

FAST, FASTING – A General Overview

Fasting means eating little or no food, either from necessity or by choice. In medicine, fasting means flushing unhealthy substances out of the body by restricting food.

Spiritual fasting, on the other hand, means more than just reducing the amount of food one eats. It also means cutting down on the activities one does and replacing these with prayer and meditation on spiritual concerns. The New Testament word that is translated “fasting” literally means one who has not eaten, one who is empty.

Three types of fast are generally recognized:

1. Normal, in which there is no food for a period of time, though there may be liquids;
2. Partial, in which the diet is limited, though some food is allowed; and
3. Absolute, in which no foods or liquids are taken into the body in any way.

In the Old Testament the fast was thought of as a way of renouncing oneself and as a way of reducing God’s anger, moving him to forgiveness. In times of emergency, the people fasted to persuade God to spare them from calamity (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 21:9; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Jeremiah 36:6, 9). Individual people fasted in the hope that God would save them from trouble (2 Samuel 12:16-20; 1 Kings 21:27; Psalms 35:13; 69:10). Prayer was a part of fasting (Ezra 8:21; Nehemiah 1:4; Jeremiah 14:12).

Regular fasts usually lasted one day, morning to evening, with food permitted at night (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 14:24; 2 Samuel 1:12), although there are reports of longer fasts, such as Mordecai’s call for a three-day fast (night and day specified-Esther 4:16) and the seven-day fast at Saul’s death (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 3:35). Special fasts included Moses’ forty days on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28) and Daniel’s three-week fast prior to receiving visions (Daniel 9:3; 10:3, 12).

Fasting was often abused during Old Testament times. It was often done insincerely and as a way of showing off; rather than fasting for God, people fasted so that they would seem pious and spiritual. The prophets cry out against this kind of fasting, as in Jeremiah, in which the Lord says “Though they fast, I will not hear their cry” (Jeremiah 14:12, RSV; see Isaiah 58:1-10).

During the time between the Old and New Testaments, a great tradition grew up around the practice of fasting. People confirmed vows by fasting; remorse and penitence were accompanied by fasting; and prayer was supported by fasting. Special fast days were observed, some voluntarily imposed. In the opinion of many rabbis, fasting was the primary way to demonstrate one’s piety. Those who fasted often wore mournful expressions on their faces, and the mood of fasting was one of gloom.

Jesus thought of fasting differently. He fasted as part of his temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2), and taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16-18). These two scenes from the Gospels tell us about his mature attitude toward fasting.

Jesus' temptation took place in the midst of a struggle. Immediately after his baptism, he was cast out into the wilderness by the Spirit to face the temptation of Satan. He fasted and prayed during this time because he was depending totally upon God.

Jesus' words about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount illustrate a totally different approach to fasting than the one taken by many teachers who lived at the same time. Jesus condemns the type of fasting that seeks to impress people. He gives it a new meaning: Fasting is service to God. This new meaning is part of Jesus' message of hope and salvation. The Bridegroom (Jesus) is here. It is a time of joy, not of sorrow. The coming of the Messiah has broken the power of the evil age. This means that fasting is inconsistent with the joy and happiness of the new age that Christ has brought, but because the kingdom of God is not fully realized-has not completely arrived here on earth-there is still a place for a certain kind of fasting. It should be a part of prayer, and we should fast in the same way that we pray: with quietness before God, not trying to show off, grateful and thankful, grounded in faith, hoping to grow spiritually.

HOW IS FASTING USED AS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE?

BIBLE READING: 2 Chronicles 20:1-30

KEY BIBLE VERSE: Jehoshaphat was alarmed by this news and sought the LORD for guidance. He also gave orders that everyone throughout Judah should observe a fast. (2 Chronicles 20:3)

FASTING CAN BE PART OF REPENTANCE.

When the nation was faced with disaster, Jehoshaphat called upon the people to get serious with God by going without food (fasting) for a designated time. By separating themselves from the daily routine of food preparation and eating, they could devote that extra time to considering their sin and praying to God for help. Hunger pangs would reinforce their feelings of penitence and remind them of their weakness and their dependence upon God. Fasting still can be helpful today as we seek God's will in special situations.

BIBLE READING: Ezra 8:15-36

KEY BIBLE VERSE: And there by the Ahava Canal, I gave orders for all of us to fast and humble ourselves before our God. We prayed that he would give us a safe journey and protect us, our children, and our goods as we traveled. (Ezra 8:21)

FASTING CAN BE PART OF PRAYER.

Ezra knew God's promises to protect his people, but he didn't take them for granted. He also knew that God's blessings are appropriated through prayer; so Ezra and the people humbled themselves by fasting and praying. And their prayers were answered. Fasting humbled them because going without food was a reminder of their complete dependence on God. Fasting also gave them more time to pray and meditate on God.

Too often we pray glibly and superficially. Serious prayer, by contrast, requires concentration. It puts us in touch with God's will and can really change us. Without serious prayer, we reduce God to a quick-service pharmacist with painkillers for our every ailment.

BIBLE READING: Matthew 6:16-18

KEY BIBLE VERSE: But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you. (Matthew 6:17-18)

FASTING NEEDS TO BE DONE FOR THE RIGHT REASONS.

Fasting-going without food in order to spend time in prayer-is noble and difficult. It gives us time to pray, teaches self-discipline, reminds us that we can live with a lot less, and helps us appreciate God's gifts. Jesus was not condemning fasting, but hypocrisy-fasting in order to gain public approval. Fasting was mandatory for the Jewish people once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:32). The Pharisees voluntarily fasted twice a week to impress the people with their "holiness." Jesus commended acts of self-sacrifice done quietly and sincerely. He wanted people to adopt spiritual disciplines for the right reasons, not from a selfish desire for praise.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BENEFITS OF FASTING?

