

Prayer and Fasting

When you think of fasting, what image comes to mind? A self-righteous Pharisee? An ascetic monk? For many of us, these are cultural stereotypes of a person who abstains from food and prays. Often we are confused about the purpose of fasting. Fortunately, Scripture provides many examples both in the Old and New Testaments of how fasting can make a difference in our lives and ministries.

God considers fasting important, and His Word contains 92 passages mentioning it. Many of our heroes of the faith, including Moses, Elijah, Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel and Paul, fasted at crucial points.

Jesus both taught and modeled fasting. After being anointed by the Holy Spirit, He was led into the wilderness to fast and pray for 40 days (Matthew 4:2). During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave specific instructions on how to fast (Matthew 6:16-18). Jesus knew the followers He addressed would fast. But what is the purpose of fasting in the life of the believer today? Here are some answers.

Showing Humility and Repentance

One reason we fast is to demonstrate humility before the sovereign Creator of the universe. God responds when we diligently and wholeheartedly seek Him (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Sometimes this involves confession and repentance from sin. This was the case of the Ninevites when Jonah reluctantly told them God was going to bring judgment upon them (Jonah 3:5,10), so they called a fast and repented of their sin. Fasting demonstrates humility by acknowledging our dependence on God. In Psalm 35, David laments his enemies' harsh treatment of him in contrast to how he cared for them when they were ill. He humbled his soul by fasting and praying for their recovery (Psalm 35:13).

Seeking God's Face More Fully

A second reason we fast is to respond to God's love toward us. It is as if we are saying to God, "Because You are righteous and holy, and loved me enough to send Jesus to die for my sins, I want to get to know You more intimately."

Jeremiah 29:13 says we will find God when we seek Him with all our hearts. We may want to take extra time to seek and praise God by missing a meal or abstaining from food for a day or more.

When we deliberately set aside time for fasting, we are showing we want to seek God.

Asking for Something You Desire

Sometimes we fast to demonstrate our sincerity to God concerning something we truly desire. Ezra proclaimed a fast to ask God to protect His people as they journeyed to Jerusalem from exile. God responded by leading them safely to Jerusalem, delivering them from their enemies and ambushes along the way (Ezra 8:21-31).

Although fasting may show our sincerity, it does not guarantee we will receive what we desire. Maybe our request is not within God's will, or we may be asking with the wrong motives. David fasted for seven days when God struck with illness the child Bathsheba conceived by David. David repented of his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. He humbled himself, fasted and prayed, but the child still died (2 Samuel 12:15-18).

Through fasting we can determine the sincerity and correctness of our requests.

Fasting to Know God's Will

Seeking God's will or direction is different from petitioning Him for something we desire. When the Israelites were in conflict with the tribe of Benjamin, they sought God's

will through fasting. The entire army fasted until evening, and "the men of Israel asked the Lord, 'Shall we go out again and fight against our brother Benjamin, or shall we stop?'" (Judges 20:26-28).

Acts 13:1-3 implies that church leaders were seeking God's direction for their ministry through prayer and fasting. The Holy Spirit responded by saying, "Set apart for me Bamabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." In both instances, people fasted and prayed to determine God's will.

Developing Discipline

An important benefit of fasting is that it promotes self-control by disciplining our bodies. When we say no to our natural appetite for food, we develop the willpower and discipline to say no to other fleshly desires (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Other reasons people in the Bible fasted include deliverance (Second Chronicles 20:3), mourning the loss of a loved one (1 Samuel 31:13), healing the sick (Psalm 35:13), spiritual strength (Matthew 4:2), and the appointment of elders in the *church* (Acts 14:23).

Losing weight is NOT the emphasis when fasting for spiritual reasons.

Men of God Continue to Fast

Fasting is not limited to believers the Bible mentions. Most of the church's reformers—including Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox—fasted. Knox fasted and prayed so much that Queen Mary said she feared his prayers more than all the armies of Scotland.

John Wesley, the renowned English preacher, missionary and founder of Methodism, fasted twice weekly from sun up until late afternoon. Charles Finney, a revivalist of the 1800s, fasted regularly week and would often go three days without eating when he felt any diminution of spiritual power at his meetings.

