

Fasting Explained

Definition of Fasting

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(Quoted from "Fasting Journal" by Jentezen Franklin)

There are different kinds of fasts. There are private fasts that you do privately, and the Bible also describes "called fasts"--when unusual times and situations call for unusual measurements and supernatural responses from God. Here at Free Chapel we have found that the greatest time to fast is at the beginning of the year. If you give God time at the beginning of the year, He will do amazing things in your life.

There are three things you must ask yourself before you fast. Number one, what are the motives behind the fast? I appreciate the fact that you'll lose weight if you fast, but that cannot be your motive. I appreciate the fact that a fast has been proven medically to be healthy for you because it detoxifies your body, cleanses you, and causes your digestive tract to be healthier, but that is not what a fast is really all about. So, the first question you need to ask yourself is: What is my motive behind this fast? Why am I doing this? Am I doing this so I can fit back into my clothes after the Christmas holidays? That will be a side benefit, but that shouldn't be the main reason. Second, you must ask: What are the specific needs I am fasting for? When people fasted in the Bible, they fasted for a specific need. Sometimes they were in trouble, sometimes it was for finances, and other times they were fasting for their children or for help or for direction. I want you to get in your mind the specific reasons for which you are fasting. If God came down and asked you to list the tree top things you want him to do in your life and in your family, you should know those reasons and keep them before you during the time you fast.

The third question you should ask is: Am I determined to minister unto the Lord during my fast? Acts 13:2 tells us that the prophets and teachers at the church in Antioch "ministered to the Lord and fasted." Fasting is a time we set aside for ministering to the Lord; it is not about us getting what we can get from God all the time. God will move when we fast, but it should be a time when our heart is crying out, "I want to draw closer to You; my heart cries for You."

The way you approach your fast is extremely important. If you are not serious about it, then you won't get real serious results. The more serious you are about the fast, the more serious God will respond. If you are frivolous or lighthearted about it—"Well, I'll fast, but I don't really feel like it--" that's not going to work. Your heart has to be in the fast, and when your heart is in it, there will come a fellowship with God like you have never known before.

There is an amazing Scripture verse in Zechariah 7:5: "Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?'" This is phenomenal. For seventy years the people had declared a certain time every year when they would fast to God. After fasting in this way for seventy years, God asked the question, "Are you fasting for Me?"

Did you know that it is possible to go on a fast and have so many personal motives and agendas that you're not even fasting unto God—you are fasting for your own wants and desires? God told the people in Zechariah's day, "You have been doing this every year at the same time for seventy years, but I want to know if anybody is hungering for Me and My kingdom, for My agenda and purpose and plan in the earth."

In the New Testament, God told the Philippian church to beware of setting their minds on "earthly things," and thus allowing their belly to become their god. (See Philippians 3:18-19.) He warned the Corinthians in this way: "And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play'" (I Cor. 10:7). I refuse to let my belly become my god. Fasting brings the flesh off of the throne. "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection" (I Cor. 9:27). When we fast, we submit our bodies to God and say, "Cleanse this body, and deal with the habits and other things that are earthly. Get this nicotine out of me; get this lust out of me. I'm presenting this flesh to You. I know the flesh will always be here, but I'm letting it know that Jesus is Lord in this temple." Every time I fast, I get closer to God. Every time you fast, you will get closer to God. There is not greater reward than HIM.

A Biblical Study on Fasting

"And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: And I prayed unto the Lord God, and made my confession... " Daniel 9:34

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I. Is there a place for fasting in New Testament times?

A. Fasting was not required of the disciples of Jesus.

Matthew 9:14 (Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33) "Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but thy disciples fast not?"

B. But Jesus spoke of a day when there would be a place for fasting.

Matthew 6:16-18 (Not "if," but "when ye fast ...") "Moreover when ye fast, ...But thou, when thou fastest..."

Matthew 9:14-15 (Luke 5:34-35) "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."

II. What guidelines are set forth in scripture concerning fasting?

A. It is to be done in a manner of humility and secrecy.

Matthew 6:16-18 "Moreover when ye 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 thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret ..."

Luke 18:9-14 "And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray. . . The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are . . . I fast twice in the week, I give tithes . . . And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to this house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

B. Fasting is closely related to prayer and reading of the Word.

I Samuel 1:6-8, 17-18, etc. "And her adversary . . . provoked her; therefore she wept, and did not eat. Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? ... Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him . . ."

