, or have an illness it's important to consult with your doctor first before you fast (it may not be an issue for short fasts).
- Generally speaking, the healthier you are, the fewer problems you'll encounter when fasting. Live a healthy lifestyle. God commands us to take care of our bodies which belong to him (*1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 7:1*).

What are some other ways you can prepare yourself physically?

5. During the fast

- For maximum spiritual benefit, set aside enough time to be with God. The more time you spend with him, the more meaningful your fast will be. This may be in the form of regular quiet times throughout the day, prayer walks, singing etc. A good idea is to read the Bible and pray when you would normally have a meal and whenever you feel hungry.
- Devote yourself to seeking God, especially during those times in which you feel weak, vulnerable or irritable. This will further humble you before the Lord.
- If others are fasting with you, you could meet together for prayer, Bible reading etc.
- Avoid distractions which could dampen your spiritual focus.

What are some things you should add or remove from your normal schedule to ensure a successful fast?

- Limit your physical activity. Your energy intake has been substantially reduced, so you will get tired easily (*Psalm 109:24*).
- Exercise only moderately.
- Rest as much as you can.
- Step outside for the fresh air and take a short walk. Talk to the Lord as you walk.

- If you feel hunger pains, eat or drink (in moderation) whatever you're not fasting from. However if you're fasting from all foods and fluids, then seek God and the strength he can give you to complete the fast (*Galatians 5:22-23; Philippians 4:10-13*).

6. Breaking the fast

If the fast lasts up to 24 hours, then returning to your normal diet and exercise regime immediately after the fast is usually not a problem. However with longer fasts, it's generally a good idea not to return to your normal habits immediately. Here are some suggestions to ending longer fasts:

- Don't gorge yourself on junk food. It's tempting to eat junk food immediately after a fast, but you should start off eating small meals of healthy food like fruit and vegetables – your body needs nutrition, not junk food.
- Keep the initial meals small because after long fasts the stomach shrinks, so immediately returning to your normal eating habits could make you feel sick.
- Some people recommend eating fruit and vegetables for the first couple of days after an extended fast of a week or more, before returning to their normal diet.

- Start exercising slowly, allowing time for your body to re-adjust to its usual regime.

What's the best way you've found to break a fast?

Your motive in fasting must be to glorify God (*1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17*). If you sincerely humble yourself before the Lord, your time of fasting will be a real blessing as you worship God through fasting (*Luke 2:36-37*). Your confidence and faith in God will be strengthened. You will feel spiritually and physically refreshed. You will see answers to your prayers.

