

What You Need to Know About Fasting

Christ said that His servants would fast. What is a fast? Is it starving yourself? Is it missing one meal—or more than one? Is fasting an obsolete Old Testament ritual—or an effective tool for Christian growth? Is it commanded for Christians today? Here are the answers to these questions and more!

FASTING HAS BEEN practiced since ancient times. There are many examples of it in God’s Word. They reveal the *true* nature of fasting.

Jonah 3:1-7 tells how the city of Nineveh reacted to Jonah’s sobering message from God. All the people “proclaimed a fast...from the greatest of them even to the least of them” (vs. 5). Verse 7 states that the king himself declared, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water.”

In Leviticus 23:27-29, God commanded the Israelites to “afflict their souls [bodies]” on the Day of Atonement. This annual Holy Day was to be kept “at even[ing], from even[ing] unto even[ing]” (vs. 32). This same day is referred to as “the fast” in Acts 27:9 and in the margins of many other Bible translations.

These verses all show what fasting is—going without food and drink for at least a twenty-four hour period.

When you fast, you feel it; you are *afflicting* your body. You may feel sluggish or lack energy. Your stomach will ache, and you will feel thirsty. If you are a regular coffee or soda drinker, you may experience a caffeine headache.

You may even feel like you are going to die—but you won’t. You can survive without food. Your body will still be “eating,” even if you are not; it will use its reserves. Our Creator knows it is pos-

sible for you to live without food and water for at least one day. Recognize that God would not tell you to do something that is impossible.

You Need God

How spiritually beneficial is fasting? What good comes from afflicting your body?

Most people don’t see the need for God in their lives. Like King Nebuchadnezzar, they believe that *they* are responsible for their talents and abilities. They also credit *themselves* for everything they have or do (Dan. 4:30). Because they are proud and lifted up—vain—they do not understand that *God* gives them life and breath (Job 12:9-10).

Even those who may be striving to obey God, who admit that they are weak and need God’s strength and guidance, may not fully understand this. Saying something and fully comprehending it are two different things.

Job realized this after a long period of trials and afflictions, as he said, “I have heard of You [God] by the hearing of the ear: but now my eye sees You. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5-6).

Your mind can deceive you into believing that you are doing fine, that you don’t need God, or that you are close to Him, when the opposite is in fact true. God sums this up in Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart [mind] is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”

It is easy to fool yourself!

A Christian striving to obey God wages a constant battle. The apostle Paul explains: “If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not” (Rom. 7:16-18).

A mind exists in you that simply does not want to obey God: “Because the carnal [fleshly] mind is enmity against [the enemy of] God: for it is not subject to the law of God, *neither indeed can be*” (Rom. 8:7). Take this verse for what it says. Your physical mind is literally the *enemy* of God!

But if you will humble yourself through fasting, God is ready and able to help you (Psa. 34:15). When you feel the hunger and thirst, the extent of your dependence upon God becomes clear. You realize how much you need what He has created—the earth, the rain, and the physical food they nourish and yield—to sustain your temporary life. Even the air you breathe comes from God. How long could you exist without any of these?

How puny and insignificant we feel when fasting—light-headed, lacking energy, having bad breath and feeling quite thirsty after just one day. We realize how much we desperately need God to sustain our lives in every way.

Only by fasting can anyone ever come to see how much he needs God.

You might be willing to admit this without fasting, but afflicting yourself brings understanding—because you FEEL it.

Humble Yourself

Fasting will help you draw closer to God. King David said, “I humbled my soul with fasting” (Psa. 35:13)—and God said that David was “a man after His own heart” (I Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). What about you? Are you “after God’s heart”? Unless you are willing to humble yourself, you cannot be close to your Creator.

This is important! Notice James 4: “God resists the proud, but gives grace unto the humble” (vs. 6). If you are proud—lifted up, dependent on self—God will not hear or help you. He cannot and will not work with a proud mind. But when you fast, you humble yourself. You draw near to God, and He draws near to you. If you rely on Him for strength, He will lift you up.

Submitting to God—obeying Him—gives you the strength to resist the devil. Fasting binds Satan; he will have no choice but to flee from you. He cannot get to you when you are close to God.

How important this is for a child of God! Read James 4:7-10. Notice how he talks about humbling yourself, weeping and mourning: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double minded. *Be afflicted* [fast], and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up.”

This is all part of fasting. Do this, and as you draw near to God, He will draw near to you.

Why the Disciples Did Not Fast

In Matthew 9:14-15, Christ explained the great purpose of denying your body food and drink: “Then came to Him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the Bridegroom is with them? But the days

will come, when the Bridegroom shall be taken from them, *and then shall they fast.*”

Christ was God in the flesh. He was right here! His disciples had close, daily contact with Him. They could ask Him questions at any time. And Christ was right there, teaching, helping and encouraging them. The disciples could touch and even hug Christ—how much closer could they have been? Thus, there was no need for them to fast.

