

The Practice and Purposes of Fasting

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We are all believers in prayer, but there is something that many times accompanied prayer in the Bible, something that we really do not talk about very much. For some reason it is a Biblical practice that we have not widely embraced, perhaps because we do not fully understand it or its place in the life of a Christian. The practice of fasting is what we will be studying here.

If you have ever had a lab test, a surgery, or perhaps some other medical procedure, you know what it is like to go without food and drink for a period of time to prepare for that procedure. In healthcare that is called NPO which is a Latin abbreviation for “nil per os” or nothing by mouth. In that context, fasting is done so that the food in your body does not affect the results of the test, does not make the procedure difficult for the physician or technician, or it helps to avoid possible complications of anesthesia. But that is not the kind of fasting we will be talking about this morning. Fasting as presented in the Bible, influences our relationship and our walk with God.

First, fasting is not a bad thing, and perhaps that is our first and most difficult hurdle when discussing fasting. If you are like me and you were ever sent to bed without any dinner for misbehaving, going without food might carry the idea of punishment. Or there may have been times when we have been so busy at work or at home that we did not have time for breakfast or lunch – this tends to make us feel that we should never miss a meal. And, as Americans most of us have been taught to eat “three square meals a day” and to clean our plate, and it is possible that some of that cultural teaching has influenced our negative view of fasting. I was speaking with a brother in Christ from another country, and he said that the church there practices fasting on a fairly regular basis, and was a little surprised it was not practiced in the United States. Perhaps that is because we have not taught about fasting very much.

The Biblical view of **fasting** is not a negative thing at all. It is not punishment: In fact it brings special blessings. It changes our focus from physical food to spiritual food. Fasting is a profoundly good thing for us as Christians.

I hope you have your Bibles with you this morning as we will be looking at some passages in both the Old and the New Testaments with regards to fasting. And although we will be looking at several occurrences of fasting in the Bible, I want us to really think about the **reasons** why people fasted. You should have a study sheet that will help you with some brief notes if you would like to follow along.

What is fasting?

Fasting is a voluntary and temporary halting of our intake of food for the purpose of focusing our hearts on a particular spiritual need or concern. During the fast, our sense of hunger and thirst remind us of the spiritual reason or purpose of our fasting. It helps us translate our physical hunger into a spiritual hunger. Fasting in the Bible generally means going without all food and drink for a period, and not merely refraining from certain foods.¹

¹Wood, D. R. W. (1996, c1982, c1962). *New Bible Dictionary* (364). InterVarsity Press.

Esther 4:15-16

¹⁵Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶“Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

Here it was Esther who called for her people to fast for her. This was an intense fast where the Jews, along with Esther and her maids, did not eat or drink for three days.

When did fasting start?

The first mention of the word “fasting” in the Bible is found in the book of Judges, nearly 3,000 years ago. But before we look at that passage, there appears to be an important and even earlier example of fasting that was performed by Moses in Exodus 34:28, and recounted by Moses in Deuteronomy 9. Please turn with me to Deuteronomy 9 and we will read verses 6 through 11.

Deuteronomy 9:6-11

⁶Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.

⁷Remember this and never forget how you provoked the LORD your God to anger in the desert. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the LORD. ⁸At Horeb you aroused the LORD’s wrath so that he was angry enough to destroy you. ⁹When I went up on the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD had made with you, I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water. ¹⁰The LORD gave me two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God. On them were all the commandments the LORD proclaimed to you on the mountain out of the fire, on the day of the assembly.

¹¹At the end of the forty days and forty nights, the LORD gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant.

Here we see that Moses went without food and water for 40 days before he received the Ten Commandments, the beginning and the core of God’s written teachings for mankind under the old law.

Now let’s turn to Judges 20, starting in verse 26. This is the first reference to the word “fasted” or “fasting” in the Bible.

Judges 20:26

²⁶Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the LORD. They **fasted** that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the LORD.

Notice that in this example of fasting, the fast lasted only until evening.

