

BIBLICAL FASTING

...for a closer walk with God



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Biblical Fasting...for a Closer Walk with God, David Beaty

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INTRODUCTION

Biblical fasting is an important, though often neglected, spiritual discipline that can help us walk more closely with God. Fasting was practiced by God's people in both Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Moses, King David, Elijah, Esther, and Daniel fasted. In the New Testament, we read of Jesus' forty-day fast and of fasting by church leaders like the apostle Paul (Acts 13:1-2, 14:23). Jesus taught about fasting and assumed that his followers would fast (Matthew 6:16-18, 9:14-15). Throughout church history, Christian leaders like Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Spurgeon practiced fasting. So why is it relatively neglected by Christians today?

Some Christians are uncertain about fasting because they view it as a practice associated with legalism. Some years ago, I was gathered with several Christian leaders when the subject turned to fasting. To my surprise, few of these pastors seemed familiar with fasting or practiced it as a spiritual discipline. "Isn't that asceticism?" one asked. "And didn't the apostle Paul warn about that?"

The apostle Paul did warn about those who would pervert the gospel message by insisting on legalistic regulations to attain a right standing with God. He wrote:

Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and

worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head. (Colossians 2:16-19a)

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul is warning about the false teachers who promoted "self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body (Colossians 2:23)" in their attempt to lead people away from "the Head"—Jesus Christ. No religious practices or sacrifices can reconcile a person to God. Only Jesus can do that, as Paul emphasized in Colossians 1:19-20:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Jesus has done all that can be done to secure our reconciliation with God. Spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible study, or fasting can never improve upon that. Yet some Christians mistakenly view fasting as an effort to reach God, rather than a response by those who have been reached to walk more closely with him.

Other Christians disregard fasting because they see it as a practice embraced by other religions. For example, Muslims are well-known for their practice of fasting during Ramadan. In his well-known book, *Celebration of Discipline*, author Richard Foster writes, "Fasting, of course, is not an exclusively Christian discipline; all the major religions of the world recognize its merit."¹ But the fact that various religions practice fasting is no reason for Christians to neglect it. Other religions also practice prayer and giving, but we would never neglect those.

¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, revised ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 48.

American Christians may neglect fasting because we live in a culture of such abundance. Anything less than three meals a day seems unhealthy! Things that were considered luxuries for many generations are now considered necessities for us.

But in neglecting the practice of biblical fasting, we are missing out on a spiritual discipline that can enrich our prayer lives and embolden our faith. Fasting can help us deny the desires of our flesh and better focus our devotion on the Lord. Biblical fasting can help free us from things that have an inordinate and inappropriate hold upon our lives so that we can live more fully for the glory of God.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL FASTING?

Biblical fasting is abstaining from food or other pleasure in order to give focused time to seeking God and his will for our lives or the lives of others.

Abstaining from food, but not from liquids, might be considered a "normal fast." In his book, *God's Chosen Fast*, Arthur Wallis describes three types of fasts. The "normal fast" is the type of fast practiced by Jesus during his forty days and nights in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2, Luke 4:2). Scripture tells us that Jesus ate nothing, but does not mention his going without water. It tells us that Christ was hungry after the forty days, but does not mention thirst. So we assume that Jesus fasted food only, and not water.

A "partial fast" might be described as a modified fast or a restricted diet. This is the type of fast practiced by the Old Testament hero, Daniel. Daniel's diet was restricted to vegetables and water on one occasion (Daniel 1:12). Later, he fasted for three weeks without "delicacies," meat, or wine (Daniel 10:3).

An "absolute fast" is going without food and water. This type of fast was practiced by Esther and the Jews when they faced possible extermination (Esther 4:16) and by the apostle Paul (formerly Saul) immediately after his conversion (Acts 9:9). Both Moses and the prophet Elijah went forty days without food or drink (Exodus 34:28, 1 Kings 19:8), but these were obviously cases of supernatural sustenance by God, since no human could live without water for so long. In *God's Chosen Fast*, Arthur Wallis gives appropriate caution about an absolute fast.

A fourth type of fasting might be considered an "alternative fast," defined as abstaining from some type of pleasure you would normally enjoy. When King Darius was distressed by Daniel's

predicament in the den of lions, "the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting: no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him" (Daniel 6:18). We don't know what "diversions" were kept from the king, and his experience hardly provides a biblical model for believers. However, the idea of abstaining from pleasure for a spiritual purpose finds support in Jesus' call for self-denial and sacrifice (Luke 9:23, 14:33). An alternative fast might be especially helpful for those who cannot participate in other types of fasting. Children, youth, expectant mothers, diabetics, and others who need a regular diet might benefit from this type of fast. Abstaining from desserts, bread, or favorite foods might be sacrificial for some. An entertainment or social media fast for several days might be an even greater sacrifice!

