

A Practical Guide for Fasting



BIBLICAL FASTING GUIDE

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An Introduction to Fasting



PROLOGUE

The goal of fasting is to draw nearer to God. Biblical fasting always has to do with eliminating distractions for a spiritual purpose; it hits the reset button of our soul and renews us from the inside out. It also enables us to celebrate the goodness and mercy of God and prepares our hearts for all the good things God desires to bring into our lives.

Remember, your personal fast should present a level of challenge, but it is very important to know your body, your options, and, most importantly, to seek God in prayer and follow what the Holy Spirit leads you to do.

SECTION 1

WHAT IS FASTING

Hunger for God

Fasting is a spiritual discipline. Simply put, it means not eating. Instead of using mealtime for food, you use it to spend time with God. Some fasts last for one meal, one day, multiple days, or even weeks. Fasting may begin at sunrise and end at sunset or extend 24 hours per day. It is a sacrifice made to spend time with God. Over time, the sacrifice has extended to more than just food. There are many ways and reasons to fast, but the whole purpose is to set aside the time you would usually spend eating, or doing what you are giving up, and focus that time on God instead. Spend time praying, reading the Bible, and worshiping God.

When you're fasting, you're likely to feel hunger pangs. Allow those to serve as reminders that you are hungry to know Jesus and that you rely on him for every need. When you pray, ask the Holy Spirit to deepen your understanding and experience of Jesus in everyday life. You might pray something like, "Father, you are my daily bread. You are my

comforter, my redeemer, my provider. My life is hidden in Christ. What more do I need?"

Christians often focus their mind on one particular idea during a fast, such as the crucifixion during Easter. During this holiday season, as you pray and fast, you may choose to meditate on the humility of Christ's birth.



A normal, biblical fast is to avoid food, but not water. You have a great deal of freedom, however, as you fast. Some people avoid everything but water. Others focus solely on not eating and instead drink whatever they want.

Whatever your plan, make sure to consult with your doctor to ensure you are medically fit enough for a fast, and get tips from your doctor on how to fast safely. There are a number of reasons a traditional fast may not be a viable option for you. These reasons range from stage of life to pregnancy to medical conditions to eating disorders and everything in between. Most people are capable of fasting without compromising their health, but if that's not the case for you, don't be discouraged! You can fast in other ways. One option is to eat less than normal rather than not at all. You could fast from coffee or give up the foods you enjoy most, eating only simple, plain foods. This type of fasting is commonly called a "Daniel Fast," referring to the story of

Daniel in the Old Testament when he and his friends abstained from eating meat and consumed only vegetables and water (see Daniel 1:12).

In place of fasting from food, you could also consider abstaining from certain activities, like entertainment or a particular hobby, for the given time. People have fasted from television, Facebook, music, golf—all sorts of things. The idea is to use the time you would normally spend on the activities you love to focus on the Lord instead, praying, reading the Bible, and worshipping God.



Okay, so you're told you should fast, that it's a good spiritual discipline, and that it doesn't necessarily require food. But fasting does emphasize food and is preferable if you are physically able to abstain from eating. Why?

There is a mystery to fasting and part of the reason we do it as Christians is simply because God wants us to. Jesus expects his disciples to fast (Matthew 6:16) and obeying God, even when it seems weird, is always a good idea.

The physical implication of fasting is that it directly impacts one of our most basic needs as humans. God has built us into a physical world with physical needs, and the physical world directly impacts the spiritual. By staying away from

food and focusing our attention on God, we shut our bodies up, strengthen our soul in God, and put into action our dependence on him. He provides us with life. Food is the way he chooses to do so, but he is the source and can very well sustain us without food, water, or any of the physical necessities of life.