But when Christ returned to the Father’s right hand in heaven, fasting became necessary. It was not as easy for the disciples to stay tuned into Christ’s thinking or to see His will in their lives. They remembered Christ’s earlier admonition to fast, and by so doing, they were able to maintain and grow beyond the level of spiritual understanding that they achieved while Jesus was on earth.

And so we must fast today. Just as we are commanded to fast on the Day of Atonement, we need to fast *often* (II Cor. 11:27), to stay in harmony—“at-one-ment”—with God and Christ.

Even Ahab Fasted

The life of a Christian is one of overcoming. It is a life of tests and trials. Human “steam” cannot get you through them. You need God’s help and strength, which fasting can bring.

Here are some examples from the pages of the Bible.

The prophet Elijah had spent many years witnessing to King Ahab and the kingdom of Israel. Ahab was an evil, wicked ruler, of whom God said, “But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD...” (I Kgs. 21:25).

Elijah gave him a final warning about what would happen to him and his relatives (vs. 20-24). This warning produced results: “...he [Ahab] rent [tore] his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and *fasted*, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly [mourned]” (vs. 27).

What was God’s reaction? “See you how Ahab humbles himself before Me? Because he humbles himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days...” (vs. 29).

A sincere, repentant attitude, humbling yourself before God, and fasting

bring results. If God had mercy on wicked Ahab, how much more will He hear the prayers of His Spirit-begotten children and help them when they fast in times of need?

Judah Fasts and God Smites an Army

King Jehosaphat of Judah faced a huge trial. A massive army, comprised of soldiers from many nations, invaded his kingdom.

How did Jehosaphat react? II Chronicles 20:3-4 reveals, “And Jehosaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and *proclaimed a fast* throughout all Judah. And Judah gathered themselves together, to ask help of the LORD: even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.”

The entire nation fasted, seeking God’s intervention. When He saw their humble attitudes, God answered. He told them not to be afraid, but to go out and meet the invading army and trust that God would settle the matter.

The next day, Jehosaphat and the people found that God had indeed intervened. The entire army was killed! God actually turned the army against itself, and no one was left alive.

When you face trials and tests or struggle with sin—when you see Satan and his army at the gates of your city—the need to fast is great. Just as God helped Jehosaphat, He will also help you.

Fasting shows God that you are willing to rely on *His* strength—not your own—for deliverance. It teaches you to depend on *Him* for everything—strength, help in overcoming sin, deliverance from trials, and answered prayer.

Read Daniel 9 to see how Daniel afflicted and humbled himself so that God would hear and answer his prayers. This great servant made a request “by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes” (Dan. 9:3). God answered by sending the archangel Gabriel to help him.

God hears all our prayers—if we obey Him. But when the need for an answer is great, fasting, along with prayer, is extremely effective (see Mark 9:25-29). God takes notice and responds when He sees how serious you are and how important His way of life is to you.

Keys to Effective Fasting

■ **FAST OFTEN:** Read II Corinthians 11:27. The more you fast, the easier it will be. Your body will grow accustomed to it. In one sense, practice makes perfect. The more you fast, the more effective it will be. But keep in mind that *attitude*, not frequency, is what really counts.

■ **TAKE IT ONE DAY AT A TIME:** An effective fast should continue for at least 24 hours, causing you to miss at least three meals. Sometimes, however, a longer fast—2 or 3 days—may be necessary. If this is the case, don't focus on the length of the fast—it will only make it seem longer. And use wisdom. Only fast beyond a three-day period if it follows sound professional advice. Your fast may start at any time, but it is more natural to go from sunset to sunset. Also, remember that fasting for a week does not necessarily make you more spiritual than someone who only fasted for one day.

■ **MAKE THE TIME:** Fasting is rarely convenient. You must set aside the time to do it. At times, it may be necessary to perform your daily duties. You may have to work. But the most profitable fast would occur during free time. Occasionally, the Sabbath may be used as a fast day. But this is not ideal, because the Sabbath is a feast day.

■ **USE THE OTHER TOOLS WITH FASTING:** Wasting the time you spend fasting—by not studying, praying or meditating—reduces the fast to a mere hunger strike. Remember to at least double the amount of prayer, Bible study and meditation normally done. Tripling them can be better. If fasting for a particular reason, be sure to review all scriptures that apply.

■ **PREPARE PROPERLY:** A day or so before beginning your fast, cut back on the amount of food you eat. Gorging yourself before a fast is unwise. You may experience headaches, due to a lack of caffeine (especially if you are a heavy coffee or soda drinker). Cut back on these beverages ahead of time. You may also experience light-headedness and bad breath. Keep in mind that your body will be eliminating built-up poisons; drinking plenty of water before beginning will help. When you resume eating, start with light foods. Don't eat heavily right away.

■ **HAVE THE PROPER APPEARANCE:** Remember what Christ said in Matthew 6:16-18. Bathe or shower as you would normally do. Comb your hair. Dress and act normally. Brushing teeth is permissible. No one should be able to tell by your appearance that you are fasting—only God should know.

