

Chapter VIII: Fasting

Contents

A. What is Fasting?	2
B. How should We Fast?	4
C. When Should We Fast?	4
D. Cautions And Guidelines In Fasting	5

Chapter VIII: Fasting

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said (Ac 13:2)

John Wesley said, "Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it." The balance, as always, lies in the truth contained in God's word.

Note also that one's lifestyle must match one's zeal for disciplines such as fasting (Is a 58). Fasting is not an alternative to a godly lifestyle, but a companion thereof.

A. What Is Fasting?

Fasting is a Scriptural discipline in which all Christians should be involved at some stage in their Christian walk. We want to give the simplest and most practical definition that we can, from which we can then work.

Fasting is abstinence from satisfying various physical appetites for the sake of prayer and seeking God.

This could include abstaining from solid food, liquids, body lotions, marital relations or any combination of these things listed. The importance of the phrase, "for the sake of prayer," found in the definition above is that fasting is not dieting for legalistic purposes nor is it hunger striking. Further, it must be pointed out clearly that fasting cannot be used as a means to twist God's arm. Rather, it is to quicken spiritual perception and enhance our prayer life and it is done in obedience to God's word.

A.1. Why Should We Fast?

Jesus deals with fasting during his sermon on the Mount (Mt 6). He spoke of fasting here in the same context as prayer and almsgiving. We know that these things are part of the righteous person's lifestyle. Of course, righteousness comes not from our works but from faith in Jesus. However, it does appear from the context that Jesus expected His followers to adopt some form of fasting in their lives.

In Mt 6:16-18 Jesus said, "when you fast" not "if you fast," the inference being that His disciples would have a lifestyle incorporating fasting.

In Mt 9:14, disciples of John the Baptist approached Jesus asking Him why they and the Pharisees fasted, but His disciples did not. Jesus responded by saying that they could not be expected to fast while the bridegroom was with them (referring to Himself), but a time would come when He would be taken away and then the disciples would fast. (He could not have been referring only to the three-day period during which He was in the grave since the disciples fasted after His ascension. In Ac 13 we see that the leaders of the church in Antioch fasted.

This indicates fasting after Jesus' ascension.) Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven where He is interceding for us (Ro 8:34), and He expects his followers to enter into the life He taught. This includes fasting.

Now that we have discussed that Jesus anticipated that His disciples would fast, let us briefly take a look at some of the benefits of fasting.

A.2. Fasting Heightens Spiritual Awareness

From practical experience and from the account of Jesus' fast (Lk 4:1-13) we discover that denying physical appetites creates a greater awareness of spiritual reality. It enhances our perception of what is going on in the spiritual realm. This is, of course, of great advantage in our prayer life.

A.3. Contact With The Enemy

Once again from experience and Jesus' fast (Lk 4:1-13) we discover that fasting can force a contact/ combat situation with the enemy, or it can arise out of a combat situation. This happens because breakthrough is imminent, we are weak physically and therefore vulnerable to temptation and the enemy fears the effects of our prayers. This contact often takes the form of a battle in our minds as the enemy assaults our beliefs, accuses us or brings condemnation. As Jesus did in His time of fasting, we are to combat these attacks with the word of God.

A.4. Spiritual Breakthrough

When Jesus returns from His time of fasting and praying in the wilderness, Luke records these words: "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside" (Lk 4:14).

Many times, when we fast and pray God releases power into our physical circumstances. In the Old Testament there is an account recorded of God's deliverance of His people in Judah from a "vast enemy army." Jehosaphat proclaimed a fast and all Judah sought the Lord's help. God spoke prophetically through Jahaziel of the deliverance of His people. Thereafter God brought about breakthrough in the ensuing battle. The account is recorded in 2Ch 20:3-24.

A.5. Fasting Flushes Out Toxins

During a time of fasting, especially extended fasting, many believe that the body has an opportunity to expel toxins that have built up over months. Some believe that for this reason our first extended fast can be quite uncomfortable, with headaches and mild dizziness.

