

Frequently Asked Questions on Fasting

What is fasting?

Fasting is abstinence from food and/or drink. However, fasting is not dieting. Fasting is an abstinence aimed at seeking the Lord. While Jesus was fasting, he was tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread in order to feed himself. In reply to Satan's temptation he said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). In fasting, we acknowledge that we have a need that is greater than food, a need satisfied only by God's Word.

What is the purpose of fasting?

The primary purpose for fasting is to seek God. Fasting is self denial in an effort to focus on seeking God. The prophet Zechariah was told to ask the people, "When you fasted...was it really for me that you fasted?" (Zechariah 7:5). Physical benefits, focus in prayer, greater Scriptural understanding and spiritual discernment, as well as greater strength to face temptation—these may each be outcomes of fasting, but they are not the primary purpose. The primary purpose of fasting is to seek God. Anna never left the temple but worshiped day and night, fasting and praying (Luke 2:37), constantly seeking God's presence. Jesus said to his disciples, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:32, 34). How easily we allow nonessentials to take the place of what is essential. Fasting helps us place our relationship with God in its proper place—first. And the good news is that we are promised that all who seek him will find him (Jeremiah 29:13,14, Matthew 7:8). In that the primary purpose for fasting is seeking God, it helps us to:

- *Focus us in prayer*
Every example of fasting in the Bible is joined with the activity of prayer. To fast without praying is simply to diet. Ezra declared a fast while petitioning God for safety (Ezra 8:23). Nehemiah and Daniel fasted while asking God to act on behalf of the Israelites in exile (Nehemiah 1:4, Daniel 9:3). The Christians in Antioch fasted and prayed while seeking God in the commissioning of Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:3). However, it is important to understand that fasting does not compel God to act according to our prayers. Fasting is not a hunger strike, aimed at coercing God to do our bidding. In fact, we know that God refused to listen to the Israelites even though they fasted during Jeremiah's day (Jeremiah 14:12). And David fasted while the son of Bathsheba was dying, but God did not act according to David's prayers to spare the boy's life (2 Samuel 12:16). Remember, we fast because we are weak and fleshly, not because God is unwilling to meet with us. We don't need to strong arm God. God is good (Psalm 119:8) and eager to answer our prayers. He is generous (James 1:5) and eager to give us 'good things' (Matthew 7:11).
- *Understand God's will in a matter*
The Israelites fasted and prayed to discern God's will for them in war (Judges 20:28). The early church fasted and prayed before appointing elders in order to receive God's guidance in the process (Acts 14:23). While fasting doesn't guarantee we will understand God's will, it can help us be more receptive to hearing and obeying.
- *Wait upon God's deliverance or protection*
King Jehoshaphat declared a fast for all of Judah, calling them to seek God's deliverance from their enemies (2 Chronicles 20:3-4). Ezra called a fast asking for the Lord's protection along his journey (Ezra 8:21-23). Esther called a fast as she prepared to approach king Xerxes uninvited (Esther 4:16). Paul fasted while waiting for restoration (Acts 9:9). In each of these cases, leaders utilized fasting to help cultivate a humble dependence upon God's protection rather than depending upon their own strength and abilities.

- *Express grief over sin and repentance*
Repentance is a change of mind and direction, and fasting has historically been an indication of one's resolve to follow after God. The Israelites fasted in repentance of their idolatry (1 Samuel 7:6). Jonathan went without food in grief over his father's shameful behavior (1 Samuel 20:34). Through the prophet Joel, God specifically commanded the people to fast in repentance (Joel 2:12). The Ninevites fasted in grief over their sin (Jonah 3:5). At the same time, it is important to understand that going without food or water cannot purchase our forgiveness. We are made acceptable to God only through the work of Christ Jesus, not our own works (Ephesians 2:8-10).
- *Express our humility before God*
Wicked King Ahab humbled himself before God through fasting (1 Kings 21:27-29). David humbled himself through fasting (Psalms 35:13). Fasting, when practiced with the right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him. We should also understand that fasting can also express pride, if our hearts are not truly broken (Luke 18:12), and we are only promised reward for fasting when we fast with appropriate motives (Matthew 6:17-18)
- *Prepare for temptation*
Jesus fasted in preparation for temptation (Matthew 4:1-11).

