

Biblical Fasting

Purpose, Principles & Promises



The Priority of the Biblical Fast

Fasting is simply **refraining from food for a spiritual purpose**.

Devoted followers of God throughout the Bible practiced fasting. We find their examples woven throughout the narrative of Scripture. In fact, fasting is mentioned over 50 times in Scripture.

Within the context of Matthew 6, Jesus teaches three expectations He had of His followers. As He discusses these duties in Mathew 6, Jesus prefaces each expectation with the words, *"When you..."* These three expectations are as follows:

- *"When you give..."* (Matthew 6:2-4)
- *"When you pray..."* (Matthew 6:5-13)
- *"When you fast..."* (Matthew 6:16-18)

The keyword here is the word, *"when."* It carries with it absolute expectation. All three of these duties are self-denying at their core, which aligns with his later teaching that if anyone desired to become a follower of Jesus, that person would need to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Him (ref Matthew 16:24). All three of these expectations go against our carnal desires; they are anti-flesh principles. All three of these disciplines were to be normal part of the lives of His followers. Together, these three imperatives form a type of threefold woven rope, which is not easily broken.

In the Bible, we see many examples of God's people fasting. Among them are Job, Moses, Joshua, Esther, Hannah, Judah, David, Ezra, the people of Nineveh, Daniel, Anna, Peter, Cornelius, Paul, Jesus, and others.

What spiritual breakthroughs do we miss when we fail to weave this rope tightly with these three key disciplines? What direction, deliverances and blessings do we miss when we fail to fast?

The Purpose of the Biblical Fast

Fasting is necessary to temper our desires. Simultaneously, we will be spiritually empowered. When you eliminate food from your diet for a number of days, your mind and spirit become less cluttered by things of this world and much more sensitive to the things of God. Biblically accurate fasting is not a dieting process, missing a meal or two because we were too rushed to eat, or going on a hunger strike to twist God's arm or get Him to do something He otherwise doesn't wish to do. Biblically accurate fasting is the discipline of doing without food in order to achieve spiritual strength, answers, direction and more. Through fasting and prayer victories are won, power is received, and deliverances are performed.

Kings and commoners, priests and prophets, and cities and nations fasted in the Bible. Revivals and renewals are recorded as occurring during or directly after a fast. Paul fasted three days prior to his conversion experience and Cornelius was fasting when an angel appeared unto him, prior to his conversion.

Christians should fast when the Holy Spirit prompts us. Fasting by inspiration is often the easiest time to fast, because we feel heavily "impressed," to do so. Christians should also fast collectively, when called by spiritual leaders to do so. Finally, believers should fast as a personal discipline and commitment to God. Dedication and consecration to God's cause strongly suggests that we should fast simply because we are told to do so through God's Word.

Here are some of the specific purposes for fasting as we find them in the Scriptures:

- ✓ **Petition for God's Deliverance and Protection**
 - Biblical examples: Esther 4:16; 2 Chronicles 20:3-4; Ezra 8:21-23
- ✓ **Seeking Guidance and Direction**
 - Biblical examples: Acts 13:2-3; Acts 9:9
- ✓ **To Express Repentance and to Return to God**
 - Biblical examples: 1 Samuel 7:6; Joel 2:12
- ✓ **To Humble Ourselves before God**
 - Biblical example: Psalm 35:13
- ✓ **To Overcome Temptation and Prepare for Ministry**

- Biblical example: Matthew 4:1-11
- ✓ **Expressing Grief and Mourning** (this was a cultural way to express grief)
 - Biblical examples: Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:11-12
- ✓ **As Devotion to God and a Spiritual Discipline**
 - Biblical examples: Luke 2:37; Acts 10:30;

The Principles of the Biblical Fast

In the Bible, we find three basic ways to fast. The degrees of fasting described in the Bible are:

- ✓ **Normal Fast:** This involves going without food for a certain amount of days. No food of any type is eaten. Only water is drunk.
 - Biblical examples: Matthew 4:1-2; Luke 4:2.
 - Duration: a normal fast can last from part of a day until several days.
- ✓ **Absolute Fast:** Also known as a full fast, an absolute fast involves abstaining from both food and water. Today, depending on one's health and the duration of the fast, it may be advisable to drink water (due to modern toxins & pollutions in the body which need flushed). If you plan on doing an absolute fast, it should be for a shorter period of time and depending on health, under medical supervision.
 - Biblical examples: Esther 4:16; Ezra 10:6; Acts 9:9.
 - Duration: an absolute fast can last from a portion of a day up to 3 days maximum, depending upon one's health. Although there are a few instances of absolute fasts lasting longer than 3 days in the Bible, they are miraculous events.
- ✓ **Partial Fast:** This is not a fast in the strictest sense of the term. A partial fast involves a restricted diet, rather than total abstinence from food. Certain types of food and drink are given up for an extended period of time. We find Daniel practicing a restricted diet at least twice. On the first occasion he and his friends only ate vegetables and drank water for ten days. On the second occasion, Daniel ate a diet comparable to a vegan diet with more restrictions for three weeks. The diet most likely excluded all animal products, breads, sweets and sweeteners, and sugary drinks. Today, many people follow this by eliminating animal products, all sweets and sweeteners, solid fats, yeast, caffeine, additives and processed

foods. Vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and water are most often allowed.

- Biblical examples: Daniel 1:8, 15-16; Daniel 10:2-3.
 - Duration: There is no biblical record of following a restricted diet (aka partial fast) for a short period of time. Our only references involved extended periods of time.
- ✓ **Jewish Fast:** An absolute fast from evening to evening, a full 24 hours (or as traditionally observed, a full 25 hours)
- Biblical example: Leviticus 23:26-32

In addition to personal fasts, group fasts were called for on several occasions throughout the Bible. Both smaller groups and very large groups of people fasted corporately.

Although there is not a specific biblical command regarding the duration of an individual's personal fast, we find examples of the following fasts in the Bible:

- **One Day or Partial Day Fast:** This involves a normal or absolute fast. It can be a personal fast or a group fast.
 - Biblical examples: Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Samuel 1:12 & 3:35; Nehemiah 9:1; Jeremiah 36:6
- **Three Day Fasts:** This can be either a normal or absolute fast.
 - Biblical examples: Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9
- **Seven Day Fasts:**
 - Biblical examples: 1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 12:16-23
- **Twenty-one Day Partial Fast:**
 - Biblical example: Daniel 10:3-13
- **Forty Day Fasts:** All three instances of forty day fasts are considered to be miraculous.
 - Biblical examples: Deuteronomy 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8; Matthew 4:2
- **Other Biblical Fasts of Unspecified Lengths:**
 - Biblical examples: Luke 2:37; Acts 13:2 and 14:23

According to the Scripture, there are several **things we should do** while fasting:

- **Loose the bands of wickedness.** We are to disengage ourselves from anything we are doing that displeases God. Ref Isaiah 58:6

- **Undo heavy burdens.** We should seek to lay aside physical & spiritual burdens to the extent possible. Our focus should be on God. Ref Isaiah 58:6
- **Let the oppressed go free.** Give men freedom. Forgive and release others who have wronged or offended us. Treat others in a just and fair manner. Ref Isaiah 58:6
- **Break every yoke.** Lay aside every weight & sin that besets us, breaking yokes that bind us and hinder us from being spiritual. Ref Isaiah 58:6
- **Give of ourselves to those who are in need.** Feed those who are hungry, cloth the naked, and do not hide ourselves from our fellow man who is in need. Ref Isaiah 58:7
- **Anoint head and wash face.** Shower, put on perfume/ cologne, fix your hair, and do not seek to appear sullen or physically weak. Ref Matthew 6:17
- **Fast unto your Father which is in secret.** Fast as discreetly as possible. Ref Matthew 6:18