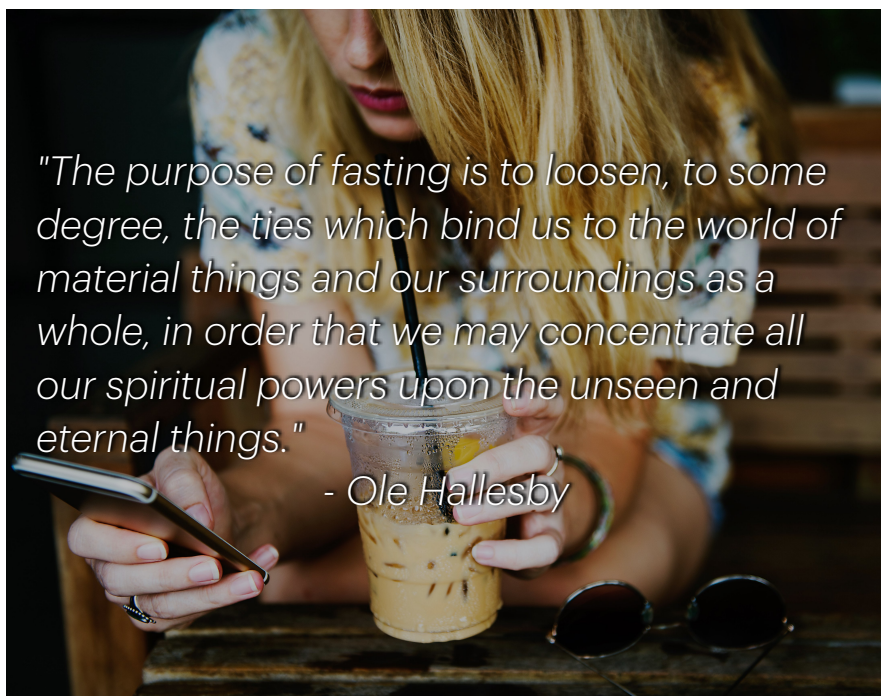
We do not discount the value of the body or consider the physical world bad. Fasting serves many purposes, one of which is to remind our minds, spirits, and bodies who and what we worship: God himself.



You can fast with other believers, as well. If it will help you overcome any fear you might have of fasting, ask another believer to join you. Biblically, there are instances of corporate fasting where entire nations fasted together (Esther 4, Ezra 8). So feel free to fast together and pray for one another. We usually do a church-wide fast the beginning of every year that will lend itself to this opportunity.

SECTION 2

THE PURPOSE OF FASTING



"The purpose of fasting is to loosen, to some degree, the ties which bind us to the world of material things and our surroundings as a whole, in order that we may concentrate all our spiritual powers upon the unseen and eternal things."

- Ole Hallesby

The purpose of fasting is ultimately God himself. There are many reasons to undertake a fast, but the bottom line for them all is to align your heart directly with him. Think of that

as the big picture. The small picture, the immediate purpose for a fast, can vary.

So the first step for any kind of fast is to declare our immediate purpose. Fasting can't be done casually, because there isn't any spiritual benefit in simply not eating. Going through the motions just makes us hungry, but genuine, purposeful fasting is a powerful discipline for the disciple of Jesus and can play a part in literally transforming your life.

To help us define a godly purpose for fasting, Donald Whitney gives us these 10 reasons¹:

1. To strengthen prayer,
2. To seek God's guidance,
3. To express grief,
4. To seek deliverance or protection,
5. To express repentance and return to God,
6. To humble oneself before God,
7. To express concern for the work of God,
8. To minister to the needs of others,
9. To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God,
10. To express love and worship to God.

¹ From the book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Don Whitney (chap. 9, NavPress, 1991).

Throughout the Bible, we see people fast for a variety of reasons:

1. To be like Jesus ([Matthew 4:1-17](#); [Luke 4:1-13](#)),
2. To obtain spiritual purity ([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 influence God ([2 Samuel 12:16-23](#)),
5. To mourn for the dead ([1 Samuel 31:13](#); [2 Samuel 1:12](#)),
6. To request God's help in times of crisis and calamity ([Ezra 8:21-23](#); [Nehemiah 1:4-11](#)),
7. To strengthen prayer ([Matthew 17:21](#); [Mark 9:17-29](#); [Acts 10:30](#); [1 Corinthians 7:5](#)).

