

The Discipline of Fasting

Excerpts from *Celebration of Discipline*
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What is Fasting?

Throughout Scripture, fasting refers to abstaining from food *for spiritual purposes*. It stands in contrast to the hunger strike, or for health reasons such as dieting. Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes.

Scripture Describes Different Types of Fasts

The Normal Fast. This involved abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water. In the forty-day fast of Jesus, we are told that "He ate nothing" and toward the end of the fast that "He was hungry" and that Satan tempted Him to eat, indicating that the abstaining was from food but not from water (Luke 4:2).

The Partial Fast. The Bible describes what could be considered a partial fast: that is, there is a restriction of diet but not total abstention. Although the normal fast seemed to be the custom with the prophet Daniel, there was an occasion where for three weeks he "ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all" (Daniel 10:3).

The Absolute Fast. There are several examples in Scripture of what has rightly been called an "absolute fast," or an abstaining from both food *and* water. It usually appears as a desperate measure to meet a dire emergency. Upon learning that execution awaited herself and her people, Esther instructed Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews...and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do" (Esther 4:16). Paul engaged in a three-day absolute fast following his encounter with the living Christ (Acts 9:9). It must be underscored that the absolute fast is the *exception* and should never be engaged in unless one has a *very clear command from God*, and then for not more than three days.

Is Fasting a Commandment?

Nowhere in Scripture do we find Biblical laws that require regular fasting, nor do we find a direct command to fast. What we do find are examples of many biblical personages to whom fasting was a regular part of their lives: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, and Jesus Christ the Incarnate Son.

Many of the great Christians throughout church history fasted and testified to its value. Among them were Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Finney and Pastor Hsi of China.

Jesus gives instruction on fasting in the Sermon on the Mount. He states: "And *whenever* you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do," (Matthew 6:16). Jesus did not say "*If* you fast," neither did He say "You *must* fast." He seemed to make the assumption that people would fast, and what was needed was instruction on *how* to do it properly.

The Purpose of Fasting

Fasting must center on God. It should draw us closer to God, where we will experience a deeper relationship with Him. Like Anna in Luke 2:37, we should be "worshiping with fasting."

Fasting reveals the things that control us. We tend to cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David said, "I humbled my soul with fasting" (Psalm 69:10). Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear - if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger, for example, is due to our hunger. We will then discover that we are angry not because of hunger, but because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.

Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them. Paul wrote: "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything" (I Corinthians 6:12). "I pommel my body and subdue it," (I Corinthians 9:27). David wrote, "I afflicted myself with fasting" (Psalm 35:13). That is not asceticism; it is discipline - and discipline brings freedom.

How to Have a Spiritual Fast

Purify your motives. The purpose of a spiritual fast is to focus upon and worship God, not to lose weight, go on a hunger strike, save money on food, etc.

"And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."
Matthew 6:16

Begin with a partial fast. It is wise to learn to walk well before we try to run. Many people find that beginning with a twenty-four hour fast from lunch to lunch works well. This would mean that you would not eat two meals. Fresh fruit juices are excellent to consume during this time. You may be fascinated with the physical aspects, but the most important thing to monitor is the inner attitude of worship. Outwardly you will be performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration, song and ministry to the Lord. Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables and a good deal of inner rejoicing.

Progress to a twenty-four hour normal fast. Use only water, but use healthy amounts of it. You will probably feel some hunger pains or discomfort before the time is up. That is not real hunger; your stomach has been trained through years of conditioning to give signals of hunger at certain hours. In many ways your stomach is like a spoiled child, and spoiled children do not need indulgence, they need discipline! Tell your "spoiled child" to calm down and in a brief time the hunger pains will pass. You are to be the master of your stomach, not its slave.

Fasting can have a powerful impact on your spiritual life. Consider a regular discipline of fasting one day a week for six-months. Regular or weekly fasting had such a profound effect in the lives of early church leaders that some sought to find a biblical command for it. John Wesley refused to ordain anyone who did not fast every Wednesday and Friday.