Dr. Bill Bright, founder and president of Campus Crusade for Christ, makes it his practice to fast and pray. He believes it plays

a vital role in what God does through him and the ministry of Campus Crusade.

Dr. Bright encourages believers to fast, but he also warns of two common pitfalls:

First, we can become legalistic about fasting. It is essential to remember God loves us and is not displeased with us when we do not fast. Second, we can take pride in our fasting. We can avoid this problem by focusing on God's character and all He has done for us. Most of us do not need to worry about having the wrong attitude or motive while fasting. A more likely problem is we may not fast at all.

Fasting is a commitment to seeking the Lord. It is not reserved for the self-righteous, but it is a privilege from which each of us can benefit.

In How to Fast

Most people go without food during a diet or when they're too busy to eat, but this isn't biblical fasting. What does fasting mean? Our sincerity and attitude play important roles in biblical fasting. Before beginning ask yourself, "Am I confident that my desire to fast is God-given? What are the spiritual objectives in this fast? Personal sanctification and consecration? Intercession? Special burdens? Is there any hidden desire to impress others?" when you've honestly answered these questions you're ready to begin.

Now that you've decided to fast and are properly motivated, you still may not know how to begin the fast, or how long it should last.

The Normal Fast

The normal fast involves abstaining from all forms of food but not from water, and commonly lasts 24 hours, from sunrise to sunrise.

According to The Foods and Nutrition Encyclopedia, "For healthy individuals, no harm results from short-term fasting." The average healthy person can go without food between 21 and 40 or more days before the

body begins to eliminate vital tissue (starvation). You should consult *your* physician before beginning any fast lasting longer than three days. If you are under the care of a physician for any kind of disease, if you struggle with anorexia nervosa or bulimia, or if you are pregnant, do not begin a fast before you have the approval and supervision of your physician.

If you want to learn more about the physical effects of fasting (and especially if you're considering a fast longer than one to three days) read books dealing with the medical aspects. Fasting: The Ultimate Diet by Allan Con, M.D. (contains an extensive bibliography); Therapeutic Fasting by Arnold DeVries, and books by Dr. Herbert Sheldon (a leading authority on fasting) are a few suggestions.

Beginning the Fast

If you are fasting for the first time, you might begin by missing a meal or two. Over time, you can build up to a full day or more. Begin by refraining from solid food, but drink liquids. Water is the best, since soft drinks 'poison' the digestive system and inhibit the purifying process, and coffee and tea stimulate the nervous system. Before beginning the fast it is best to eat lightly and cut back on caffeinated drinks. However, during the first few days of the fast, it is common to experience headaches as the body withdraws from and removes caffeine.

During your fast set aside specific and significant time to worship and seek God. Plan where you'll be, so your time can be unhurried and conducive to enjoying the Lord. Many people begin this time by repenting of any sins the Holy Spirit brings to mind and asking for God's forgiveness. This is essential to ensure that sin is not hindering your communication with God. Then plan time to make your requests known to God and to seek His will. Take breaks to study Scripture passages you have chosen. Don't rush your fellowship with God. Take time to listen. Keep a notebook and pen nearby to record the ideas, insights, directions and instructions He impresses on your mind. When you turn down the "noise

of western civilization" by fasting, you can more easily hear God.

Breaking the Fast

Breaking the fast may require as much discipline as beginning it. During the fast your stomach contracts and your body's digestive and elimination systems rest. The longer you fast, the more time the digestive organs need to reactivate before functioning at full speed.

If you plan to fast only a day or two at a time, it is best to end the fast with a small glass of fruit juice as your first meal. Gradually introduce small amounts of easily digestible foods such as yogurt, soup, fresh fruit, and cooked vegetables.

If your fast lasts longer than a few days, you should continue with juices for a day or more before gradually introducing more substantial foods like yogurt, soup and fruit. Be sure you introduce new foods in small quantities, and that it is chewed well. You should stop eating at the slightest sensation of fullness.

If fasting only a few days at a time, ending the fast should be easier. If you have built up to and desire to fast longer, you should consult your physician and review a health book on fasting.

Remember, it is your attitude toward God and your walk with Him that is important, not how long you fast. God desires for you to love, obey, follow and enjoy Him. Deliberately abstaining from food is one way to demonstrate your commitment and sincerity in seeking Him.