“Diets are about losing weight so we can look nicer, feel better and live longer; fasting is about growing closer to God.

Keith Drury
Soul Shaper, p. 12”

WHY FAST?

Whatever type of fasting we practice, the key is to abstain from that food or pleasure **in order to give focused time to seeking God and his will for our lives or the lives of others.** Seeking God and his will must be central to our fasting.

“The reward we are to seek from the Father in fasting is not first or mainly the gifts of God, but God himself.

John Piper
A Hunger for God, p. 74”

Biblical fasting should not be about losing weight or even developing personal discipline, but about our relationship with God and our desire to see his purposes fulfilled in our lives and the lives of others. In Scripture, people sought God with fasting for a variety of reasons, but all were related to gaining a closer relationship with God and being more aligned with his will and purposes. For example:

- Moses fasted when alone with God, receiving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28).
- The people of Israel fasted for guidance and success in battle (Judges 20:26-27).
- The Israelites fasted in repentance for their idolatry (1 Samuel 7:6).
- Ezra proclaimed a fast so God's people could humble themselves and seek his protection (Ezra 8:21-23).

- Nehemiah fasted to ask God's forgiveness for the sins of his nation and to seek Jerusalem's restoration (Nehemiah 1:4-11).
- Esther and the Jews fasted to be spared from destruction (Esther 4:15-16).
- Daniel fasted to repent for the sins of his nation and to seek God's mercy for his people (Daniel 9:3-19).
- Joel called his people to fast, repent, and return to God in order to be spared from judgment and destruction (Joel 2:12-17).
- At Jonah's preaching, the people of Nineveh fasted in repentance for sin in order to avoid destruction (Jonah 3:4-10).
- Jesus fasted at the beginning of his public ministry. While in the wilderness, he overcame Satan's temptations and returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-14).
- The apostle Paul fasted for three days immediately after his conversion. Apparently, this was a time of preparation for his ministry (Acts 9:9).
- Early church leaders fasted as they worshiped God and sought his guidance (Acts 13:1-2).
- Paul and Barnabas fasted as they appointed elders, committing them to the Lord (Acts 14:23).

From these examples, we see that fasting was done for separation to God and his purposes, repentance, guidance, and empowering for ministry. Fasting was a way for God's people to humble themselves before him and receive his mercy, power, and direction.

But should Christians practice fasting today? Jesus makes it clear that we should. In his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses three spiritual practices: giving, praying, and fasting. Jesus begins his teaching on each spiritual practice with the words, "When you..." ("When you give to the needy...", "When you pray...", "When you fast...") Jesus' main concern is with our motives in these practices. He calls us to avoid spiritual pride and to practice spirituality for God's eyes rather than to impress others. And while Jesus gives necessary cautions about giving, praying, and fasting, he still assumes that his followers *will* give, pray, and fast (Matthew 6:1-18).

“Jesus takes it for granted that his disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
The Cost of Discipleship, p. 188”

In Matthew 9:14, we read that Jesus was questioned by disciples of John the Baptist. Apparently, John's disciples practiced fasting, and were concerned that Jesus' disciples did not. Jesus' reply teaches us much about who he is and the new purpose for which Christians are called to fast.

And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a

piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved" (verses 15-17).

Jesus identifies himself as the bridegroom, the long-awaited Messiah and Savior of God's people. It would not be appropriate to fast with the bridegroom at hand. The time when he was present was to be a time of rejoicing and recognition that God was in their midst. As author John Piper writes, "The absence of fasting in the band of disciples was a witness to the presence of God in their midst."² But Jesus would soon go away. He would be crucified, raised from the dead, and would ascend to heaven. Then his followers would fast. But their fasting would not be in the "old wineskins" of religious tradition or the self-righteousness that was showcased by the hypocritical Pharisees. A new relationship with God would call for a new fasting. As John Piper writes, "What's new about Christian fasting is that it rests on all the finished work of the Bridegroom."³ As believers, we do not fast in order to avert God's judgment for our sins. Christ has borne our judgment. We don't fast to gain God's favor. Jesus has reconciled us to God. Our fasting is done in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit as we seek to be more fully aligned with God's will and purposes. We fast in eagerness to find and fulfill our roles in the coming of God's kingdom on earth.

² John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 38.

³ Piper, 43.

HOW SHOULD WE FAST?