Likewise, there are several **things we should not do** while fasting:

- **Indulge in pleasure.** We should not seek to substitute other pleasures for food. We are not to distract ourselves with entertainment and other pleasurable things while fasting. During the fast, we are to deny ourselves and seek the face of God. Ref Isaiah 58:3
- **Oppress others.** We are to be careful not to oppress others, including employees. Ref Isaiah 58:3
- **Quarrel, fight or debate.** Ref Isaiah 58:4
- **Boast about our fasting (or fast to be seen by others).** Ref Luke 18:10-14 and Matthew 6:18
- **Treat others harshly.** Ref Isaiah 58:3
- **Look gloomy and weak/ complain.** We should do our best not to complain or look like we are suffering due to the fast. Ref Matthew 6:16

Practical Tips for Modern Fasting

- **For Beginners.**
 - Start with a shorter fast. Rather than attempting an extended fast in the beginning, start with a partial or a 24 hour fast. If need be, begin with a clear liquid fast rather than an absolute fast or a

water only fast. You may then want to graduate to a water-only fast. After successfully going on a 24 hour water-only fast, you may wish to try an evening-to-evening, absolute fast (AKA Jewish Fast).

- **For everyone.**
 - When going on a normal fast, drink water very often. Headaches can be caused by dehydration.
 - Make sure to schedule in adequate prayer time. Remember, fasting without prayer is simply starvation.
 - Whenever you get hungry, use that as a prompt to pray instead of thinking about food.
 - You can always find an excuse not to fast. Your flesh hates fasting! Plan it and stick to it.
 - If you unintentionally break a fast, get right back to it. Rather than stopping the fast altogether, restart immediately and see it through.
 - If you are feeling too weak on a water only fast, consider drinking a clear juice or some clear broth rather than breaking the fast prematurely. If you prayerfully feel that you can continue, then do so.
 - Tell only the people that you must.
 - If you are going on a water-only or absolute fast, consider weaning yourself away from caffeine a few days prior.
 - Avoid media and entertainment, as much as is possible. Your focus needs to remain on the things of God.
 - Get plenty of rest.
 - Find a way to minister to those in great need during your fast.

The Power and Promise of the Biblical Fast

Read what happened in Joel 2:15-18 when they called a sacred time of prayer, fasting, and repentance as a group:

- ✓ God would send "grain, new wine and oil" & they would be satisfied.
- ✓ God will drive their enemies far away from them.
- ✓ He would cause the "rain" to come down for them in a time of famine and drought.
- ✓ The harvest will be full of plenty.

- ✓ He will restore the years that have been stolen from His people.
- ✓ They would eat in plenty and be satisfied.
- ✓ God's people would never be put to shame.
- ✓ He would pour His Spirit out upon all flesh.
- ✓ Their children shall prophesy.
- ✓ The elders would dream dreams and the younger ones would see visions.

Study Isaiah 58:1-12. When we fast according to the fast that the Lord has chosen:

- ✓ Our light shall break forth like the morning.
- ✓ Our healing shall spring forth speedily.
- ✓ Our righteousness shall go before us.
- ✓ The glory of the LORD shall be our rear guard.
- ✓ When we call, and the LORD will answer; when we cry, He will say, "Here I am."
- ✓ If we take away the yoke and refrain from blaming others and speaking wickedness, and if we extend our souls to the hungry and afflicted:
 - Our light shall dawn in the darkness, and our gloom shall be as the noonday.
 - The LORD will guide us continually.
 - He will satisfy our souls in drought.
 - He will strengthen our bodies.
 - We shall be like a watered garden and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.
 - Those from among us shall build the old waste places.
 - We shall raise up the foundations of many generations.
 - We shall be called the Repairer(s) of the Breach, the Restorer(s) of Streets to Dwell In.

Oh, what blessings, strength, direction, healing and intervention from God await to those who will pray and fast the way that God has chosen!