Is fasting required of Christians?

Fasting is not required of Christians. We are never told in the New Testament that we must fast. Fasting is a voluntary activity. But Jesus did assume his followers would fast. When Jesus spoke about fasting, he didn't say *if you fast*, but "when you fast," indicating that he expected his disciples would fast (Matthew 6:16). Furthermore, Jesus taught that fasting was a response to his absence and a reflection of our longing to be in his presence (Matthew 9:15). So while there are no biblical requirements to fast, we shouldn't use our freedom to live without discipline (Galatians 5:13).

Doesn't fasting send the message that food is bad?

Food is meant to be a source of enjoyment (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25; 5:18, 1 Timothy 4:1-4). When Jesus was tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread, he did not refuse by saying that bread is bad. In reply to Satan's temptation he said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). In fasting we simply acknowledge that we have a need that is greater than food, a need satisfied only by God.

Will we fast in heaven?

We will not fast in heaven. Heaven is described as a great banquet, a time and place of feasting (Matthew 22:1-14)! In fact, when Jesus was asked why his disciples did not observe a regular fast, he explained that it was because there was no reason to "mourn," because he was with them (Matthew 9:14-15). In heaven there will be no reason to mourn, only to celebrate (Revelation 7:17).

Can children fast?

Children can fast, but it needs to be under the strict instruction and supervision of their parents.

What do we do during the time that we would normally eat?

Pray! Fasting without prayer is simply dieting. We should also read Scripture. God speaks through His Word and we are often softened to receiving and responding to His Word when we fast. Beyond prayer and Scripture reading, we should go about our normal activities (Matthew 6:16-18).

Isn't fasting supposed to be done in secret?

Fasting is to be a private matter, and Jesus warns his disciples not to parade their fasting for others to see (Matthew 6:16-18). However, Jesus did not forbid our fasting together, and there are corporate fasts recorded in the Bible. For example, each year on the Day of Atonement the entire Israelite nation fasted together (Leviticus 23:27). And Joel and Jehoshaphat both called national fasts, and all of Nineveh fasted in response to Jonah's message of coming judgment (Joel 2:15, 2 Chronicles 20:1-4, Jonah 3:5).

Can we substitute other "lifestyle" choices for food?

Fasting is voluntary and each individual is free to determine the nature of their fast. For this reason, it is popular to abstain from activities such as watching television, listening to the radio, or shopping, rather than food. However, fasting from food provides a unique opportunity to cultivate a hunger for God, because nothing softens our heart quite as quickly as physical suffering.

What if we have medication that must be taken with food?

If you are on medication that must be taken with food, then we would encourage a partial fast such as drinking only water, and forgoing all other beverages, or eating only fruits and vegetables. If you are planning an extended fast, or if you are pregnant, nursing, diabetic, or have a physical condition that depends on a regular diet, talk to your doctor before starting your fast.

What if we have never fasted before?

As with most disciplines, it is important to be patient with yourself and allow some time to build discipline. Begin by simply missing one meal, or only eating fruit or vegetables for the day. Over time you will be able to go for longer periods without eating. Make your last meal before beginning the fast a light meal. Gorging yourself before you begin the fast has the unintended consequence of stretching you stomach out and only making you feel hungrier later.

What are some cautions we should be aware of when fasting?

- There are no biblical examples of people fasting in order to lose weight, and we should be aware that some may use fasting as a cover for unhealthy behavior such as anorexia.
- Although fasting may be an important part of one's spiritual life, it should be viewed as only one of many spiritual disciplines available to us. We are not more spiritual because we fast. A single fast, however, is not a spiritual cure-all. Just as we need fresh infillings of the Holy Spirit daily, we also need new times of fasting before God. A 24-hour fast each week has been greatly rewarding for many Christians.
- Fasting is not a substitute for obedience to Christ's commands. The people of Isaiah's day thought that they could fast in disobedience and God would hear them. But God said, "On the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling 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" (Isaiah 58:3b-4).