Our fasting should be done:

- **WITH RIGHT MOTIVES.** The emphasis of Jesus in his teaching about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount is primarily with our motives.

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)

Jesus calls us to avoid fasting out of religious pride. The only reward for fasting done to impress others is any fleeting ego-gratification we might experience. But when we fast for God's honor—seeking to know him better, love him more, and do his will—he will reward us.

- **WITH A CLEAR PURPOSE.** Fasting for no reason in particular is like praying for no reason in particular. Have a clear purpose for fasting. Your purpose might be to have greater love for the Lord. You might fast for guidance in a big decision. You may feel drawn to fast for the salvation of a family member or friend. You might join others in your church in fasting and praying about a major church decision or ministry initiative. Fasting with a clear purpose helps us to fast in faith, trusting that God will be at work in the situation we have brought to him.

- WITH FOCUSED TIME AND ATTENTION. Fast when you can devote time to Bible reading and prayer. Don't try to fast during a busy day at work or home. Your fast will be far more meaningful if you can allow your hunger to drive you to feed on God's Word, denying your flesh and finding fulfillment in God's presence by worship and prayer.
- WITH CONCERN FOR THE POOR. Isaiah chapter 58 is one of the most important passages of Scripture on the subject of fasting. Much of the chapter is a rebuke to God's people for their wrong attitudes and actions in fasting. To their question: "Why have we fasted, and you see it not?" God answers:
 - "You seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers." (v. 3)
 - "You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist." (v. 4)

God then calls his people to:

- "...loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke." (v. 6)
- "...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." (v. 7)
- "...take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness." (v. 9)
- "...pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted." (v. 10)

Clearly, fasting with right motives should cause us to consider the poor and those who are unjustly treated. Right fasting calls us to examine any of our unjust actions that may lead to the oppression or abuse of others. And our hunger pangs when fasting should stir us to greater compassion for those who have no choice but to live with physical hunger.

- **WITH OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD.** The prophet Isaiah, having rebuked God's people for their abuse of the poor, then rebukes them for their disregard of God's command about the Sabbath day. He calls them to "turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day ... not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly"(Isaiah 58:13).

Isaiah's point is that right fasting must be joined with a right heart attitude toward God's commands. Our fasting cannot be effective if we are living in willful defiance of God's Word. Fasting will not bring us closer to God if we are grieving the Holy Spirit. However, when our motives are right and our lives are submitted to God's Word, we can expect remarkable benefits from fasting.

BENEFITS OF BIBLICAL FASTING

Fasting should not be seen as a discipline that will help God love us more or guarantee the effectiveness of our prayers. We must always rest in the full sufficiency of what Jesus has secured for us on the cross. We cannot make ourselves more acceptable to God by our spiritual practices. We can only rejoice in the unfathomable gift of his salvation, provided to us through Jesus Christ. But when we have received Christ's salvation and have his Spirit dwelling within us, we will want to respond to God's love with a life of seeking. At times, that seeking may involve some form of fasting. And when properly done, biblical fasting can bring wonderful benefits, including:

- **GREATER LOVE FOR GOD.** When our fasting is focused on seeking God, we have his wonderful promise that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6). And there is no greater reward than growing to know him better and love him more. As Donald Whitney writes, "Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God."⁴
- **GREATER HUMILITY.** During Daniel's fast, the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them" (Daniel 10:12). Fasting is a way to humble ourselves before the Lord. When we abstain from food, we often feel weak physically. But this self-denying weakness is one way to expose our pride and express our complete dependence on our God, who "opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

⁴ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 176.

However, we must remember that fasting itself does not bring about humility. Jesus told about an arrogant, self-righteous Pharisee who boasted in prayer that he fasted twice a week. This man's fasting was merely a way to exalt himself in comparison to others (Luke 18:12-14). Jesus' story should serve as a warning that even good things, like giving, praying, and fasting, can be harmful if they cause us to exalt ourselves and look down on others.

“Fasting, then, is a divine corrective to the pride of the human heart. It is a discipline of the body with a tendency to humble the soul.

Arthur Wallis
God's Chosen Fast, p. 45

- **STRENGTHENING OUR PRAYER LIVES.** Donald Whitney writes regarding fasting:

“The most important aspect of this discipline is its influence on prayer. You’ll notice that in one way or another, all the other biblical purposes of fasting relate to prayer. Fasting is one of the best friends we can introduce to our prayer life.”⁵

As Whitney notes, fasting is connected with praying throughout Scripture. The words in Acts chapter 13:3: “Then after fasting and praying...” imply the two are inseparable. And while fasting is not a way to improve our prayers, it is a way for us to be more focused and deliberate in our prayers. It may simply be that fasting strengthens our prayer lives by strengthening our faith.

