

Bethany Baptist Church

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Why Do We Fast?

From a biblical standpoint, fasting is:

1. Going without food and/or water
2. Consuming only water and simple foods

Biblically, a typical “fast” lasted for a day, from sunrise to sunset. However, other “fasting” lasted for several or many days. (See **Judges 20:26, 1 day; Esther 4:16, 3 days; 1 Samuel 31:13, 7 days and Matthew 4:2, 40 days and 40 nights.**) Throughout the bible, people fasted for a variety of reasons; consider some of the following reasons found in the Old Testament:

- a. **Some fasted because of a crisis or time of emotional distress** - For example, David fasted in hopes that God would take notice of it and spare his son from death. In **2 Samuel 12:15-18** (NIV) we read, “¹⁵After Nathan had gone home, the Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife had borne to David, and he became ill. ¹⁶**David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground.** ¹⁷The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, **and he would not eat any food with them.** ¹⁸On the seventh day the child died....” (See also **Daniel 6:18**)
- b. **Some fasted as an act of mourning** – For example, in **Psalms 35:13-14** (NIV) David fasted as an act of mourning. There we read, “¹³Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth **and humbled myself with fasting.** When my prayers returned to me unanswered, ¹⁴**I went about mourning** as though for my friend or brother.”
- c. **Some fasted publically as an act of national repentance** – in **Nehemiah 9:1-2** (NIV) we read, “¹On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, **fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads.** ²Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. **They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.**” (See also **1 Samuel 7:5-6**)
- d. **Some fasted in the midst of defeat** – in **Judges 20:24-26** (NIV) we read, “²⁴Then the Israelites drew near to Benjamin the second day. ²⁵This time, when the Benjaminites came out from Gibeah to oppose them, they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of them armed with swords. ²⁶Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, **and there they sat weeping before the Lord. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the Lord.**”
- e. **Some fasted with prayer to seek the Lord’s help and direction** – in **2 Chronicles 20:3-4** (NIV) we read, “³Alarmed, **Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.** ⁴**The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.**”

- f. **Some fasted with prayer for the Lords protection** – in Ezra 8:21-23 (NIV) we read, *“²¹There by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. ²²I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, ‘The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.’ ²³So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.”*

When fasting was done to express true repentance and grief for sinful behavior, God sometimes responded with deliverance. For example, in **Jonah 3:4** (HSCB), Jonah told the Ninevites, “... **in Forty days Nineveh will be overthrown!!**” In verse 5, we read, “*The men of Nineveh believed in God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least.*” In verse 10, we read, “*Then God saw their actions that they had turned from their evil ways- so God relented from the disaster he had threatened to do to them. And He did not do it.*”

At other times, fasting was nothing more than a hypocritical attempt to manipulate God. In **Isaiah 58:1-4** (NIV) we read, *“¹Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. ²For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ³Why have we fasted, they say, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed? Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴You’re fasting ends in quarrelling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.”* (See also verses 5-8)

In the New Testament we find no command to fast neither do we find that fasting is forbidden. However, as a New Testament example, we do find the believers fasting and praying before ordaining elders and teachers. In **Acts 13:2-3** (NIV) we read, *“²While they were worshipping the lord **and fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. ³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”* (See also Acts 14:23)

When asked why his disciples didn’t fast like John’s disciples and the Pharisees, Jesus responded by saying, “***How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.***” (Matthew 9:15) In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees fasted twice a week (**Luke 18:12; See Leviticus 16:29, Zechariah 7:5; 8:19 for other fasts**) John’s disciples probably fasted in Jesus’ day as an act of repentance. However, when it came to his disciples, Jesus compared them with the guests of a bridegroom. Typically, a Jewish wedding was a joyous occasion, and the celebration associated with it often lasted a week. It would be unthinkable to fast during such a joyous occasion, especially since fasting was associated with sorrow. Jesus said when the “**bridegroom**” would be taken away from the disciples by death, then fasting would be in order. Until then, his disciples didn’t fast.

In **Matthew 6:16-18**, Jesus gives us some of the guidelines for fasting. He said:

1. Do not look somber like the hypocrites who disfigure their faces to show people that they were fasting. (fasting is to be done secretly)
2. When we fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that it would not be obvious that you are fasting. (fasting is between you and God)
3. Only God should know when you're fasting. (Married people must tell their spouse that they are fasting. In **1 Corinthians 7:5** (HSCB) we read, ***"Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer...."***

Some suggestions for fasting

1. Plan your fast based on your daily medications. If you cannot skip meals because of your medication, don't do it!!! Instead of the typical fast for those that cannot skip meals because of their medication, I recommend they do other things. For example, if they usually watch T.V. from 5pm to 9pm, they can turn off the T.V. and go somewhere private and lay before the Lord in prayer and reading their bible from 5pm to 9pm.
2. Since fasting always involves prayer and meditation, be sure to turn off the T.V. , computer, and radio while you're fasting. If possible, avoid having company or people around you that do not have to be in your presence. Of course this is to be done in love, while not telling them you're fasting.
3. Your fasting must involve a stillness and quiet time between you and the Lord with no distractions. (For some this may not be possible, but do your best)
4. Find a particular bible passage or topic to study during your fast.
5. Do not try to fast for more than 4 hours at first. Gradually work your way up to the number of hours or days that you desire to fast. Because some people become dizzy and/or pass out when they don't eat for lengthy periods of time, do not fast for lengthy periods if you live alone. If you live alone and want to fast, find someone to either call you every couple of hours or come by to check on you.
6. Do not inconvenience others because of your fast. If there is a dinner for a special occasion planned, don't cause others to suffer with you, let them eat!!!

Fasting is one of the ways that we crucify our flesh and hear from God in the process. I believe every Christian, leader and laity should have a private time of prayer and fasting at least once every month.

God bless,
Bishop-Elect D.M. Duncan