

FASTING

What is Fasting?

Fasting is abstaining from food for a specific period of time. When we fast, we intentionally set aside something we regularly rely on for sustenance and look to God to fill us instead. Fasting is one of the oldest and most prevalent spiritual practices in the Bible.

“The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast.... By decree of the king and his nobles, do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.” Jonah 3:5,7

“Fast,” is a word that’s never made much sense. It should mean “rapid,” “quick,” or “it’ll be over soon.” Anyone who has ever fasted knows that just the opposite is true. A fast is never rapid, quick or over soon. You can finish dinner at 6:45, decide you’re fasting until the following evening, and by 6:55 you’re craving any morsel your mouth can imagine. Time moves slowly when you fast. Unless you’re a veteran “faster,” it’s never over soon.

Why Should We Fast?

One thing’s for sure: you have to be serious about fasting. In a culture saturated with satiating ourselves, fasting takes discipline and determination. So why are we even bothering to talk about it in a book on Jonah? Because the Ninevites fasted and it helped them; it may have even saved their lives. God seems to think fasting is good for us on occasion. Remember, this is a book on responding to God in all the right ways and one of the right ways is by fasting. So put down that sandwich and let’s talk about fasting for a minute.

Throughout the Bible, there are a variety of reasons why people fast. Samuel fasted for help in time of war (1 Samuel 7:6). The Israelites fasted for wisdom about going to war (Judges 20:26). Jehoshaphat fasted for protection in war (2 Chronicles 10:3). David fasted in hopes that God would spare the life of his son (2 Samuel 12:16); he also fasted as a means of humbling himself (Psalm 35:13). The men of Jabesh fasted to mourn the life of Saul (1 Samuel 31:13). The people of Jerusalem fasted out of sorrow for their sin (Nehemiah 9:1). The people of Nineveh fasted out of desperation for God’s forgiveness (Jonah 3:5). Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther fasted as a means of intensifying their prayers (Ezra 8:21; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16). All Israelites fasted to celebrate certain holy days (Leviticus 23:27). Moses and Daniel fasted in preparation for hearing from God (Exodus 34:28; Daniel 9:3). Early Christian leaders fasted before ordaining elders and commissioning apostles (Acts 13:3; 14:23).

Biblical fasts come in all shapes and sizes. There are secret fasts (Matthew 6:16-18), public fasts (Jeremiah 36:9), community fasts (Nehemiah 9:1), partial fasts (Daniel 10:3), water-only fasts (Matthew 4:2), and no-food-or-water-fasts (Ezra 10:6). In terms of length, there are one night fasts (Daniel 6:18), one day fasts (1 Samuel 7:6), three day fasts (Esther 4:16), week-long fasts (2 Samuel 12:16-23), two-week-long fasts (Acts 27:33-34), three-week-long fasts (Daniel 10:3-13), and forty-day fasts (Exodus 24:18; Matthew 4:2).

So what will fasting do for you? If your thought is “help me lose weight,” don’t bother. While fasting is not a command (and not recommended for people with certain health conditions), Jesus seems to assume the practice will be one of the normal habits of His followers. In Matthew 6:16, he says, “When you fast...” meaning, “Not if, but when...”. Later, in Luke 5:34-35, He says, “Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.” Though fasting is assumed, it is not required. We don’t have to fast. We get to fast. Like all intentional spiritual practices, fasting should not be legalistic – we are not earning approval from God through fasting.

Fasting allows us to create space in our minds and souls for more of God’s presence. We can fast for a number of reasons: For growing our dependence on God, to hear from God, to increase our self-discipline, to intensify our prayers, for spiritual renewal, etc. As we fast, we give our need for food to God, asking him to fill that space instead. Fasting goes hand-in-hand with prayer. As we become more aware of God’s presence through fasting, we can begin to discern His desires and align our prayers with his will.

REASONS TO FAST

We fast when we want to reinforce our love for and dependency on God.

Midway through a day-long fast, your stomach might start whispering, “Why are we fasting again?” Your mind can reply, “To remind ourselves that we don’t live by bread alone, but are absolutely dependent on God for everything.” Your whole body may then reason, “You must really love God to be doing this.” Your mind can answer, “I do.”

This kind of fast can also loosen materialism’s grip on you. Thirty minutes after beginning a fast, you may start thinking about food. It owns us. Including snacks, we usually bow to it three to five times a day. While we’re fasting, food doesn’t own us; God does. After completing a fast, food has less ownership of us, and so do “things.” Fasting is a means for learning to live without “stuff.” At the end of a fast, God owns us more and “stuff” owns us less.

We fast when we want to hear from God.

Retreat to a secluded place to hear from God about life, family, church, etc. You will probably find that you are able to hear God’s voice better when there is no food in your stomach. The key to this kind of fast is the combination of fasting, prayer, and solitude. If you try to fast and hear from God while carrying on a normal day’s work; it doesn’t always work out so well. On the other hand, getting away with an empty stomach with a Bible, notepad, and no distractions can draw you closer to God.

We fast when we want to increase self-discipline.

The apostle Paul clued us in to this secret when he said, “I beat my body and make it a slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Discipline transfers from one aspect of life to another. The ability to say “no” to food translates into a heightened ability to say “no” to temptation as well.

We fast when we want to intensify our prayers.

If you have a situation where you really need to hear from God, or need to make a big decision, try fasting for a certain length of time over a long period of time. For example, for six months or longer, fast every Monday morning until God supplies an answer.

God expects us to fast from time to time but not as a means of torture or punishment. He understands how we work better than we do. He is great and gracious, so if He thinks fasting is good for us, fasting must be good for us. Don’t go overboard with fasting. Still, it is worthwhile to add fasting to your spiritual diet.

PREPARING TO FAST

Time – How often you will fast? One meal? One day? One day a week for three weeks? One meal a day for multiple days each week? A whole week? For 21 days? Making this commitment ahead of time will help you sustain your fast when physical temptations and life's pressures tempt you to abandon it. If fasting is new to you, start with a shorter fast.

Type – Fasting can either be total (abstaining from food and water) or partial (i.e. abstaining from solid foods but still drinking water and juices). Fasting requires reasonable precautions, especially longer fasts. If you take prescription medication or have a chronic ailment, consult your physician first.

Practices – Decide how much time you will devote to spiritual practices during the fast. Plan to set aside the time you would normally spend on meal preparation and eating for focused time with God. You may need to restrict certain physical or social activities during your fast.

DURING AND AFTER

DURING THE FAST:

You can pray, read and meditate on Scripture, journal, listen to worship music, etc. Expect to receive insights or promptings from God during your fast, but be patient. Ask God to help you be still and quiet before him. Find purpose in just being focused on his presence. You may feel weak, irritable, or have difficulty concentrating. You may also get a headache. This is normal. Let your physical challenges draw you to a deeper dependence on God.

AFTER THE FAST:

Share any insights or promptings you sensed from God during your fast with someone in your Community Group or a friend or a Laurel Ridge staff member. Do not be discouraged if you struggle the first few times you fast. It takes time to build your spiritual fasting muscles. God will honor your desire to experience his presence through this practice.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO A GOD LIKE THAT?

How might fasting fit into your lifestyle? How can you maximize it as a tool to get closer to God? Would you like to try fasting, prayer, and solitude as a means to hear His voice? Do you think a half-day's fast might increase your self-discipline? Might fasting become a tool to intensify your prayers? I hope you'll pick a reason to fast and a day (or a half-day) to try it, and see what happens. Who knows? You might find that the time goes by really fast.

Some excerpts adapted from the book, "Jonah: Responding to God in all the Right Ways," by Hal Seed.



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