

A GUIDE TO PRAYER AND FASTING

The Bible often mentions the people God entering into a time prayer and fasting. In the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah both abstained from food and water for forty days and forty nights. (Deuteronomy 9:9, 10:10, 18:25-29; 1 Kings 19:8). Jesus himself fasted for forty days in the desert after his baptism, before engaging in his own public ministry. (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13). Simply put, fasting is mentioned both descriptively and prescriptively as being part of the life of the believer.

WHY FAST?

There are a few reasons why Christians should and do fast.

1. Jesus commands us to Fast - In Matthew 6, Jesus says, "When you fast..." and then goes on to give instruction how to fast. His instructions assume that his disciples will, in fact, be fasting. Otherwise, there would be no need for him to give any instructions on the matter. Additionally, Jesus modeled this discipline. Before he went into public ministry, he fasted. Often he would come away from the crowds to pray alone.
2. Fasting Kills our Love of Lesser Joys - So often in our lives, we run around so preoccupied with the lesser joys of money, people, job, school, etc., that we forget our dependence on and joy in God. Fasting helps us to remember that, "man doesn't live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." In forsaking food, we forsake that on which we depend for life, to remember the one on whom we ultimately depend on for life. Often during a fast, our idolatry is exposed, giving room for repentance and growth in holiness.
3. Fasting fans into flame our Passion for God - God does not want us to be half-hearted in our devotion to him. We are not honored when people are half-committed and flaky to us, and neither is God. Fasting causes us to see freshly our dependence on God and thus stirs our affections for him. It causes us to see him as our daily bread, and sweeter to us than honey. (Psalm 19). This makes true worship rise from our hearts to God.
4. Fasting causes us to be Generous - Isaiah 58 shows us that one of God's intentions behind fasting is that we might take the food and resources we're not using during that time and give them to the poor and oppressed. By abstaining from food and the "extras" in life, we're able to be more generous. Consider the words of Scripture:

"if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame." (Isaiah 58: 10-11)

5. Fasting Strengthens Prayer - Scripture gives us examples of fasting strengthening our prayers, thus the common pairing of Christians fasting and praying. When we fast, our minds and hearts become focused, and our prayers are often more filled with fervor and life. That's not to say that our emotional commitment to pray somehow makes God listen better, but it does allow us to pray better, and more in line with God's will. (See Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:17-29; Acts 10:30; 1 Corinthians 7:5).

Here are some additional reasons that Scripture gives us to fast:

1. To be Christ like (Matthew 4:1-17; Luke 4:1-13).
2. To grow in holiness (Isaiah 58:5-7).
3. To repent from sins (See Jonah 3:8; Nehemiah 1:4, 9:1-3; 1 Samuel 14:24).
4. To mourn for the dead (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:12).
5. To request God's help in times of crisis and calamity (Ezra 8:21-23; Nehemiah 1:4-11).

TYPES OF FASTING

Scripture gives us examples of a few different forms of fasting.

One type of fast is the ABSOLUTE FAST. In this fast, one abstains completely from all food and water for a certain period of time. Moses and Elijah both fasted in this way (Deuteronomy 9:9, 10:10, 18:25-29; 1 Kings 19:8). This is not a commonly performed fast, and should be done with a great deal of care. It's not recommended to pursue this type of fast for more than three days, and only to do so under the supervision of your doctor.

The next kind of fast is a SOLID-FOOD FAST. This is, much as it sounds, abstaining from solid foods, while allowing yourself to drink water and juice. Some theologians think that Jesus did a fast like this, because the Scriptures don't mention him being thirsty at the end of it. (Matthew 4:2).

The final kind of fast that Scripture shows us is a PARTIAL FAST. Daniel, for example, fasted from delicacies, meat, and wine for 21 days. (Daniel 10:3). Other kinds of partial fasting may be from television, social media, or hobbies, allowing one more time to devote to prayer and reflection.