Nehemiah 1:4 ". . . when I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven."

Nehemiah 9: 1-3 ". . . the children of Israel were assembled with fasting . . . and stood and confessed their sins . . . and read in the book of the law of the Lord their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the Lord their God."

Daniel 9:3, 20 "And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplication, with fasting . . . and while I was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication . . ."

Joel 2:12 ". . . turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning."

Jonah 3:8, etc. "For word came unto the king ... and he caused it to be proclaimed and published ... saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God ... Who can tell if God will ... turn away from his fierce anger ... And God saw ..."

Luke 2:37 "And she was a widow of about 44 years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day."

Acts 9:9, 11 "And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink."

Acts 10:30 "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing."

Acts 13:2 "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said . . ."

Acts 14:23 "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord . . ."

I Corinthians 7:5 ". . . that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer . . ."

C. A fast may be either absolute or partial.

1. Examples of absolute (complete) fasts:

Deuteronomy 9:9, 18 ". . . 40 nights, I neither did eat bread nor drink water."

Ezra 10:6 "Ezra. . . did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned . . ."

Esther 4:16 "Go, gather together all the Jews . . . and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day . . ."

Acts 9:9 ". . . and neither did eat nor drink"

Acts 27:33 ". . . This is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing."

2. Examples of partial fasts (abstinence from certain foods only):

I Kings chapter 17

Daniel 10:3 "I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled."

D. There is a place for both the corporate (group) and the individual (personal) fast.

1. Examples of corporate fasts:

I Samuel 7:5-6 "And Samuel said, Gather all Israel . . . and they gathered . . . and fasted . . ."

II Chronicles 20:34

Ezra 8:21-23 "Then I proclaimed a fast . . . So we fasted and besought our God . . ."

Nehemiah 9:1-3 ". . . the children of Israel were assembled with fasting . . ."

Joel 2:15-16 "... sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly; gather the people ..."

Jonah 3:5-10 "the people ... proclaimed a fast ... from the greatest of them even to the least"

Acts 27:33-37

2. Examples of the individual fast:

II Samuel 12:15-16, 22-23 "... and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth."

I Kings 21:27-29 "When Ahab heard those words, he... fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly."

Psalms 35:13 "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting ..."

Daniel 9:3 "And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer ... with fasting ..."

Luke 2:36-37 "And there was one Anna, a prophetess ... a widow of about 44 years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day."

Acts 9:9 " ... and neither did eat nor drink."

III. Fasting in itself is of no spiritual value (Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 14:12; I Corinthians 8:8) – "that which is of the flesh is flesh," John 3:6 – but it is the attitude of a heart sincerely seeking Him to which God responds with blessing.

Joel 2:12, 13 "Rend your heart, and not your garments ..."

Romans 14:6, 17

I Corinthians 15:50

A. Only fasting that is done with the right motive, that of glorifying God, can be pleasing in His sight.

Isaiah chapter 58 "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? ... Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure ... ye fast for strife and debate ... ye shall not fast as ye do this day ... Is it such a fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands ... to undo the heavy burdens ... to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him ..."

Zechariah 7:5-6 "... When ye fasted and mourned ... those 70 years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?"

Matthew 6:16-18 "The hypocrites ... disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast."

Luke 18:9-14 "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I am not as other men are ... I fast twice in the week ..."

B. The same Bible that teaches abstaining from foods (as God leads) also warns us against testing the Lord (Matthew 4:7).

1. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:9), and we are to care for them as such (v. 20).
2. It may indeed be profitable for a season for us to exercise severe discipline, to "keep under my body, and bring it into subjection" (I Corinthians 9 :27), to be "temperate in all things" (I Corinthians 9 :25), but we must also realize that "that which is flesh is flesh," and we cannot produce spiritual results – however sincere our intentions – from that which is purely flesh.
3. To deny the flesh of its natural desires may cause us to be more "in tune" to hear the voice of the Lord (Deuteronomy 9:18, 25, etc.), but it also places us in a realm more easily prone to the attack of the enemy. It was when Jesus had been fasting for 40 days that He was faced with the greatest Satanic attack (Matthew 4:1-3; Luke 4:1-2).