A.6. Time Gain In Your Daily Routine

On average people devote some 2-4 hours to eating and related activities each day. During a water fast this time can be spent in prayer or Scripture reading and study. On a simple calculation during a week of fasting, assuming we gain 3 hours each day, we gain an additional 21 hours of time to be used for prayer and the Word.

This point and the following points are physical, circumstantial and health benefits to fasting. They are not necessarily directly related to the spiritual benefits but are important to note.

A.7. Rest For The Vital Organs

Many believe that during a time of fasting the stomach and other body organs are given a much-needed time of respite. This is one of the reasons why many doctors say fasting is a healthy practice.

B. How Should We Fast?

The pattern of fasting in Scripture can be divided into three types, described in this section.

B.1. Normal Fast

An example of no solid food is recorded in Lk 4:1-2. Most scholars agree that to the Hebrew interpreter of Scripture this would be a water only type fast. Many, however, see it as a liquid only fast, in other words, including various drinks.

B.2. Partial Fast

An example of no delicacies, meat, wine or lotions for three weeks is found in Da 10:2-3. For abstaining from marital relations by mutual consent, see 1Co 7:3-5.

B.3. Absolute Fast

For examples of no food or water see Ezr 10:6, Est 4:16 and Ac 9:9. This is up to three days in length and *never any longer*. On the issue of absolute fasting Richard Foster, the author of Celebration of Discipline, writes: "It should be underscored that the absolute fast is the exception and should never be engaged in unless one has a very clear command from God, and then for no more than three days."

C. When Should We Fast?

We offer three basic guidelines that are useful in helping one to determine when to fast.

C.1. Called By The Spirit To Fast

In Lk 4:1-2 we see that Jesus was led by the Spirit into His time of fasting, hence we should be open to the Spirit leading us into our times of fasting.

C.2. Called To A Fast By Church Leaders

Heb 13:17 tells us to obey our leaders. When the leaders hear from God and call the church to fast, we obey God's word by obeying the leadership. An example of a leader proclaiming a fast can be found in Ezr 8:21.

C.3. Deciding To Fast

This is choosing a date and setting it aside as part of the disciplined lifestyle of a follower of Jesus. Caution should be exercised here especially for those who have ascetic and legalistic tendencies.

D. Cautions And Guidelines In Fasting

Fasting includes within it the component of prayer. Abstinence from food without prayer is hunger striking, not fasting. Fasting is only a part of the disciple's lifestyle.

To get started you may try shorter, partial fasts. You can build up to extended water fasts.

If there is any medical reason why you should not fast, or if you suspect any medical reason why you should not fast (for example, pregnancy or diabetics), then get qualified medical advice. If there is a corporate fast and you have a medical condition, you are pregnant or you do a lot of physical labour in your work, please speak to the elders. In this way you can still participate in some way and enjoy the benefits of the community's fast.

Seriously consider skipping gym and other strenuous physical exercise during a fast.

A lifestyle of fasting has wonderful spiritual benefits and some healthy physical ones too.

LAYING FOUNDATIONS

D.1. Advice For Those Preparing For Longer Fasts

In preparing for a long fast you should exercise caution and cut out solids from your diet step by step. As a general guideline you should cut out the following foods, in the following order:

- Complex proteins: red meat and fish.
- Dairy and eggs.
- Cereals: rice and wheat.
- Vegetables and fruit.

Those who are embarking on a longer fast for the first time should be warned that experiencing mild dizziness and headaches is normal.

D.2. Breaking The Fast

In breaking the fast one would usually follow the preparation process in reverse:

- Vegetables and fruit.
- Cereals: rice and wheat.
- Dairy and eggs.
- Complex proteins: red meat and fish.

Note that breaking any fast of 3-40 days in an unwise way can be an extreme shock to the system.

For a fuller appraisal of this discipline of fasting many books are available. We mention three here should you desire to embark on further study:

Celebration of Discipline, R Foster.

Changing History Through Prayer And Fasting, D Prince.

God's Chosen Fast, A Wallis.