

FASTING

What Does the Bible Say About Fasting?

In the Old Testament, God commanded Israel to observe several set times of fasting. For New Testament believers, fasting was neither commanded nor forbidden in the Bible. While early Christians were not required to fast, many practiced prayer and fasting regularly. Jesus himself affirmed in Luke 5:35 that after his death fasting would be appropriate for his followers. Fasting clearly has a place and a purpose for God's people today.

What Is Fasting?

In most cases, a spiritual fast involves abstaining from food while focusing on prayer. This can mean refraining from snacks between meals, skipping one or two meals a day, abstaining only from certain foods, or a total fast from all food for an entire day or longer.

For medical reasons, some people may not be able to fast from food altogether. They may choose to abstain only from certain foods, like sugar or chocolate, or from something other than food. In truth, believers can fast from anything. Doing without something temporarily, such as television or soda, as a way of redirecting our focus from earthly things toward God, can also be considered a spiritual fast.

The Purpose of Fasting

While many people fast to lose weight, dieting is not the purpose of a spiritual fast. Instead, fasting provides unique spiritual benefits in the life of the believer.

Fasting requires self-control and discipline as one denies the natural desires of the flesh. During spiritual fasting, the believer's focus is removed from the physical things of this world and intensely concentrated on God. Put differently, fasting directs our hunger toward God. It clears the mind and body of earthly attentions and draws us close to God. So, as we gain spiritual clarity of thought while fasting, it allows us to hear God more clearly. Fasting also demonstrates a profound need for God's help and guidance through complete dependence upon him.

What Fasting Is Not

Spiritual fasting is not a way to earn God's favor by getting him to do something for us. Rather, the purpose is to produce a transformation in us—a clearer, more focused attention and dependence upon God.

Fasting is never to be a public display of spirituality—it is between you and God alone. In fact, Jesus specifically instructed us in Matthew 6:16-18 to let our fasting be done privately and in humility, else we forfeit the benefits.

While Old Testament fasting was a sign of mourning, New Testament believers were taught to practice fasting with a cheerful attitude.

How long should I fast?

Fasting, especially from food, should be limited to a determined length of time. Fasting for too long can cause harm to the body.

Your decision to fast should be guided by the Holy Spirit. If you've never fasted, seek both medical and spiritual counsel before embarking on any type of prolonged fast. While Jesus and Moses both fasted for 40 days without food and water, this was clearly an impossible human achievement, only accomplished through the Holy Spirit's empowerment.

Examples of Fasting in the Bible

Old Testament

- Moses fasted 40 days on behalf of Israel's sin: Deut. 9:9, 18, 25-29; 10:10.
- David fasted and mourned the death of his child: 2 Samuel 12:16.
- Elijah fasted 40 days after fleeing from Jezebel: 1 Kings 19:7-18.
- Ahab fasted and humbled himself before God: 1 Kings 21:27-29.
- Darius fasted in concern for Daniel: Daniel 6:18-24.
- Daniel fasted on behalf of Judah's sin while reading Jeremiah: Daniel 9:1-19.
- Daniel fasted regarding a mysterious vision from God: Daniel 10:3-13.
- Esther fasted on behalf of her people: Esther 4:13-16.
- Ezra fasted and wept for the sins of the returning remnant: Ezra 10:6-17.
- Nehemiah fasted over the broken walls of Jerusalem: Nehemiah 1:4-2:10.
- The people of Nineveh fasted after hearing the message of Jonah: Jonah 3.

New Testament

- Anna fasted for Jerusalem and the coming Messiah: Luke 2:37.
- Jesus fasted 40 days before his temptation and the beginning of his ministry: Matthew 4:1-11.
- The disciples of John the Baptist fasted: Matthew 9:14-15.
- The elders in Antioch fasted before sending off Paul and Barnabas as missionaries: Acts 13:1-5.
- Cornelius fasted and sought God: Acts 10:30.
- Paul fasted three day fast after his Damascus Road experience: Acts 9:9.
- Paul fasted 14 days while at sea on a sinking ship: Acts 27:33-34.

Week of Prayer and Fasting

February 23-28, 2015

I will fast (what) _____ on (day) _____