2 Chronicles 20:3 . . . Jehoshaphat was alarmed by this news and sought the Lord for guidance. He also gave orders that everyone throughout Judah should observe a fast.

****Fasting helps us become more focused on the Lord so we can better receive his guidance.***

Joel 1:14 . . . Announce a time of fasting; call the people together for a solemn meeting. Bring the leaders and all the people into the Temple of the Lord your God, and cry out to him there.

****Fasting helps us focus corporately and individually on repentance.***

Ezra 8:21, 23 . . . I gave orders for all of us to fast and humble ourselves before our God. We prayed that he would give us a safe journey and protect us, our children, and our goods as we traveled. . . . So we fasted and earnestly prayed that our God would take care of us, and he heard our prayer.

****Fasting helps remind us to seek God's protection.***

Esther 4:16 . . . "Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. . . . And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I am willing to die."

****Fasting helps us to seek courage.***

1 Chronicles 10:12 . . . Their warriors went out and brought the bodies of Saul and his three sons back to Jabesh. Then they buried their remains beneath the oak tree at Jabesh, and they fasted for seven days.

****Fasting can reinforce our grief.***

WHEN IS IT APPROPRIATE TO FAST?

2 Samuel 3:35 . . . David had refused to eat anything the day of the funeral.

****It is appropriate to fast in times of mourning.***

2 Samuel 1:12 . . . They mourned and wept and fasted all day for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the Lord's army and the nation of Israel, because so many had died that day.

****It is appropriate to fast in times of crisis.***

Ezra 10:6 . . . He did not eat any food or drink. He was still in mourning because of the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.

Deuteronomy 9:18-19 . . . Then for forty days and nights I lay prostrate before the Lord, neither eating bread nor drinking water. I did this because you had sinned by doing what the Lord hated, thus making him very angry. How I feared for you, for the Lord was ready to destroy you. But again he listened to me.

****It is appropriate to fast in times of intercession for others' sins.***

Acts 14:23 . . . Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church and prayed for them with fasting, turning them over to the care of the Lord, in whom they had come to trust.

****It is appropriate to fast in times of dedication.***

2 Samuel 12:16 . . . David begged God to spare the child. He went without food and lay all night on the bare ground.

****It is appropriate to fast in times of life-threatening illness.***

Jonah 3:5 . . . The people of Nineveh believed God's message, and from the greatest to the least, they decided to go without food and wear sackcloth to show their sorrow.

****It is appropriate to fast in times of repentance.***

WHAT ARE SOME GUIDELINES FOR FASTING? HOW SHOULD I FAST?

Isaiah 58:3-7 . . . "We have fasted before you!" they say. "Why aren't you impressed? We have done much penance, and you don't even notice it!"

"I will tell you why! It's because you are living for yourselves even while you are fasting. You keep right on oppressing your workers. What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? . . . Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord?"

****The importance of fasting is not the act or ritual, but our motives before God. It is not what we do but why we do it.***

Matthew 6:16-18 . . . When you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, who try to look pale and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I assure you, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.

****Fasting, like prayer, is not a public performance but a private relationship with God.***

Daniel 9:3 . . . I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and fasting. I wore rough sackcloth and sprinkled myself with ashes.

****Fasting and prayer are a spiritual duet.***

Acts 13:2-3 . . . One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work I have for them.” So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.

****Fasting, prayer, and worship are a spiritual trio.***

WHAT REFRESHES THE SOUL?

Psalm 42:2 . . . I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and stand before him?

Psalm 63:1 . . . O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 90:14 . . . Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, so we may sing for joy to the end of our lives.

****God’s faithful, loving character refreshes the soul.***

Matthew 11:28 . . . Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

****Our relationship with Jesus refreshes the soul.***

Psalm 19:7 . . . The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

Psalm 119:25 . . . I lie in the dust, completely discouraged; revive me by your word.

Psalm 119:50 . . . Your promise revives me; it comforts me in all my troubles.

****God’s Word refreshes the soul.***

Mark 1:35 . . . The next morning Jesus awoke long before daybreak and went out alone into the wilderness to pray.

Mark 6:46 . . . Afterward he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

****Time spent alone with God in prayer refreshes the soul.***

Isaiah 28:12 . . . God’s people could have rest in their own land if they would only obey him, but they will not listen.

Ezekiel 18:31 . . . Put all your rebellion behind you, and get for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O people of Israel?

Ezekiel 36:26 . . . I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart.

****Our obedience to God refreshes the soul.***

Psalm 51:2, 10, 12 . . . Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me. . . . Restore to me again the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you.

Isaiah 57:15 . . . The high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, the Holy One, says this: “I live in that high and holy place with those whose spirits are contrite and humble. I refresh the humble and give new courage to those with repentant hearts.”

Acts 3:19-20 . . . Now turn from your sins and turn to God, so you can be cleansed of your sins. Then wonderful times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will send Jesus your Messiah to you again.

****Our confession and repentance of sin refreshes the soul.***

Hebrews 12:11-12 . . . No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening-it is painful! But afterward there will be a quiet harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. So take a new grip with your tired hands and stand firm on your shaky legs.

****Discipline refreshes the soul.***

2 Corinthians 4:16-17 . . . That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are quite small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever!

****Eternal perspective refreshes the soul.***

Proverbs 11:25 . . . The generous prosper and are satisfied; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.

****Ministering to others refreshes the soul.***

Psalm 133:1, 3 . . . How wonderful it is, how pleasant, when brothers live together in harmony! . . . Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion. And the Lord has pronounced his blessing, even life forevermore.

****Harmonious relationships refresh the soul.***