⁵ Whitney, 166.

“There’s something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications.

Donald S. Whitney
Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life,

p. 165”

- **DISCERNING GOD’S GUIDANCE.** One of the benefits of a God-approved fast described in Isaiah 58 is that of guidance: “And the Lord will guide you continually” (verse 11). It was while early church leaders “were worshiping the Lord and fasting” that the Holy Spirit gave direction that would shape the missions ministry of the apostle Paul and his friend, Barnabas (Acts 13:2). If you are facing a big decision, consider fasting as a way to humble yourself before the Lord and seek his guidance.

- **GOD’S FORGIVENESS AND BLESSING UPON OUR NATION.** Some of the fasts recorded in the Old Testament were corporate fasts in which people were seeking God’s mercy for their nation. Fasting was sometimes an expression of their repentance and their need for God’s deliverance from a threatening situation. Since fasting was a recognized means of self-humbling, it is possible that the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 assumed fasting by God’s people: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

- **SPIRITUAL POWER.** At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness, where he fasted and was tempted by Satan (Matthew 4:1-3, Luke 4:1-2). After overcoming every temptation from the devil, “Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee” (Luke 4:14). The fact that Jesus began his earthly ministry with a season of fasting should be enough to convince us of the importance of fasting as we seek to live as his followers. The fact that he overcame

temptation when fasting and “returned in the power of the Spirit” reveals a connection between biblical fasting and spiritual power.

“Fasting heightens our complete dependence upon God and forces us to draw on Him and His power, and to believe fully in His strength.

Sam Storms
Pleasures Evermore, p. 172

- **STRENGTH TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION.** We all live with tension between doing God’s will and fulfilling the desires of our flesh. The apostle Paul understood this conflict, and pointed to the need to have our bodily desires subjected to the desires of the Holy Spirit when he wrote, “But I discipline my body and keep it under control” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Fasting can be a powerful way to say *no* to the desires of the body while saying *yes* to a deeper devotion to God and his will. Author Keith Drury writes:

Another purpose is to fast as a means of escape from sensuality. The connection between our inability to control our appetites for food and our appetites for sex has long been observed. The discipline we gain by fasting from food can have a spillover effect into other areas of life.⁶

⁶ Keith Drury, *Soul Shaper* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013), 16.

“More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us.”
Richard J. Foster
Celebration of Discipline, p. 55

If you find yourself facing a temptation that seems too difficult to overcome, consider a period of fasting and prayer, while following Jesus’ example of quoting Scripture in the face of temptation.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR FASTING

- **BEGIN** with a short period of time. Don't attempt your first fast for a period of more than three days. If you have never fasted, a one-day fast may seem both difficult and sacrificial! A fast of just one meal that you would normally eat can be meaningful if you devote that time to Scripture and prayer.
- **IF YOU** fast for a full day or more, break your fast slowly. Don't gorge yourself on a large meal to satisfy your hunger. Don't overload yourself on sugar or caffeine. Eat in moderation. You will probably discover a new appreciation for food.
- **FAST** when you can devote significant time to fellowship with God. Let your hunger drive you to feeding upon God's Word and drawing upon his strength and power.
- **CONSIDER** using the money you would normally spend on food to help the poor. Remember the teaching of Isaiah chapter 58.
- **CONSIDER** an "alternative fast" if you cannot miss a meal for health reasons. Think about what would be sacrificial for you. Would going without desserts or bread or caffeine provide a meaningful fast? What about several days without television, social media, or any other "diversion" you normally enjoy? Don't view such a sacrifice as a punishment to be endured, but as freeing you to enjoy more time in fellowship with the Lord.

“Fasting must forever center on God.
Richard J. Foster
Celebration of Discipline, p. 54”

CONCLUSION

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that has been practiced by God’s people throughout history. Countless Christians today would attest to the importance of fasting when seeking guidance, strength to overcome temptation, or help in trusting God to answer prayer. But the greatest benefit of biblical fasting is a closer walk with God. Fasting is most effective when we put aside the many things that compete for our time and attention and focus on God himself.

And in these times of seeking the Lord, he changes us. Our hunger for food can help us find greater richness in God’s Word. Our freedom from media can help us be more God-focused and trusting when we pray. Our self-denial can help us renew our devotion to God’s will and ways, and we can grow toward fulfilling the commandment that Jesus called “the great and first commandment”: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37-38).

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