

PRAYER AND FASTING

A Congregational Resource

What is fasting and why do we do it?

The following is taken from an article by Dave Mathis, the executive editor of *Desiring God*:

Chances are you are among the massive majority of Christians who rarely or never fast. It's not because we haven't read our Bibles or sat under faithful preaching or heard about the power of fasting, or even that we don't genuinely want to do it. We just never actually get around to putting down the fork. Part of it may be that we live in a society in which food is so ubiquitous that we eat not only when we don't need to, but sometimes even when we don't want to. We eat to share a meal with others, to build or grow relationships (good reasons), or just as a distraction from responsibility. And of course, there are our own cravings and aches for comfort that keep us from the discomfort of fasting.

Fasting is voluntarily going without food — or any other regularly enjoyed, good gift from God — for the sake of some spiritual purpose. It is markedly countercultural in our consumerist society, like abstaining from sex until marriage.

If we are to learn the lost art of fasting and enjoy its fruit, it will not come with our ear to the ground of society, but with Bibles open. Then, the concern will not be whether we fast, but when. Jesus assumes his followers will fast, and even promises it will happen. He doesn't say "if," but "when you fast" (Matthew 6:16). And he doesn't say his followers might fast, but "they will" (Matthew 9:15).

We fast in this life because we believe in the life to come. We don't have to get it all here and now, because we have a promise that we will have it all in the coming age. We fast from what we can see and taste, because we have tasted and seen the goodness of the invisible and infinite God — and are desperately hungry for more of him. The typical form of fasting is personal, private, and partial, but we find a variety of forms in the Bible: personal and communal, private and public, congregational and national, regular and occasional, absolute and partial.

Thomas Tarants, Vice President for Ministry & Director Washington Area Fellows Program, C.S. Lewis Institute provides the following information that can be helpful as we consider fasting.

In the Old Testament, the main Hebrew word used is *tsom*, which means "to abstain from food." In the New Testament, the Greek word we translate as "fast" is *nesteuo*, which means "to abstain from eating." In both testaments, fasting is simply going without food in order to seek God for some special reason. Although the purposes for which we seek God may vary, going without food does not. This is an important distinction, because today there is a tendency to expand the word fasting to include things other than food, such as television, movies, internet, social media, or cell phones. Although it is certainly right to abstain from any number of things that are hindering our relationship with God, that is not what the Bible means by fasting. Such abstaining



is better described as “saying no” to some form of worldliness or harmful fleshly indulgence. To reiterate, in the Bible, the word fasting means going without food, the purpose of which is to earnestly seek God in prayer.

There are many biblical examples of fasting, which include the following:

- In the Old Testament, every Israelite was called to fast on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27–28). This was a sign of humbling and repentance before God as they sought His forgiveness for their sins.
- Moses fasted from food and water in two back-to-back fasts, lasting a total of eighty days while he was meeting with God on Mt. Sinai and receiving divine revelation (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:9–10:10).
- Daniel observed a partial fast for twenty-one days, at the end of which God gave him revelation into important aspects of Israel’s future (Dan. 10).
- Hannah was barren, heartbroken, and desperate for a child. She sought God in prayer and fasting, and He answered her with the birth of Samuel, one of the great leaders of the Old Testament (1 Sam. 1:1–20).

Types and lengths of food fasts:

- One-day or partial-day fast (Judges 20:26, 1 Samuel 7:6, 2 Samuel 1:12, 3:35, Nehemiah 9:1, Jeremiah 36:6)
- Three-day fast (Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9)
- Seven-day fast (1 Samuel 31:13, 2 Samuel 2:16-23)
- Fourteen, twenty-one or forty-day fasts (Acts 27:33-34, Daniel 10:3-13. Deuteronomy 9:9, 1 Kings 19:8 and Matthew 4:2)
- Fasts are also described as regular (abstaining from all food and drink except for water), partial (abstaining from some particular kind of food) or a complete or absolute fast (no food or liquid of any kind). It should be noted that any fast longer than three to five days should not begin without medical advice.

This is just a short introduction to fasting, what it is, and why we are called to participate. For more in-depth understanding of the history, both biblical and cultural, see the list of resources at the end of this explanation.

What are some ways to incorporate prayer into my time of fasting?

There are many ways to incorporate prayer into your time of fasting. Fasting is a way to focus our hearts and minds on God who provides all that we need. As we experience the loss of food and feel the pangs of hunger, we are reminded to prioritize our time with God through prayer. If you have a regular prayer list that you use, take the time to pray over your list throughout your time of fasting. Consider setting aside separate times of prayer throughout your fasting to pray over specific areas in your life and the life of the church. Fasting and prayer can help us hear from God, reveal our sin,



strengthen our intimacy with God, teach us to pray with right motives and build our faith. To add something different to your prayer time, one option might be to practice *Lectio Divina*.

Lectio divina is a method of praying the Scriptures and traces its roots back to the early centuries in the Church. While in its beginnings this prayer method was set aside for monks and religious leaders, today *lectio divina* is a widely held practice by many laypeople.

Lectio divina is a slow, rhythmic reading and praying of a Scripture passage. You pick a passage and read it. Notice what arises within you as you read it. Then you read it again, and then again, noticing what words and phrases grab your heart and noticing the feelings that arise. You respond to God about whatever is stirring within as you read and pray with the passage. Finally, you rest and let God respond and speak to you.

To begin, open with a short prayer, asking God to guide your prayer time. Then do the following:

Read.

Slowly and thoughtfully, read the Scripture passage the first time. What word or phrase captures your attention and grabs your heart? Linger with it whenever this happens.

Reflect.

Slowly and prayerfully, read the passage again. What is God saying to you in this passage? offering you? asking you? What feelings are arising within you?

Respond.

Slowly and prayerfully, read the passage again. Respond to God from your heart. Speak to God of your feelings and insights. Offer these to God.

Rest.

Possibly read the passage another time. Sit quietly in God's presence, asking, "What are you saying to me?" Rest in God's love and listen to what He has for you.

Some tips and cautions as you think about and incorporate fasting into your week:

1. Start small- especially if you have never fasted before. Consider starting with fasting from one meal a day for a week, or from dinner to dinner for one day.
2. Make sure to drink water throughout your fast, especially if you go for a day or longer fast.
3. Consider the different types of fasts, pray and ask God the direction He would have you go.
4. Consider how your fast will affect others. Going without food might cause you to be grumpy or irritated so think about how to curb taking those emotions out on those around you.
5. Be aware that in the beginning stages of fasting, especially if you have never fasted before, you might get dizzy, have headaches or feel extremely tired. This is normal and part of your body adjusting to less food.



6. Focus on prayer during your fast. Plan ahead of time what you will pray about and how you will incorporate that into your day but also be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and how He might lead you during this time.
7. If there are medical reasons you should not fast from food, consider fasting from something other than food. Martin Lloyd-Jones said, "Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special purpose."
8. When you break your fast, especially if you fast for 24 hours or longer, do so gradually with fresh fruit and vegetables. Although it can be tempting to gorge yourself with your favorite food, practice restraint and ingest slowly!

Additional Resources

- [The Place of Fasting in the Christian Life - C.S. Lewis Institute \(cslewisinstitute.org\)](https://www.cslewisinstitute.org)
- [A Guide to Prayer and Fasting - General Assembly \(pcaga.org\)](https://www.pcaga.org)
- [A Guide to Christian Fasting | Desiring God](#)
- Why Should I Fast? Daniel R Hyde

