

# Fasting 101 – A Biblical overview

The Bible does not give us many instructions on fasting, but when Jesus spoke of fasting, it was clear that he expected that his disciples would engage in fasting after his ascension.

- “*When you fast, do not look gloomy...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.*” (Matthew 6:16-18 ESV)
- “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and *then they will fast* in that day.” (Mark 2:20 ESV)

There are dietary reasons that fasting can be helpful, but the kind of fasting we do as we pray is done for other reasons. In general terms, fasting serves as a tangible, physical way of participating in whole-hearted devotion to prayer for a more intense period of prayer. God is pleased when we come to Him in such serious and expectant pursuit<sup>1</sup>. Because He sees our heart motivations, fasting does not yield the same results if it is merely for show<sup>2</sup> or done in the midst of unrepentant unrighteousness<sup>3</sup>.

We fast when we want to force ourselves to be more seriously devoted to God. Fasting is rightly done when we recognize an unusually severe need for God’s intervention,<sup>4</sup> when we want to express true repentance,<sup>5</sup> or while we are seeking God’s direction and blessing<sup>6</sup>. That said, regular routines of fasting and prayer are a powerful way through which we can surrender ourselves meaningfully to God’s agenda when we are not aware of any particular need or opportunity<sup>7</sup>.

In God’s economy, external religious ritual does not equate to spiritual merit, nor does the degree of pain or hardship involved necessarily bring profit<sup>8</sup>. Any religious activity that causes us to take pride in self is harmful to our souls. (If you are at risk in this department, ask God to help you to fast for the sake of seeking Him and His kingdom rather than your own sense of religious self-worth) That said, fasting can make an incredible impact on your prayer life. The best way to understand the value of fasting and prayer is simply to try it—you will never know what God wants to accomplish until you trust Him enough to go and find out.

Has God been moving you to fast and pray for a specific purpose or as a regular spiritual habit?

“I once found myself at odds with a group of christian brothers, and as I discussed the matter in my prayers with God, I felt as if God wanted me to pray for them. I immediately agreed to do so. He then asked if I loved them enough to be willing to *fast* and pray for them. I reluctantly agreed to fast for a day. He asked if I loved them enough to be willing to fast and pray for them for an entire week. I don’t understand the impact that week of prayer had in the spiritual realm, but by the end of it, I saw those brothers in an entirely different light.” - Anonymous

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1 Hebrews 11:6

2 Matthew 6:16

3 Isaiah 58:3-6

4 Esther 4:16, Ezra 8:21, 2 Chronicles 20:3-4

5 Jeremiah 36:1-10, Jonah 3:5

6 Acts 13:1-3

7 Luke 2:36-38

8 Colossians 2:16-23

# Fasting 101 – A how-to

**Traditional:** Fasting is traditionally practiced by completely abstaining from eating food, and this is how we recommend that you fast. During this time you will want to drink more water than you typically do, as many of the foods we normally eat also contain water content. During the time that you normally use to prepare, eat, and clean up your meals, pray or worship instead. When you feel hungry, use that as a reminder to pray.

**Modified fast:** If you are not medically able to fast from all food, you may choose to do a juice-only fast, a bread and water fast, or some other variation. Make sure that your fast will leave you feeling deprived in some fashion (so you will be reminded to pray) and also that it will leave you with extra time for prayer (time that your meals would otherwise occupy).

**Breaking your fast:** break your fast with prayer, thanksgiving, and simple, light foods. This gets more important if you have fasted for more than one or two days, as your body will need to re-engage your entire digestive system.

## FAQ

**How long do I fast?** Fast as you feel led to. Most people are able to fast from one meal up to a whole day relatively easily. If you are implementing this as a spiritual discipline for weekly practice, a one-day fast or two one-day fasts each week are good targets. If you desire to fast for longer than three days, it would be a good idea to talk this over with your doctor before beginning. If you are fasting as a part of a corporate prayer initiative, fast during the period of time you have agreed to. If you have signed up for a calendar day, plan on not eating for that whole day and resume eating with breakfast the following morning (if you find it necessary to eat, fast all the way through the evening meal and have a light before-bed snack).

**Is there anything I should be careful of?** If you begin to experience any noticeable health effects, consult with a doctor. If you see flashes of light in your vision, this could be a sign that your blood sugar is too low, and you should eat something or drink some juice.

**Is it possible to do this wrong?** The most important part of fasting is the inclination of your heart, so do not worry that you might be breaking some rule accidentally or not! As you seek God, be earnest in your exercise of self-discipline for the sake of prayer, and you will see the fruit of it.

**What if I've had an eating disorder?** If you believe that fasting from food could cause you to slip back into self-destructive eating habits, it may be best that you not fast from food. Perhaps abstaining from some other thing (such as your phone, TV, the internet, etc) for the sake of prayer would be more beneficial to you. Talk it through with a trusted spiritual mentor!

**Any last advice?** For maximum results, don't tell anyone except those whose meal plans may need to change based on your fasting. Shower, brush your teeth (fasting can cause bad breath!), and smile.

*“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.” (Matthew 6:16–18 ESV)*