

## **Fasting: A Biblical Overview**

For many people that attend church regularly, fasting is a spiritual habit that is not very well known and perhaps they have never even given it much thought. In his book "Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life (page 159), Don Whitney says:

"One of the reasons fasting is feared is that many believe it turns us into something we don't want to become and causes things to happen that we don't want to happen. We fear that fasting will make us hollow-eyed fanatics or odd for God."

Fasting has a history that goes back into the Old Testament and to many of the oldest religions in the world. Fasting has also been used for other reasons relating to diet and health. As Christians, we are looking for what the Bible says about fasting.

## **Basic Questions and Answers about Fasting**

***What is fasting?*** Fasting is the Christian practice of temporarily not eating food for the purpose of spiritual focus and breakthrough. Broadly speaking, we could talk about fasting as a practice whereby we abstain from any normal function to help us focus spiritually (ie. "fasting" from devices, television, social media, etc.) While a retreat from these habits may be helpful, the biblical concept of fasting is narrowly confined to abstaining from food.

***Is fasting a private matter?*** The most typical fast that a Christian is to observe is private. Jesus taught that our fasting is not to be practiced in a way that is noticed by others.

***Is fasting always a private matter?*** Throughout the Bible, we have examples of a special day of fasting or period of time for fasting as the people of God. In Acts 13:2 part of the early church prayed and fasted together. In Joel 2, the people of God were called to gather and fast together. When God's people experience a particular need of provision or protection, they often fasted and pleaded with God to move. For instance, Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:3) called for a fast when a large army came against the people of God. Also, Esther called for God's people to fast when they faced the danger of being destroyed by the Persians.

***What is the purpose of fasting?*** Fasting helps the Christian to realize how much they need to depend on God. When they withhold food (and sometimes drink) from their body, the hunger and thirst are a needed reminder that we are dependent on food and water. As we experience this hunger and thirst, we dedicate the time we might normally have a meal to talking to God in prayer and studying God's Word. We feed on God's Word to nourish our soul and we drink from the refreshing waters God's presence in prayer. We position ourselves to plead with God for breakthrough in our lives, the lives of others, for our church, for our community, for our country, and for our world. Individually or corporately, we should always fast on purpose and for a purpose.

## **Kinds of Fasts in the Bible**

**A Normal Fast** means that we do not eat any food, but we may take something to drink. Matthew 4:2 speaks of Jesus, “fasting for forty days and forty nights” and after that time the Bible says, “He was hungry.” Notice it does not say that Jesus was thirsty. It is a scientific fact and a biological reality that the human body can only survive a few days without water, but we can survive without food for much longer. The most common type of Christian fast is to abstain from food, but to drink water or fruit juices.

**A Partial Fast** is when we restrict our diet, but do not stop eating all kinds of food. In the book of Daniel, we find the young Hebrew men abstaining from certain kinds of food, specifically the king’s food and wine. Instead of partaking in that food, Daniel 1:12 says they requested only “vegetables to eat and water to drink.” Christians that observe a partial fast may only eat smaller portions of food or eat certain kinds of food during their fast.

**An Absolute Fast** is the avoidance of all food and drink. After Paul’s conversion on the Damascus’ Road, Acts 9:9 says that he “was blind for three days, and did not eat or drink anything.” Both Ezra and Esther from the Old Testament were said to have fasted and did not eat food or have anything to drink.” Absolute fasts are limited by our body’s ability to survive without food and water.

**A Supernatural Fast** is a fast that includes not eating food and water for an extended period of time that is beyond the body’s ability to survive. In Deuteronomy 9:9, we are told that Moses, “stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.” Moses further describes this experience saying, “I ate no bread and drank no water.” Elijah also experienced a miraculous fast as recorded in 1 Kings 19:8.