Fast to Seek God's Will

Do you want to know what God's will is—for you or anything else? Then follow the example of Paul.

When Christ struck Paul down supernaturally on the road to Damascus, Paul fasted while waiting to learn what Christ wanted him to do—to learn His will (Acts 9:6-9).

When you face important decisions in your life and need to know what God's will is on the matter, FAST! Draw close to God. Study His Word. Read and meditate on any and all scriptures that pertain to the matter. Make your request known to God through prayer. Ask for His guid-

ance and help. Seek His will and He will show you what to do.

The Proper Attitude

People in the world fast for many reasons, but almost none do it with the proper attitude. They fast to make political statements, or for this or that cause. Or they fast to force their will upon God. During a fast, we must seek God's will—not our own!

So what kind of attitude does God look for? The latter half of Isaiah 66:2 reveals the answer: "...but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a *contrite spirit*, and *trembles* at My word."

Isaiah also records why God calls for fasting: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness [flee sin], to undo the heavy burdens [trials and tribulations]...and that you break every yoke [bondage to sin]?" (58:6).

Fasting is a great tool of release when you are bound by sin.

In verses 1-4, God condemns those who fast for selfish reasons, take pleasure in their own fast, or have political agendas. These attitudes are not acceptable to Him. These kinds of fasts are nothing more than hunger strikes.

Fasting should always achieve a good end. It should help you see that you are nothing but weak flesh. It should help you see the need to help and serve others (vs. 7). If you fast with the proper attitude, God promises great blessings (vs. 8-12).

Fast in Secret

Fasting should not be "for show." It is not proof of spirituality. How long or how often you fast should rarely be mentioned to anyone. Neither should anyone notice that you are fasting due to your appearance—it should not show on your face.

Jesus gave clear instruction about this in Matthew 6:16-18: "Moreover when you fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face; that you appear not unto men to fast, but unto your Father which is in secret: and your Father, which sees in secret, shall reward you openly."

You should wash your face, comb your hair, appear normal. Only God should know that you are fasting.

However, on certain occasions it may be necessary for two or more to fast about the same matter, so keeping it to yourself is unavoidable. But on the whole, only God should know you are fasting.

Always remember that Jesus said, "For whosoever exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:11). Fasting should be more than simple hunger and thirst. It should help you see past the physical, to spiritual principles. A Christian must not live "by bread alone, but by every word

that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; see also Jn. 4:34; 6:26-27, 32-35, 50-51). During a fast, you should “hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Matt. 5:6).

Afflicting yourself should powerfully help you draw closer to God, to study (II Tim. 2:15) and meditate on His Word (Psa. 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 148) and to pray to Him (I Cor. 7:5). These three tools produce an effective fast.

Fasting is a test to see what you will put first—hunger and thirst (“the lusts of the flesh”), or a humble, heartfelt desire to obey and submit yourself before God and draw closer to Him in every way.

Denying yourself in a humble attitude is repentance, not penance. It is not a way to atone for sins—only Christ can do that. A humble person willingly admits that his own ways are wrong and that God’s are right. He seeks God’s way and asks for His help, deliverance, instruction and guidance.

Fasting for Health Reasons

Notice what God says happens when you fast: “Then shall your light break

forth as the morning, and *your health shall spring forth speedily*: and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rearward [rear guard]” (Isa. 58:8).

Many have noticed certain health benefits that accompany fasting. Of course, it can be beneficial to fast for physical reasons. But health fasts, juice fasts (abstaining from solid foods), and other such fasts should *not* be confused with a SPIRITUAL fast. Such physical fasts are not appropriate for the Day of Atonement or any other time set aside for spiritual fasting.

It is natural for our bodies to be healthy. Our bodies were not made to be sick! When illness strikes, it can be an appropriate time to fast. You may have ingested some illness-causing bacteria, perhaps from spoiled food.

In any case, illness results from some kind of physical sin. God made the human body; therefore, He knows what is good for it. God created laws of health that yield blessings when obeyed. If broken, they bring curses—illness, sickness, disease. All too

often, mankind violates these perfect laws—just like it rejects God’s spiritual laws. People often eat too much of one kind of food and not enough of another; or we eat the wrong food altogether. Breaking God’s dietary laws results in ILLNESS.

So, when you find yourself getting sick, stop eating!

Why? To stop eating what made you sick—to stop breaking God’s health laws—to stop *sinning*.

But understand: Fasting does not heal—*only God does*, through Jesus Christ (I Pet. 2:24; Isa. 53:5; Jms. 5:14-16). In this case, fasting stops you from sinning physically. Repent, and God will heal.

The Rewards of Fasting

Proper fasting reaps great rewards—both physical and spiritual. Properly used, it will draw you closer to God, show you His will, bring guidance, direction, help, strength, and deliverance. You can now see why fasting is such an essential tool in a Christian’s growth and overcoming. □

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