Why do people fast?

Fasting is a way of showing a strong heart-felt focus about something. It is like saying to God, “I am so **deeply concerned** that I am going to temporarily give up the food and drink that I need to sustain my life, so that I may focus on my relationship with you and plead for your intervention. More than anything, I **need** you, God.”

In our first passage, Moses' fast seems to have been out of **reverence** for the holiness of God and to seek God for strength to **prepare** him lead the Israelite nation. We will talk a bit more about this in a few moments.

Esther was deeply concerned about approaching the king on behalf of her fellow Jews. She knew that unless the king extended his scepter, her approach to him could cost her life. Esther's fast was for seeking God's **strength** and **safety**, and his **intervention** in saving the lives of her fellow Jews.

In the passage we read from Judges 20, the Israelites fasted because they were seeking **God's will** with regards to going up a third time against the tribe of Benjamin, and they were no doubt **mourning** over the 40,000 Israelites who had died in the previous two battles. We know the results of this story: God said he would give the people of Benjamin into their hands, and that is exactly what happened.

Now let's turn to 1 Samuel 7:3-6. Here Samuel judges the people of Israel and convicts them of the wrong they had been doing. Let's read starting in verse three.

1 Samuel 7:3-6

³And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."⁴ So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.

⁵Then Samuel said, "Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the LORD for you."⁶ When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they **fasted** and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel was leader^a of Israel at Mizpah.

In this passage we see that fasting was performed by the children of Israel out of **repentance** and **rededication** of their lives to God. They were convicted of the wrong they had done, and they wanted to get back into a right relationship with God.

Let's take a look at another example of fasting, this time in 2 Samuel 1:11-12. David has just received word that Saul and Jonathan are both dead.

2 Samuel 1:11-12

¹¹Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. ¹²They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

Here we see that David and his men fasted out of their **sadness** for the loss of Saul, God's anointed king, and Jonathan, whom David loved.

^a Traditionally *judge*

Now let's move to the New Testament and see the occasions and the **reasons** why people fasted. Our first stop would have to be Matthew 3:13. In this context, Jesus has just been baptized by John.

Matthew 3:16-4:3

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

⁴ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

I don't believe there is anywhere in the Bible that tells us explicitly why Jesus fasted, but let me share some thoughts with you. Just as Moses fasted for 40 days when preparing to carry the weight of leadership of the children of Israel, it seems that Jesus similarly fasted to strengthen himself for the **temptations** that would come his way, and to **prepare** him for his critical role in fulfilling God's plan for mankind. There is one other person mentioned in the Bible who fasted for 40 days, and that is Elijah. If you want to turn with me to 1 Kings 19, let's read starting in verse 3 and continue through verse 8. In context, Jezebel had just sent a message to Elijah telling him that she was committed to killing him.

1 Kings 19:3-8

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank.

Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

We know that God then spoke to Elijah in a whisper in the cave at Horeb, and that God told him how he was to confront the evil influence of Baal in the Israelite nation. Each of these leaders, Moses, Elijah and Jesus, had **monumental tasks** ahead of them. It is interesting that it is these two, Moses and Elijah, who appear to Jesus when he is transfigured. Perhaps they encouraged Jesus in his ministry for all of us, sharing how God had blessed and strengthened them in their leadership of God's people. We can only speculate as to exactly what these three discussed, but it is interesting that each of them fasted for 40 days prior to beginning a large task to which God had called them. Just as a side note, Moses fasted another 40 days after he came down from the mountain and saw the sin which the people committed. We can read this in Deuteronomy 9:18.

Our next stop is in Acts 13, if you would like to turn with me there. Starting in verse 1 we read the following:

Acts 13:1-3

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”³ So after they had **fasted** and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

From this passage we see that both before and after the selection of men to preach the gospel, there was fasting. It would seem that the fasting prior to the Holy Spirit’s selection was part of their **worship** to God, and the fasting after their selection was part of their **committing** them to the work of preaching and teaching.