## **Other Key Bible Passages on Fasting**

### **Old Testament**

Ezra called for God’s people to fast. (Ezra 8:21)

Esther called for God’s people to fast. (Esther 4:16)

Isaiah proclaimed the Lord’s views on people who fast for the wrong reasons. (Isaiah 58:3-6)

The Lord spoke through the prophet Joel to call for God’s people to fast. (Joel 1:14; 2:15)

The people of Nineveh fasted to show their repentance to God. (Jonah 3:5)

### **New Testament**

The prophetess Anna is described as one who worshipped and fasted regularly. (Luke 2:37)

Jesus fasted. (Matthew 4:2)

Jesus taught about fasting. (Matthew 6:16-17)

Jesus taught that his disciples and us would fast after He returned to heaven. (Mark 2:20; Luke 5:34)

The early church set apart people for missions with prayer and fasting. (Acts 13:2-3)

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church with prayer and fasting. (Acts 14:23)

## **Fasting: A Simple “How To”**

So how do I start. Make a plan! As the old adage goes ‘Failing to plan is planning to fail’. This is true in fasting as well. Remember, you are battling to deny the flesh. You need a plan! We will step through several things to think and pray through to help you be most successful.

\*Before we go any further it is important to note, if you are on medication or under physician’s care it is very important to talk to your doctor before you start a fast. Do not stop taking your medication or begin a fast without their guidance and oversight.

1. What kind of Fast does God want you to do? Dig in and do some research on the “Kinds of Fasts in the Bible” section. Spend some time in prayer and figure out which kind of Fast God is leading you too.
2. How long does God want you to commit to your fast? Fasting time varies in scripture. Determine through prayer how long God wants you to Fast. It will be easier to pray through temptations if you have a pre-determined time frame.
3. How will this affect my family? This is where you’ll need to be sure to plan out your week(s) in advance to help you be successful. If God calls you to a Normal Fast or a Partial, it is difficult when you have to spend time every day preparing meals for your family. Maybe consider some other options; like microwave meals, take-out, or ask your spouse to help out a night or two. This doesn’t mean to completely remove yourself from your family. You still need to be present. It will just help you to stay on track and be sure you’re thinking through and making a plan for your kiddos.
4. If you are doing a partial fast or a juice fast, be prepared. Go to the store ahead of time and get what you will need. If you’re prepared, you will be less likely to be tempted.
5. Start slow...End slow. Don’t just jump right in. Slowly over the course of 2-3 days, ease into your fast. Try going down to two meals a day, and then one meal. And again at the end of the time you have committed, do NOT run out and grab a cheeseburger. You will regret it! Slowly reincorporate solid food, starting with steamed or raw vegetables. Introduce meats, dairy products, and fats slowly and in small amounts.
6. Limit social and physical activities. You don’t want to go around telling everyone your fasting. That’s between you and God. It may make social situations difficult if people are asking you why you aren’t eating. You also will not have the same amount of energy as normal to do normal activities. It’s important to plan extra time to rest and to restrict yourself from intense exercise.
7. Don’t give up! The first few days of your fast, your going to feel pretty puny. Your head is going to hurt from caffeine and sugar withdrawals. You’re going to have moments where you think, what was I thinking? Does it even really matter? I’m just going to have this one little thing. Don’t give in!! You can do this! By day 3, you will start to notice a renewal and a refreshing and those hunger pangs slowly diminishing. So hang in there!
8. Most importantly, SPEND TIME SEEKING GOD! Don’t allow yourself to fill the time you would normally be eating with other tasks and activities. This is time to set aside and dedicate to prayer and meditating on scripture. Without a purpose and a plan, it’s not fasting...you’re just going hungry.

## **Resources for Further Study**

“Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life” by Don Whitney

“A Hunger for God” by John Piper

“The Power of Praying and Fasting” by Ronnie Floyd

“Fasting: The Key to Releasing God’s Power in your Life” by Derek Prince

“Seven Steps to Successful Fasting and Prayer” by Bill Bright

<https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/fasting/7-steps-to-fasting.html>