How long should I fast?

Each person should determine the length of their fast. Only one fast was ever command in the Bible and that was the fast on the Day of Atonement. This fast was from sunset of one day through sunset of the next day (Leviticus 16:29, 23:32). Fasts that lasted for extended periods were exceptions. Some examples of these longer fasts include: Moses (Deuteronomy 9:9-18 and Exodus 34:28); Elijah (1 Kings 19:8); and Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11).

What are the different types of fasting?

There are very few "rules" when it comes to fasting. Each person is free to define the parameters of their abstinence, and the options for fasting are virtually limitless. Some of the more common fasts include:

- No food or drink – this is a radically restrictive fast and should be limited in its scope. Going without food and drink can be harmful to your health and should be done rarely. Esther decided to fast for three days abstaining from both "food and water" both "day and night" (Esther 4:15-16). The rabbi Ezra and the apostle Paul also went without food and water for three days (Ezra 10:6-9; Acts 9:9).
- No food, water only – this type of fast is more common, but should be limited to those who do not need to eat for medical reasons.
- Some foods, water only - in this type of fast, the emphasis is placed on restricting one's diet to certain types of food, rather than abstaining completely from eating. Daniel ate fruits and vegetables and drank only water (Daniel 1:16, 10:3). Other types of restrictions may include going without desserts, or breads, or designer drinks (coffees and alcohol).

What should we expect physically while fasting?

Depending on the length and type of fast, you can expect lightheadedness, even dizziness, headaches, or nausea. If you fast for longer periods of time, you may experience muscle cramps as well. You may feel more tired than usual and it will be important to limit your physical activity. Rest as much as your schedule will permit. You may feel uniquely impatient, cranky, anxious and even "low." The first two or three days are usually the hardest in an extended fast. As your fast continues though, you will likely experience a sense of well-being both physically and spiritually.

What if I fast and nothing good happens?

Jesus promised that God will reward those who fast with the right motives (Matthew 6:18). We can be confident that something good will happen, although the spiritual benefit might not be immediately obvious.

How should I get ready for a fast?

- First, begin with prayer, asking God to help you identify the type and length of your fast. Make sure to consult your calendar to see whether social commitments will conflict with the time of fasting.
- Second, identify when and where you will pray and read Scripture while fasting. It is easy to miss the opportunity for prayer and Scripture reading, because we are tempted to stay busy in order to avoid hunger pains. Many have found praying and reading during meal time most effective.
- Third, prepare yourself spiritually by spending some time at the outset confessing sin. Ask the Holy Spirit to convict you of sin and receive God's promised forgiveness (1 John 1:9). If you find that you are harboring unforgiveness toward someone, then ask the Holy Spirit for the power to forgive them and seek reconciliation as he leads (Matthew 6:14-15).
- Fourth, prepare yourself physically. You may need to consult a physician, especially if you take prescription medication or have chronic ailments. It's also wise to prepare physically by eating smaller meals before starting a fast. Avoid high-fat and sugary foods.
- Finally, begin your fast with an expectant heart. God promises to reward those who fast with right motives and to be found by those who seek him (Matthew 6:18, 7:8, Hebrews 11:6).

How do I finish a fast?

Breaking a fast well varies depending upon the type of fast. Ending your fast gradually is a good rule of thumb. If you were abstaining from solid foods, then do not eat solid foods immediately. Suddenly reintroducing solid food to your digestive tract will likely have negative, even dangerous, consequences. Begin with several smaller meals of fruits and vegetables or snacks each day. Light soups are helpful, along with drinking fruit or vegetable juices. Next add in salads and then gradually increase your diet.