None of these purposes amounts to twisting God's arm to do what we want. Who can do that? God is not a genie who will grant us whatever we wish. He is a good father who is working out his sovereign will. Our reasons for fasting are for our own humility. By denying ourselves for a time, we provoke ourselves to rely more on God Almighty. It isn't about changing God; it's about changing us.

In fasting:

1. We pray more intently,
2. We become more receptive to God's guidance,

3. We lean more on Scripture to hear his voice,
4. We demonstrate our grief and honest repentance,
5. We physically declare that we need God to survive,
6. We yearn to sense spiritual reality more than the physical world,
7. We prepare to love others better than ourselves.

Lastly, fasting helps us to remember the true source of our utmost joy. Most people would agree that food is a good thing. If you're fasting from something else, such as a hobby or technology or entertainment, those can also be good things. All good things come from God, but the human heart is inclined to worship God's gifts rather than God himself. Fasting helps our hearts to look past the good gift to the good God, who blesses us despite ourselves.

Even if fasting makes sense, you may not feel like you need it right now. But think of fasting as similar to praise and worship. Oftentimes joy overflows in songs of praise, but more often singing leads us into joy. We sing first and that brings us to a place of thankfulness and joy. Likewise, when our souls overflow with godly emotions and repentance, we may be led to fasting, but far more often we need to choose to fast in order to be humbled and to fight our pride by rejecting the ways we so often cope with our feelings. It's the proactive approach.

SECTION 3

WHAT FASTING IS NOT

It's not about selfish gain

Fasting is an awesome gift. And like all awesome gifts, it can be misconstrued in a way that leaves us bitterly disappointed. Now that we know what fasting is, let's consider what it is not.



Fasting is not a manipulation tactic or a way to earn points with God. Fasting doesn't make you more holy or acceptable to God. Christ Jesus alone has made us holy. Instead, by practicing a fast and other spiritual disciplines, we are asking for grace just like we did when we prayed for salvation. We didn't save ourselves. We received God's gift to us. So in fasting, we don't transform ourselves; we receive the grace that transforms us (note 1 Peter 1:13-14).



Fasting is not an endurance test, and like anything else can be done in pride for the praise of men (Luke 18:9-14). Self-righteousness is a signpost on the road to hell. That's the reason we must clarify our purpose for fasting—to avoid ego-tripping. Jesus warned us not to make our fasting a public service announcement in order to get attention (see Matthew 6:16-17). If you're tempted to look at your contrite spirituality and get smug about fasting, remember even the ability to fast is yours by grace alone, and that without Jesus, you couldn't even do that much (John 15:5).



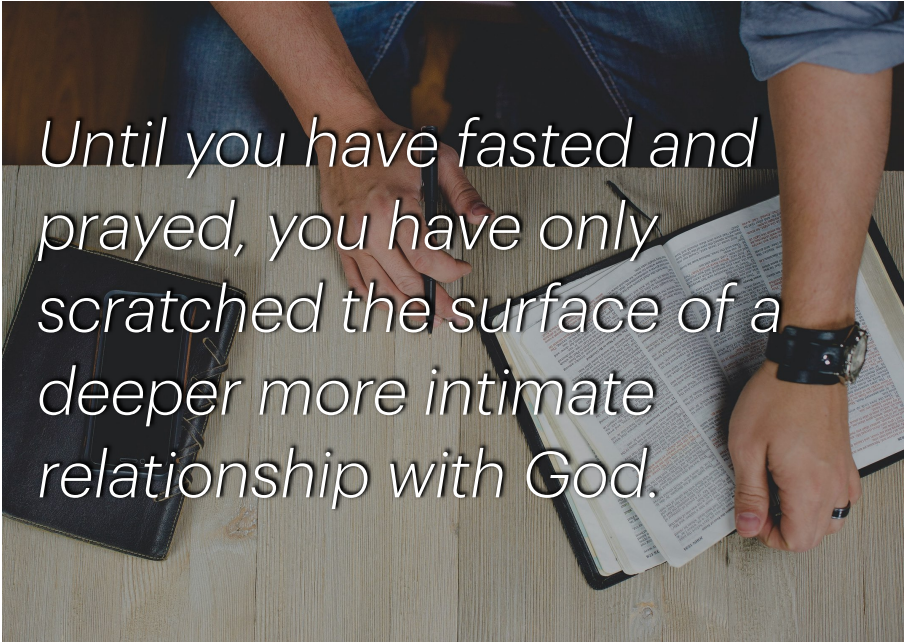
Fasting is not some religious formality to check off the list. Some believers, out of a feeling of duty, will fast for the 40 days of Lent by giving up something easy, but their sacrifice becomes a mere annoyance which they are glad to drop by the time Easter Sunday comes. Without a purpose beyond "It's Lent," this kind of fasting falls far, far short of the awesomeness God wove into the fabric of fasting.



