

WHAT IS FASTING AND WHY IS IT DONE?

"Prayer needs fasting for its full growth...Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting, the other, with which we let loose and cast away the visible."

Andrew Murray

Fasting is a technique that God has given us to encourage humility, and praying in humility will always maximize the power of our prayers (Isa. 57:15). Christian fasting can be defined as "abstaining from food or other sensual distractions for spiritual purposes." John Piper in his book, *A Hunger for God*, said:

"The birthplace of Christian fasting is homesickness for God... Christian fasting is a test to see what desires control us. What are our bottom-line passions?... 'Desires for other things' (Mark 4:19) - there's the enemy. And the only weapon that will triumph is a deeper hunger for God... The weakness of our hunger for God is not because He is unsavory, but because we keep ourselves stuffed with 'other things'... The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie."

It is important to note that spiritual Fasting is not to be done as a weight loss plan or as a way to internally clean the body. Both of these results can happen from a regular habit of fasting but they should not be the motivating factor behind our desire to fast. Spiritual fasting says "NO" to the flesh in a very simple and basic way. Fasting helps free up more time for prayer by taking our focus off of our next meal and by directing that available time as attention toward Him. Fasting quickly reveals our frailties and helps dismiss our erroneous proud opinions of "self". It also gives our body a chance to rest from its constant chore of trying to process every thing we stick into our mouths.

Jesus indicated that fasting was necessary, and was to be coupled with prayer to assure success. In Matthew 17:14-21 we read about the unsuccessful attempts of some of the disciples to free a boy of a demon. Shortly after their failed attempt Jesus, Peter, James and John arrived on the scene. What was Jesus' response to what He found? Verses 17-21: "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.' And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' 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. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.'" In these verses Jesus revealed to His disciples that they were not successful with casting out the demon because of faithlessness. Jesus went on to prescribe prayer and fasting as the cure to that deadly spiritual disease. Why prayer and fasting? Were the disciples prideful and in need of humility? Apparently so, because immediately after this event we catch a glimpse of the disciples' proud hearts. In Luke 9:46-49: we find the disciples arguing about whom would be the greatest. The Disciples, just like the rest of us, were a proud bunch; they needed to submit to their Lord and be humbled. Prayer puts us in our proper place, dependant on God for everything. Fasting submits our body to the will of the Spirit, while at the same time humbling our flesh. Fasting was a regular element of the Jew's life. A devout Jew would fast one or two days a week on a regular schedule. Jesus acknowledged this fact and taught His disciples about fasting in the same passage that he taught them about prayer.

Matthew 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."

And further on in Matthew 9:14-15 we read:

"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.**'"

So it not a question whether or not we should fast; Jesus said we will!

Types of Biblical Fasts

1. **Supernatural:** (no food or water for a very long time) Deu. 9:9,15-18 (Moses), 1 Kings 19:8 (Elijah)
2. **Total:** (no food or water for up to three days) Ezra 10:6, Esther 4:16, Acts 9:8-9 (Saul/Paul)
3. **Normal:** (no food, water only) Luke 4:2 (Jesus)
4. **Partial:** (simple foods) Dan. 1:8-16 (Jewish boys), Dan. 10:2,3,12 (Daniel)
5. **Media:** (minimum media input) Ps 101:3, Rom. 12:1-2 (Can you go a day without TV? A week?)

Look up these scriptural accounts of the use of fasting on your own.

A note on fasting from the media: They say the average American watches at least three hours of TV a day. Throw in radio listening and reading of newspapers and other publications and how much time can be left to reflect on our relationship with the God of the universe?

Examples of Fasting For Various Reasons

Fasting was a regular and systematic occurrence in the life of a Jew. It was also a featured part of special religious events. Holy days came with both fasting and feast. Emergency situations also called for emergency fasts.

Fasting was done for **Repentance**

1 Kings 21:24, 27-29 (Elijah said to Ahab)

“The dogs shall eat whoever belongs to Ahab and dies in the city, and the birds of the air shall eat whoever dies in the field.” So it was, when Ahab heard those words, that he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, “See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days.”

