

The Biblical Way To Fast

'Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and later He was hungry' (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2).

'Moses was up the mountain with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he ate no bread and drank no water' (Exodus 34:28).

Jesus and Moses fasted a complete fast; that is they did not eat any food, nor did they drink any water for more than a month. Moses did that twice in the space of 120 days. He went up the mountain for forty days and fasted during that time, then he came down the mountain for forty days and ate normally, then he went back up the mountain and fasted for a further forty days before coming back down again. Daniel fasted a partial fast for twenty-one days (Daniel 10:2 & 3). As Christians, we are called to fast from time to time (Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:20; Luke 5:35). Fasting is always accompanied by prayer. What is fasting for? What does it accomplish? Other than denying food and water, what other types of fasting are there? Fasting is for a number of reasons which we will look at, and when fasting is done with the correct motive and attitude, it accomplishes God's will. Other types of fasting will be looked at later.

Fasting food and water can be used to show repentance. 'They gathered at Mizpah, drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day and said, "We have sinned against the Lord"' (1 Samuel 7:6). 'When I heard this, I sat down and wept and mourned for days and fasted and prayed constantly before the God of heaven ... confessing the sins of Israel ...' (Nehemiah 1:4 to 11; 9:1 to 3). 'Therefore, says the Lord, turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning' (Joel 2:12). The whole city of Nineveh repented, fasted and turned to God (Jonah 3:1 to 10).

Fasting can be used to prevail against the enemy and receive deliverance from trouble. 'And in every province, wherever the king's decree came there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing, and many lay in sackcloth and ashes ... "Gather all the Jews and fast for me, neither eat nor drink for three days and three nights and I will fast the same way"' (Esther 4:3, 16). The Jews won a great victory, helped along by their fasting.

Fasting can be used to increase the power of God in our life so we can serve the Lord more effectively just as Jesus did. He was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12) and came out of the desert full of the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:14). Jesus did not perform one miracle until after He was baptised in water by full immersion and had fasted for forty days.

Fasting can be a form of worship, and fasting can also be a response to the call of God. 'While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting the Holy Spirit said, "Separate now for Me, Barnabas and Saul, for the work to which I have called them." After fasting and praying, they laid hands on them and sent them away' (Acts 13:2 & 3). 'When they had appointed elders for them in each church with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in Whom they had come to believe' (Acts 14:23).

Fasting can be used to diligently seek the will of God. 'The whole army of Israelites came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening, and the Israelites inquired of the Lord' (Judges 20:26 & 27). Jehoshaphat set himself to seek the Lord and proclaimed a fast throughout Judah (2 Chronicles 20:3).

Fasting can be used to receive healing or deliverance for ourselves or others (2 Samuel 12:16 to 23). 'When they were sick ... I afflicted myself with fasting and I prayed' (Psalm 35:13). 'This kind (of evil force causing epilepsy) does not go out except by prayer and fasting' (Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29).

Fasting can be used to humble ourselves before the Lord. 'I (Ezra) proclaimed a fast there so we might humble ourselves before our God ...' (Ezra 8:21) 'When I (David) wept and humbled myself with fasting, I was humiliated' (Psalm 69:10).

Fasting can be used to ask God's help. 'So we fasted and sought our God for this, and He heard our prayer' (Ezra 8:23).

Fasting can be used to ask for necessary provisions, such as food or water in times of drought or bushfires. 'Wail all you vinedressers for the wheat, barley and the harvest of the field has perished. The vine has dried up and the fig, pomegranate, palm, apple and all the trees of the field are withered ... Sanctify a fast and gather the elders ... The seed rots and shrivels. The granaries are empty ... The beasts groan. The herds of livestock are starving ... O Lord, to You will I cry ... The wild beasts pant for the water has dried up and fire has consumed the pastures' (Joel 1:11 to 20).

Fasting can achieve the impossible. 'The king went to his palace and passed the night fasting ... and his sleep fled from him ... he cried out in a voice of anguish ... My God has sent an angel ...' (Daniel 6:16 to 24).

Fasting is serious business to God and we must not take it lightly. 'Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders ... and cry to the Lord' (Joel 1:14).