Fasting doesn't press God to be more attentive, or give us quicker answers. We don't tell God, "We're fasting now. That's our part; now you do your part" (Isaiah 58). No matter what we do, God will perform all his holy will. So fasting isn't our effort to twist God's arm. It's our response of pressing into him like it says in Joel: "rend your hearts and

not your garments" (Joel 2:12-13). Fasting is one way that we express our surrender and honest petition before God.

Finally, be careful to differentiate between aligning your heart with God (what fasting does) and getting closer to God (what fasting does not). Jesus alone brings you, spotless, into God's presence. If you belong to Jesus, fasting basically makes you more aware of where you already are.

A top-down photograph of a person's hands and arms resting on a light-colored wooden table. The person is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a black leather watch on their left wrist. They are holding an open Bible with their left hand. To the left of the open Bible is a closed black Bible. A black pen lies on the table between the two Bibles. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

*Until you have fasted and
prayed, you have only
scratched the surface of a
deeper more intimate
relationship with God.*

SECTION 4

THE NITTY-GRITTY

How to fast

Once you have your purpose, plan out your fast. People have been fasting for thousands of years in all different ways.



Once you know your purposes for fasting (the ultimate purpose and immediate purposes), consider your health. Consult your doctor, and if it's time for a checkup, get in there. Fasting can aggravate medical conditions and you don't want to find that out the hard way. A few reasons you may not be able to fast safely include a myriad of health concerns: weakness and anemia, a history of anorexia or bulimia, tumors, cancer, heart disease, chronic organ problems, diabetes, pregnancy, nursing—you get the idea. There are many legitimate reasons to not abstain from food.

If fasting from food is not a reality for you, pray about what God wants you to do. He knows your limitations and won't be disappointed. There are plenty of options that do not involve food. You can fast from technology, entertainment,

music, hobbies— the list is endless. Remember, the important part is your motive! Use the time you would normally spend eating/watching tv/facebooking/whatever, and spend it with Jesus.



There isn't one particular formula for fasting. It's a personal decision. How you fast, how long you fast, and what you fast from are all individual choices, none of which are as important as your reason for fasting. God doesn't command everyone to go forty days without food. Ask him what he would have you do and start slowly, fasting for one meal, or one day. Avoid jumping into an extended fast without building up to it first.

In the Bible, we find several types of fasts. The partial fast is illustrated by Daniel, who abstained from delicacies like meat and wine (Daniel 1:8-16). You could opt for plain food and drink, like vegetables and water.

An absolute fast means not eating or drinking anything at all. Paul did an absolute fast after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9). There are instances of long-term absolute fasts, such as Moses (Deut. 9:9) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), who both fasted absolutely for 40 days. This sort of fast is so extreme that you should not do it unless you are absolutely sure God is leading you to do so. Don't worry! If

God wants you to do something this extreme, he knows how to make it so clear to you that there is no room for uncertainty.