C. Scripture warns that in the last days there will be many "forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats," etc. (I Timothy 4:1-3). We are to test the spirits, to see whether they be of God (I John 4:1).

IV. How long should I fast?

A. Bible personalities fasted and sought God diligently until they obtained from God what they desired (see the examples of Hannah, I Samuel 1:6-8, 17-18; and Paul, Acts 9:9,17-19) – or until the Lord made it evident that what they requested simply would not be obtained (as in the case of David, II Samuel 12:15-23).

B. The length of a fast may vary.

1. One night.

Daniel 6:18

2. One day.

I Samuel 7:6
II Samuel 1:12; 3:35
Judges 20:26

3. Three days and three nights.

Esther 4:16
Acts 9:9, 17-19

4. Seven days.

I Samuel 31:13
II Samuel 12:16-23

5. Fourteen days.

Acts 27:33-34

6. Twenty-one days.

Daniel 10:3-13

7. Forty days.

a. Moses (at two different times).

Exodus 24:18; 34:28
Deuteronomy 9:9, 18, 25-29; 10:10

b. Elijah.

I Kings 19:8

c. Jesus.

Matthew 4:2 (Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2)

V. When should I fast?

Many occasions for fasting are recorded in scripture.

A. The ordination of elders and commissioning of apostles to ministry.

Acts 13:3 "And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."

Acts 14:23 "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord..."

B. Intercession for the people of God.

Exodus 24:18
Deuteronomy 9:8-9, 12-20, 23-27
Ezra 10:6
Daniel 9:3-4
Joel 2:12-14, 17-18
Jonah 3:5-10

C. Humbling and chastening of oneself.

I Kings 21:27-29 "... Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me?"

Psalms 35:13 "... I humbled myself with fasting ..."

Psalms 69:10 "I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting ..."

D. Seeking the Lord and His way.

Judges 20:26-28, etc. "Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until evening, and ... inquired of the Lord ... (whether to) go out to battle ... And the Lord said, Go up ..."

II Chronicles 20:3 "And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah."

Ezra 8:21-23 "Then I proclaimed a fast ... that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to ask the king ... to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our god is upon all them for good that seek him ... So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us."

E. Repentance and confession of sin.

I Samuel 7:6

I Kings 21:27-29

Ezra 10:6 "... he ate no bread, nor drank water: for he mourned because of the transgression ..."

Nehemiah 1:4-7, etc. "...when I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed..."

Nehemiah 9:1-3 "... the children of Israel were assembled with fasting ... and stood and confessed their sins ... one fourth part of the day ... they confessed ..."

Jeremiah 36:6-10

Daniel 9:3-5, 20 "... confessing my sin and the sin of my people ..."

Jonah 3:5-10

F. Receiving healing.

I Samuel 1:5-11, 18-20
II Samuel 12:15-16, 22-23
Isaiah 58:8
Acts 9:9, 17-19

G. Petitioning God to withhold His hand in judgment.

Deuteronomy 9:18, 25 "And I fell down before the Lord ... I did neither eat bread, nor drink water, because of all your sins ... because the Lord had said he would destroy you."

Isaiah 58:9

H. Preparation to receive word from God.

Deuteronomy 9:18, 25
Isaiah 58:9

I. Spiritual deliverance.

Isaiah 58:6 "Is not this the fast that I have chose? To loose the bands ... to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?"

Mark 9:29 (Matthew 17:21) "And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting."

J. Seeking assistance in time of fear.

II Chronicles 20:3 "And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast ..."

K. Mourning another's death (II Samuel 1:12; 3:35); out of concern for another's safety (Daniel 6:18); or when faced with threats on one's own life (Esther 4:3; 9:1-3).

L. Seeking protection.

Ezra 8:21-23

M. Lacking material provision; in need.

II Corinthians 11:27 "... in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often ..."

VI. Fasting is an extremely valuable and important facet of the Christian life; but it is not an infallible means of "getting what we want" from God. (Jeremiah 14:12 "When they fast, I will not hear their cry ...") Example: II Samuel 12:15-23 (David's son died anyway.) Obedience is better than sacrifice (I Samuel 15:22).