

What is Biblical Fasting?

Fasting is commonly associated with taking a temporary break from eating. However, Biblical fasting is much more than simply refusing food for a period of time. Fasting is the act of denying yourself something, while taking up something else in its place. For example, one might fast from food in order to seek the face of the Lord, in order to get discernment about a tough circumstance that he's going through. During his fast, when those hunger cramps are felt, his hunger prompts to take time to pray more fervently for spiritual help and discernment. In this case, fasting is showing the Lord how serious he is about the matter at hand. When he desires to eat, he's replacing that need with spiritual intimacy with the Lord; asking the Lord to sustain him while he's seeking His face.

Too often though, people don't take seriously the second step of fasting, the step involving diligently seeking the Lord. Instead, some people chose to busy themselves in order to distract themselves from their hunger cramps. In other words, they're just on a food strike, and not experiencing Biblical fasting. The element of replacing food with seeking the Lord is not present. This essay takes a look at what the Bible has to say about fasting.

Different types of fasting in the Bible

Complete Fast (No Food or Water)

Moses, Exodus 34:2 - ***"So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments."*** One might ask, *"How could Moses go that long without water?"* One commentator responds by saying, *"When you take up your abode in any particular city, you must live according to its customs. Moses ascended to heaven, where they neither eat nor drink, therefore he became assimilated as one in heaven. We are accustomed to eat and drink; and, when angels descend to us, they eat and drink also."* Whether Moses was taken in spirit to heaven, as was Isaiah and others, it's not clear. One thing is clear, he was divinely sustained, since no one can go 40 days without water.

Partial Fasts – Either Water Only, or Abstaining from Certain Types of Foods

Daniel – Daniel 1:12, ***"Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink."*** Here, Daniel abstained from meat and wine that was offered to him.

Non-Food Fasting

Oil – Daniel, as part of his fasting, abstained also from putting oil on his skin, Daniel 10:3, ***"I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all until the entire three weeks were completed."***

Sex – A married couple abstains while individually seeking the Lord in prayer (1 Corinthians 7:5).

Sleep & Music – King Darius refused sleep and music when Daniel was in the lion's den (Daniel 6:18). Today, someone might consider fasting from Netflix or social media.

Fasting as a group

The king of Nineveh issued a decree in Jonah 3:7-9, ***"He issued a proclamation and it said, 'In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 'But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. 'Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.'"***

Different Durations of Biblical Fasting

- 40 days - Jesus – Matthew 4:2, ***“And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.”***
- 21 days & 10 days – Daniel
- 3 days – Esther 4:16, before Esther decided to approach the king, ***“Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.”***
- 1 day – David and his men, 2 Samuel 1:12, over the death of Saul and Jonathan, ***“They mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the people of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.”***
- Overnight – King Darius in Daniel 6:18, ***“Then the king went off to his palace and spent the night fasting, and no entertainment was brought before him; and his sleep fled from him.”***

Reasons for fasting in the Bible

- When facing war - See 1 Samuel 7:6. ***“So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the Lord. And they fasted that day, and said there, ‘We have sinned against the Lord.’ And Samuel judged the children of Israel at Mizpah.”***
- In repentance - Joel 2:12-13, ***“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and tear your hearts and not your garments.”***
- When a loved one was sick - David fasted for his son until he learned he had died. ***“David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.”*** 2 Samuel 12:16
- When someone had died - 1 Chronicles 10:12, ***“All the valiant men arose and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons; and they brought them to Jabesh, and buried their bones under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.”***
- When seeking forgiveness - Nehemiah 9:1-3. ***“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed.”***
- When afraid for their lives - 2 Chronicles 20:3, ***“And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.”***
- When seeking clear direction - Acts 13:2. ***“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”***

Motives Matter Most

Matthew 6:16-18, ***“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”*** Here, Jesus points out that the Pharisees (hypocrites) used to put on a show when they fasted, so as to appear extreme and ultra-committed to their fasting; to appear super spiritual. They would do things like rub ashes on their face to appear to have sunken in cheeks as though they were malnourished. Real Biblical fasting doesn’t seek to be seen or heard or to make ourselves something we are not.

Some have misunderstood this teaching of Jesus to mean, “*Nobody can know if you’re fasting.*” That’s not the point. If someone asks you to lunch, and you’re fasting, you can say, “*I’m sorry, I’ll have to reschedule as I’m fasting today.*” It’s okay to own that you’re fasting, that’s different from wanting people to know you’re fasting.

Tips for Fasting

Plan – Sometimes you might find that upon hearing immediate bad news, you decide to fast right then and there. That’s fine. Most of the time though, fasting comes about after giving it some forethought and planning it out. It’s best to fast when you’re most likely to get the uninterrupted time you need to focus on seeking Jesus. Planning your time might mean having some particular scripture ready to study during your fast, or having some songs planned out that you want to sing, writing down several verses you want to memorize, or getting supplies ready to journal while you fast, etc.

Get Away – Plan your fast away from the business of work and life. For example, when Jesus fasted, He retreated into the wilderness so as to not be burdened by the demands of the disciples and the crowds. A friend of mine once tried to fast while he was working as a waiter. Working on your feet and hustling around is not a good idea when you are not eating, as you can become dangerously faint. On top of that, working around hot fresh delicious food made his fasting time even more difficult. Toward the end of his shift he spilled some sauce on his wrist and he desperately licked it up off of his shaking hand because he was so hungry and weak-willed. So, the point is, don’t try to maintain an active routine while fasting. Not only will you not be able to focus on the Lord, which is the whole point, but you’ll physically put yourself in a dangerous place.

Remove Distractions – If you’re like me, you’ll find yourself turning to “things” in order to get you through the hunger cramps. Things like phone distractions, social media, etc. Perhaps leave behind your phone or computer and choose to seclude yourself from what you know will be a distraction.

Invite Others to Pray – Let’s say you’re planning a fast for the weekend. You might consider asking some Christian friends or mentors to pray for you that same weekend, that you’ll hear from the Lord and endure the demands of the fast.