

FASTING

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Fasting – What is it Good For?

When my co-workers learned it was my birthday, they asked if they could take me out to lunch. Unfortunately, I had to turn them down because I was in the middle of a multi-day fast.

They asked some great questions. When did I start? How long would I fast for? Why was I fasting?

Recently, a new year had begun, and the previous year had been fraught with bumps and bruises. Both my brother-in-law and my mother-in-law had passed away. My daughter faced chronic health problems that needed both natural and supernatural intervention. I had given ground to the all-too-familiar feeling of fear, and I felt my heart growing cold. For those reasons, I entered into a fast.

People throughout history have fasted — usually a practice of abstaining from solid food and only drinking liquids — in order to slow down, quiet the noise of the culture around them and take the time and space to listen and reflect. (There are other ways to fast, such as only drinking water or abstaining from a pleasurable activity other than food, but for the purpose of this article, the above will be our definition.)

Fasting allows Christians to turn their hearts toward God. When people fast in community, it can cause those Christians to experience a refreshing of their faith as a group. But this refreshing of faith, sometimes called revival, starts on a personal level.

In the midst of living in a broken world, I desperately need to see the face and hear the voice of my heavenly Father. I give up physical food so I can receive spiritual nourishment.

So does it work? How do you know if you're "doing it right"?

When I fast, I focus on a passage of Scripture and journal my thoughts. I invite the Holy Spirit to do what He has promised to do:

1. **Lead me into truth:** The Holy Spirit reminds me what's true about God and about my relationship with Him. How does God's truth change the way I see the events of my life?
2. **Convict me of my sins:** Sin is any action or attitude that doesn't please God. Someone once told me it's how I act when I meet my needs my way instead of trusting God to meet my needs His way. When I fast, I ask God to show me how I've done this.
3. **Comfort me with His presence:** Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Comforter; the One He would send when He went to the Father. It's painful when I see how I let the pressures of life push in on me to the point where I trust myself and my solutions instead of trusting my heavenly Father.

4. **Give me wisdom:** When I search desperately for the courage to make difficult decisions, I hear the gentle voice of God leading me into the truth of what I have to do and checking my motives.

Those moments when I see truth for what it really is, when I understand just how far short of God's holiness I fall, I'm devastated. The Holy Spirit gently leads me to the cross and I agree with God that I've sinned, and I ask Him to forgive me. To restore my fellowship with Him. And then through the power that emptied Christ's tomb, He changes my heart.

Sometimes this leads to difficult conversations, in which I have to find the courage to tell people things that may offend them. Other times, I have to ask people to forgive me for my unkind words and actions. At times those conversations go well. Other times they don't. Regardless of the outcome, I'm obedient to my heavenly Father. As long as He's pleased, I'm satisfied.

So what does fasting actually accomplish? This spiritual discipline is a physical way for me to slow down, tell God how much I need Him, listen to what He has to say, and then act on how He leads me. He revives my heart, clears my head and gives me the courage to face living in a broken world.

Why Would a Christian Fast?

Fasting, a spiritual discipline, is a way to grow deeper in your relationship with God. Sometimes fasting means giving up a necessity, like food, but you can also fast by refraining from a pleasure, like social media. Fasting helps you to humble yourself and remember that you depend on God alone to meet all your needs. And for a time, it makes feeding your soul a higher priority than feeding your body.

So, why might a Christian fast? Here are a few great reasons. When you fast...

You Turn Down the Volume

In Psalm 46:10, God says, “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth!” (English Standard Version).

When you deny yourself food (or other things you rely on), you humbly admit your dependence on God alone to meet your needs. As your metabolism slows down, so can you, and you can allow the fast-paced world to fade to background noise for a short time.

You Can Hear from God

In John 16:13, Jesus says, “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (ESV).

One of the Holy Spirit’s jobs is to lead you into truth, but it’s hard to listen when life moves so loudly and quickly around you. Give yourself space to receive guidance from Him. You might want to journal your thoughts and prayers during the time of your fast.

You Worship God

In Acts 13:2-3 (ESV), Luke writes about the experience of one early church:

While they were worshipping 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.

The church leaders fasted while they worshipped, and then they received instructions from the Holy Spirit. As they worshipped God for Himself, not for the gifts he’d given them, they received the guidance they needed, and they confidently sent Saul (that is, Paul) and Barnabas to preach the gospel.

You Have an Opportunity to Help Other People

In Isaiah 58:6-7 (ESV), God says,

“Is not this the fast that I choose:

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

When you fast, you have the opportunity to look for ways to help others. Jesus commands you to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:36-39).