The most common fast involves not eating any sort of food, but drinking plenty of water and juice. Even this can take a toll on your body if done for an extended length of time. Unlike an absolute fast, however, juice provides your body with some energy. It's a good idea to stay away from caffeine and sugar, because these substances can have negative effects when not countered by solid foods. This will mean scouring the aisle for 100% juice or juicing your own fruits and vegetables.

Ultimately, pray, pick the one that seems best, and think about your motives. God won't be impressed if your fast is more difficult. He's already pleased with you because of Jesus, so fast in whichever way you choose and praise God that you don't have to earn his favor through misery!



It's tempting to have your own personal party, eating every one of your favorite foods just before starting your fast. While culturally popular, this makes fasting more difficult. It's better to slowly wean yourself off of food leading up to your fast. Start cutting down on your intake a few days before beginning your fast. Especially focus on slowly

removing sugar and caffeine to make the adjustment less jarring and uncomfortable to your body and more of a gradual adjustment.

Look at your schedule and plan realistically. Fasting during holidays is not only difficult because of all the special foods you will be around; it can also be a huge bummer to those around you. They want to enjoy a feast with you and celebrate—not easy over the sound of your growling stomach or your sad expression. Avoid this. There is a time to fast and a holiday probably isn't it.

Also consider the point of fasting: spending time with Jesus. If you're running a million errands in the lead up to Christmas or a birthday or another special event, you won't have the time to sit and commune with God in isolation. Remember, the point of fasting isn't just to be hungry; it's to take the time you would normally spend eating and use it to focus on God.



When your fast ends, it's very important to reintroduce food slowly. Avoid the six-course dinner or the all you can eat pancake breakfast. Your body will have responded and adjusted to life without food fairly quickly. Suddenly shoveling in normal food can cause extreme discomfort, illness, or worse. Start simply, with steamed or raw

vegetables. Take your time and eat small quantities. Stop before you actually feel full, because your stomach will have shrunk and won't be able to handle the same amount of food at one time as before your fast. Reintroduce foods like meat, starches (potatoes, rice, etc.), fats, and oils in small amounts over time.

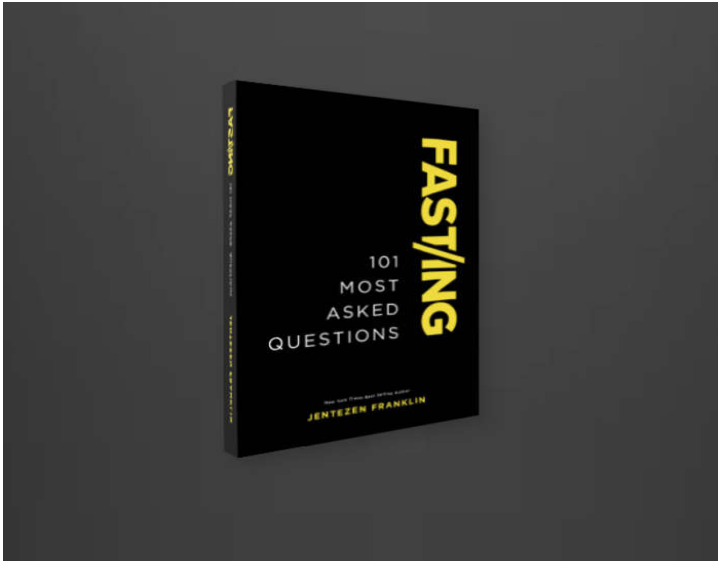
These guidelines aren't just for intensive, long-term fasts. Even after a few days your body will need gentle reintroduction to food. Broth is a good way to start.



Fasting isn't a burden or a requirement for belonging to God. It's a gift that helps you to know and run alongside your heavenly father. Going without food is a reminder that cuts straight to one of our most basic needs. There is a mystery to it, as with all the things of God.

If you've never fasted before, be courageous, give it a go, and expect great things. Fasting is an act of faith, and faith pleases God.

MORE RESOURCES



[Fasting by Jentzen Franklin](#)



[Online Fasting Starter Kit](#)