HOW TO FAST AND PRAY

Jesus gives us pretty clear instruction on fasting and prayer. So, I'll just get out of the way and let the Master instruct us.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

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 6:1, 5-6, 16-18).

So what is Jesus after? He's not after everyone in the world knowing how holy we Christians are because we fast. Rather, he's interested in our hearts really and truly being turned to him. In fact, he goes out of his way to tell us not to advertise the fact that we are fasting. Don't look sleepy, hungry, or annoyed that you can't eat. Don't excuse yourself from lunch saying, "Sorry guys, I've got to go pray." Simply, fast.

FASTING VS. A HUNGER STRIKE

A hunger strike is when someone refuses to eat to get someone else to bend to their will, capitulate, or do something for them. Prisoners go on hunger strikes. Oppressed people go on hunger strikes. Ghandi went on hunger strikes. Christians do not, I repeat, do not go on hunger strikes.

When we fast, we are not doing it to get God to notice us, hear our prayers better, love us more, or move him to do what we really want him to do. Christians are not prisoners, oppressed people, or manipulators of their God. Christians are blood-bought saints whom God loves enough to sacrifice his own Son. Therefore, Christian fasting is categorically different from a hunger strike.

We fast to align our hearts with God's. We fast to suppress the noise of the natural man to hear the still small voice of God. We fast to kill sin that we might live to God. We fast to pray better. We fast to love better. We fast to give better. We fast as a form of freedom in God, not as a form of oppression under God.

SOME PRACTICAL STEPS FOR YOUR FAST

1. Make a Plan - If you plan nothing, you'll hit it every time. To have a successful fast, take a moment to decide what kind of fast you will take. How long will it be? What kind? Setting goals will allow you to be successful.

2. Set Prayer Goals - During a fast, it can be beneficial to set certain goals in prayer for which you will pray every day. These can be church goals, like growth, prayer for pastors and leaders, or for your small group. It's also good to set personal prayer goals, like personal holiness, mortification of sin, and opportunities for evangelism.
3. Consult a Physician - If you are pregnant, nursing, or ill, the more extreme forms of fasting won't be right for you. Please use wisdom and consult a physician if you have any sickness or concern about participating in a fast.
4. Give yourself time to Pray - If you spend your fast so busy that you really don't have any extra time to pray, you may have simply not eaten, rather than really fasted. Put time to pray in your schedule, and go after those God-given goals which God has laid on your heart.
5. Slowly re-introduce food - When your fast is over, don't rush out to the nearest buffet and practice the sin of gluttony. Your body may not like that very much. It's wise to slowly re-introduce foods like fruits, soft vegetables, and grains. Often times, people will break fasts with soup and salad, or a smoothie.
6. Do it! Don't wait around worrying if you'll be able to do it. Just go for it. God will provide grace and you'll get the joy in the God who is better than food, money, drink, and everything else.

WHAT SHOULD I BE PRAYING FOR?

There are a few different things that we will be praying for during this fast. To help you make the most of your time in prayer, here's a list. Add to the list the Godly goals that you want to set during this fast. It may be freedom from a specific sin, the salvation of a friend or family member, or something else. Commit to praying for the following list multiple times a day during your fast. Take notes on how God speaks, and what Scriptures come to mind. You'll be surprised at how encouraging you'll find this when it's done.

Church Prayer Goals:

1. Unity around the Gospel, and the mission to bring the truth, grace, and changing power of the Gospel to our city.
2. Wisdom and protection for our Pastors.
3. For those who don't know Jesus to repent and believe the Gospel.
4. For God's Kingdom to come on Earth, even as it is in Heaven.
5. For leaders to rise up in our midst to proclaim, teach, and lead our city to God.

6. That our church would grow and make thousands of disciples.

Personal Prayer Goals:

1. To grow in holiness and in freedom from sin.

2. For a greater desire for God.

3. Success in evangelism.

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____