Also see: Ezra 10:6, Neh. 9:1-3, Joel 1:13-14, Jonah 3:5-10

Fasting was done for **Direction**

Ezra 8:21, 23 (Ezra taking the first wave of exiles back to Jerusalem)

"Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, 'The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him.' So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer."

Also see: Judg. 20:26-28, Acts 14:23, James 4:6-10

Fasting was done for **Intercession**

Nehemiah. 1:3-6, (Nehemiah upon hearing of the plight the remnant)

And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire." So it was, when I heard these words that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned."

Also see: 2 Sam 12:21-23, 2 Chronicles 7:13-14, Joel 2:12-27 Ps. 35:13, Isa. 58:6-12

Fasting was done for **Preparation** for ministry

Acts 13:2-3, (The early church)

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.

Also see: Num. 6:2-4, Est. 4:16, Luke 1:15, 2 Cor. 6:4-5, 2 Cor. 11:23, 27

Practical Suggestions for Spiritual Fasting

All fasting should be preceded by a time of preparation. The longer you plan to fast, the longer you should allow for preparation before the fast and for resumption of normal eating after your fast. Moderation of what you eat before and after a fast is also important. The foods you eat before a fast can greatly affect your comfort during the fast, so hold off on the Whoppers! We have learned that our prayers and our fasting require a specific target if you want them to be effective. Someone once said that: "If you aim at nothing, you can be pretty sure you will hit it." The focus of our prayer and fasting this year at Maranatha is to lift up, shield and empower our senior pastor, our support pastors, our staff, ministries and the congregation of Maranatha Chapel, allowing us all to serve the Lord in boldness.

The Daniel Fast (Partial Fast)

Remember Daniel and his vegetables? (Daniel chapters 1 and 10) A partial fast should be of meals that are simply prepared from simple and plain ingredients. Quantity is not that critical, eat as much as you want (in moderation) but stay away from sauces, sweets, soda, wine and meats. Take it easy on the starches like potatoes, rice and pasta which can turn into a lump of library paste in your tummy. Keep your meals short and simple and then use the extra time you have in your day to pray and read God's Word. Combine your fast from complicated foods along with a Media Fast. Dedicate everything that goes into your mouth, eyes and ears to the Lord.

The Normal Fast (Water Only)

In preparation for a "Normal" fast of water only, continue to eat simple foods as much as you can during the week, both before and after your "Water only Fast". Fruits and vegetables are good. Avoid a lot of red meat. During your fast you can drink as much water as you want. Drink light and natural juices before beginning and after you end your fast. Don't take a lot of vitamins during your fast, they often don't sit well on an empty stomach. If you are on medications it's best to check with your Doctor before beginning any kind of diet modified fast. During your fast you may have bad breath. "Halitosis" is often a side effect of fasting. Mints are OK in moderation but a "Breath Mint Fast" is not on our list of Biblical fasts, so don't live on them. Use them only when you are in close situations and the other party doesn't know you're fasting. Limit your physical activity. Exercise is OK but stop if you feel a little "spacey". Your blood sugar may drop a bit, causing you to feel confused. If this happens, try to rest, lay down, elevate your feet if you can, drink a little diluted light juice. Use the extra time you have from not preparing meals and use it for additional prayer and for the reading of God's Word. Combine your fast from all solid foods along with a Media Fast; sanctify your fast time unto the Lord.

The Juice and Water Fast

A combination juice and water fast is a variation of a "Normal Fast", it involves a fast of juices and water only, with no solid foods. Stay away from acid juices like grapefruit juice or highly sweetened juices like pineapple juice. Drink a limited amount of orange juice, stay away from sweetened juice drinks or fruit smoothie/health drinks. The juice you drink during your fast can also be diluted. A lemon wedge squeezed into a glass of water also works well. Try drinking plain water or water with lemon for the central portion of your fast

A Last Word About God's Chosen Fast

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail."

Isaiah 58:6-11

Books on Fasting

The Coming Revival: America's Call to Fast, Pray and "Seek God's Face", Bill Bright

God's Chosen Fast - Arthur Wallis

The Adventure of Fasting - James Beall

A Hunger for God, John Piper

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