We are not to use fasting as a reason to be proud. 'God, I thank You I am not like the rest of men ... I fast twice a week ... Jesus said, "I tell you, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted"' (Luke 18:11 to 14).

Fasting can be done individually, like Jesus, Moses and Daniel did; a whole church can be called to fast, or a city (Jeremiah 36:9). In times of strife, an army or a whole nation can be called on to fast. However, unless we are called to collectively fast for a specific purpose, we should fast and pray in secret and tell no one except the Lord. 'Whenever you fast do not be like the hypocrites, for they put on a sad countenance so that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full already. When you fast, perfume your head and wash your face so your fasting may not be noticed by men but by your Father, Who sees you in secret, will reward you in the open' (Matthew 6:16 to 18).

There is no set time for fasting. We can fast for half a day (2 Samuel 1:12), one whole day (Jeremiah 36:6), three days (Esther 4:16), seven days (1 Samuel 31:13), twenty-one days (Daniel 10:3), forty days (like Jesus & Moses did), or repeatedly over a period of years like Anna the prophetess did (Luke 2:36 & 37). We need to take care not to fast a little too much, like King David did. 'My knees are weak from fasting and my body is thin and has no fat' (Psalm 109:24).

There are other types of fasting that have nothing to do with food. Jesus 'fasted' sleep and spent all night in prayer (Luke 6:12). Another scriptural 'fast' is for married couples to abstain for a time, from the sex act by mutual consent, to devote themselves unhindered to prayer (1 Corinthians 7:5). "Is this not the fast that I (the Lord) have chosen? To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and that you break every bondage? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the poor and homeless to your house? When you see the needy, that you clothe him, and that you not forsake your own family?" (Isaiah 58:6 & 7). We need to repent, forgive others then do acts of kindness, not forgetting to help out family members. Jesus said, "I have food to eat of which you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of Him Who sent Me and to complete His work" (John 4:32 & 34). We are not to live solely by food, but by every Word spoken by God and written in the scriptures (Matthew 4:4). Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan and his incredible kindness (Luke 10:30 to 37), and we are told to, "Go and do likewise." Jesus told us to feed and help the poor because they have no financial way of paying us back, and He promised us we will receive our reward in heaven (Luke 14:12 to 14).

We also need to understand that the Lord will not accept our fasting if we have the wrong motives or attitude. Fasting must be an act of faith and sincerity or the Lord will ignore it and will not answer our prayers. 'Fasting as you do today will not cause your voice to be heard on high' (Isaiah 58:4). 'Though they fast, I will not hear their cry' (Jeremiah 14:12). 'Was it for Me that you fasted, for Me?' (Zechariah 7:5). 'Whenever you are fasting do not look sad like the hypocrites do ... for they have their reward in full already' (Matthew 6:16).

When we are called to a collective fast, the group needs to fast all at the same time, but nobody should be told to fast. Fasting has to be from the heart or the Lord will not accept it. For a pastor to tell the people in his church to put their names on a list, then warn them God will know if they do not fast, is not only not scriptural, it is instilling fear. If people fast through fear or a sense of obligation to the church, it cannot possibly be by faith. Giving dire warnings, is using fasting almost like a weapon and God never does that. If fasting is not done by faith, God will ignore it and prayers will not be answered anyway, so it is a wasted effort. Individual fasting should be done in secret, as Jesus clearly tells us. Collective fasting should be done collectively, that is all at the same time, for a specific purpose, for a set time. Even then, the participants need to fast in secret before the Lord and not be coerced to write their names on a list; otherwise they are fasting for the pastor, not for the Lord. No pastor has the scriptural right to use fasting as a weapon against his flock, threatening them with warnings. That is so wrong, there is no way the Lord would bless that, and in fact, it could hinder the growth of the church. Church leaders need to lead by example, not by threats or coercion (1 Peter 5:1 to 3). This 'forced' fasting will not be accepted by the Lord. When we fast, whatever type of fast we choose, must be done by faith, must line up with the scriptures and must be in line with God's will, otherwise it is not done with the correct motive and attitude, and the fasting will be ineffective. Fasting should be done with joy and gladness, cheerfully in love, truth and peace, then followed by a feast and fellowship (Zechariah 8:19).

Amen and God bless you.

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