We see a similar pattern in Acts 14, starting in verse 23.

Acts 14:23

²³ Paul and Barnabas appointed elders^a for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Here Paul and Barnabas fasted and prayed for these new **elders** to commit them to the Lord. It was no doubt a strength to these new elders to see that level of godly support for them from Paul and Barnabas.

Now let’s turn to Luke 2:26 to study a final example of a reason for fasting.

Luke 2:36-38

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.^d She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

From this passage we see that fasting is also performed as part of a regular **devotion** to God. It was a consistent part of Anna’s spiritual walk with God, and it was closely tied to her prayer life.

^a Or *Barnabas ordained elders*; or *Barnabas had elders elected*

^d Or *widow for eighty-four years*

How should we fast?

At one point, it apparently became normal practice for people to look sad and let their appearance and personal grooming go so that others would know that they were fasting. It gave them a sense of personal righteousness. Jesus said this was wrong, and he made it clear how Christians should fast.

Matthew 6:16-18

¹⁶ “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Jesus makes it clear that fasting is a very personal thing, and that our audience for our fast is not other people but God himself. Fasting is between **us** and **God**, and the **reward** is a spiritual reward from God, not from men.

There is another passage regarding proper fasting, and this one is found in Isaiah 58:3-12. This is a powerful passage, and I encourage you to listen carefully.

Isaiah 58:3-12

³ Why have we fasted, and you see it not?

Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ “Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;

- your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
- ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'
- If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the **pointing of the finger**, and speaking wickedness,
- ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
- ¹¹ And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
- ¹² And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.

From this passage in Isaiah we learn that going through the motions of a fast when our heart is not right, is pointless to God. The next thought on our lesson sheet is this: When we fast, our heart must be **sincere**, with an expectation of **righteous change** and **healing** in our lives.

With regards to the details of fasting, the following are just my suggestions for you. These are not found specifically in God's word, and I share them with you only as personal guidance. If you have not fasted before, you should probably consider **planning** it ahead of time. You should take the time to carefully prepare for a fast so that you do not seriously hurt yourself. Here are some things to consider as you prepare to fast.

- Decide when you will fast, and for what **duration**. A shorter fast is recommended if you are just starting out – perhaps fasting through breakfast and lunch as we saw in Judges 20, and then eating again at supper in the evening. If you have concerns or health issues such as diabetes, you should consult a physician prior to planning your fast. We had a young man staying with us several years ago who decided to fast, and after four days we had to take him to the Emergency Department at the hospital.
- Don't schedule your fast on a day when a lot will be expected of your **body**, such as strenuous exercise, heavy lifting, or extensive walking.
- Don't schedule a fast on a day when those restrictions create an **inconvenience** for others. For example, you probably would not want to plan your fast for Thanksgiving when friends and family come together to share a meal.
- Eat **smaller** meals as you approach your scheduled fast. The day before your fast you may want to eat very small meals every two hours. Resist the urge to eat a **huge** meal before your fast begins, or immediately upon ending your fast.

As you fast, use the hunger pangs and the thirst that you feel to remind you **why** you are fasting. Fasting is usually accompanied with prayer. Set aside time when you can have meaningful prayer during your fast. Fasting can be a powerful experience that brings you closer to God and strengthens your devotion to him.

In recent years that has been a trend toward other kinds of fasting: For example, fasting from television or fasting from the Internet. Who knows, maybe even a Facebook fast would be a good thing. Though we will not find these specific types of fasting in the Bible, we do see many teachings where we are called to put aside those things that tend to dominate our focus and lead us away from our awareness of our dependence and deep need for God. God should always be first in our lives.

With this as a basis for understanding fasting in the life a Christian, think about your deepest spiritual concern right now, and how you might apply fasting and prayer in your life. God has always wanted to be first in our lives, and fasting is one way to remind us that we are wholly dependent on him, that we absolutely need him. My prayer is that you use fasting, as outlined throughout the Bible, to draw you closer to God as you walk with him.