Fasting is a time to consider ways you can love your neighbor. Someone somewhere will need help. It might be inconvenient, but fasting is a time to turn from your own needs and look outside yourself. Instead of saying you don’t have time and walking away from a need, consider going out of your way to help someone. But be careful: this might become a habit.

You Cultivate Dependence on God

After Jesus was baptized and before He began His public ministry, which would eventually lead Him to the cross, He spent 40 days and nights fasting in the wilderness. Like prophets before Him, Jesus, who was fully human, chose to endure the physical weakening of His body — even while temptation and spiritual attack came at Him in full force — to rely on the Word of God before launching into the most significant season of His earthly life.

Although Jesus is not recorded to have fasted often, nor to have required His disciples to fast (see Matthew 9:14), it is clear that He saw its value. Still, unlike the religious leaders of the day, Jesus clarified that fasting is a private activity meant to spiritually commune with God and not to win spiritual “brownie points” in the eyes of others.

In Matthew 6:16-18 (ESV), Jesus says:

“And 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.”

Fasting is a discipline. When you fast, you can come to depend upon the Lord more deeply.

Do you know Jesus as the Lord of your life? If so, might God be calling you to try a fast?

What Does the Bible Say About Fasting?

While there is little instruction about how to fast in the Bible, there are plenty of examples of people who fasted. Below are Scriptures that show key times individuals and nations fasted. Fasting was and still is a way to humble yourself and remember your dependence on God to meet your needs.

The First Recorded Fast

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the LORD.” (Leviticus 23:26-27, English Standard Version)

When God was giving the Law to Moses, God instructed Moses to have the people fast (in Hebrew, the words “afflict yourselves” mean to fast) once a year on the holiday known as the Day of Atonement.

Repenting as a Nation

Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. (1 Samuel 7:5-6, ESV)

At a time when Israel was becoming aware of its sins, the prophet Samuel called the people together and told them to fast and pray, to confess their sins, and to return to the Lord. That day, as they cried out to God, He defeated their enemies, the Philistines.

In Mourning

But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days. (1 Samuel 31:11-13, ESV)

When King Saul and his sons were killed in battle, in order to honor them, men from a town Saul had saved from destruction by one of Israel’s enemies (1 Samuel 11) collected their bodies, buried them and then fasted for seven days as they grieved their deaths.

When Afraid

After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, “A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar” (that is, Engedi). Then Jehoshaphat was

afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.
(2 Chronicles 20:1-4, ESV)

When King Jehosaphat learned that his enemies were on their way to attack him, he was frightened, and he called for a fast throughout the entire country. He and the people prayed, pleading with God to help them defeat their enemies. And when the army went out the next morning singing praises to the Lord, God turned the enemy armies against one another, and they destroyed each other. (Read the rest of the story in 2 Chronicles 20:1-24).

For Protection

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek Him, and the power of His wrath is against all who forsake Him.” So we fasted and implored our God for this, and He listened to our entreaty.
(Ezra 8:21-23, ESV)

In the sixth century B.C., the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and God’s temple and sent the people of Israel into exile. Later, Persia conquered the Babylonians. When the king of Persia sent Ezra and a group of Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Jewish temple and reinvigorate worship of God, Ezra was embarrassed to ask for soldiers to protect them along the way. Instead, he fasted and prayed earnestly for God’s protection for their journey.

When Facing Opposition

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.” As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.
(Nehemiah 1:1-4, ESV)

When Nehemiah, a Jew living in exile in Persia, learned that the remnant of Jews in Jerusalem were in trouble because the walls of Jerusalem were broken down, he sat down and wept for days. He fasted and prayed, confessing the sins of his nation and asking God for guidance and protection. Later, when enemies of the Jews tried to stop the rebuilding of the walls, Nehemiah confidently countered their actions and encouraged the people to keep working.

When Taking a Risk

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”
(Esther 4:15-16, ESV)

When Esther, the Jewish Queen of Persia, learned about a plot to kill the Jewish people, her uncle Mordecai asked her to plead with the king to rescue them. But anyone entering the presence of the king without being called risked being killed for their boldness. The king hadn't called for Esther in more than 30 days. So Esther asked all of the Jewish people to fast for three days. She approached the king, and he received her and helped her save the Jewish people.

Before Beginning Ministry

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But He answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:1-4, ESV)

Before beginning His public ministry, Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness. During this period, He became hungry, and the devil came to tempt Him. Each time, Jesus answered with Scripture and resisted the temptation. Finally, He told the devil to leave. After that, Jesus began His public ministry and chose His disciples.

When Choosing Church Leaders

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23, ESV)

Paul and Barnabas traveled around the Mediterranean preaching the gospel and planting churches. When they visited local believers, they would pray and fast as they chose leaders for the new churches in their area.