

Fasting Basics

HE IS
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Greater Than We Think
His Power Working In Us
Eph. 3:20



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Contents

Fasting Basics.....	1
What is fasting?.....	1
Isn't fasting just for those with a special calling to that kind of thing?.....	1
But what about grace? Why would God expect us to fast?.....	2
Is fasting as a Christian different from other kinds of fasting?.....	2
Can't I just read my Bible and pray and get the same benefit without fasting?.....	3
Do I have to commit to something for the rest of my life?.....	3
What sort of spiritual benefit do we get from fasting?.....	3
I tried fasting but didn't see any spiritual benefit, I just felt miserable!.....	4
Are there any physical benefits to fasting?.....	5
I normally eat healthy foods, shouldn't that be good enough?.....	5
What are some of the reasons why people fasted in the Bible?.....	6
What about those who can't fast for medical reasons?.....	6
What are some alternatives to full food fasting?.....	7
How do I get started?.....	8
Is there anything I should do to prepare for a fast?.....	9
Do you have any helpful hints or pointers for me while I am fasting?.....	11
Some suggested resources.....	15

Fasting Basics

This guide is designed to address some of the most basic questions regarding the spiritual discipline of food fasting.

What is fasting?

Fasting is the spiritual discipline of restraining or abstaining from eating in order to gain something spiritually. What is central to the fast is the idea of humbling ourselves through self-denial. Fasting is a **voluntary weakness**.

Fasting is just one of many spiritual disciplines that are all considered part of a normal Christian experience. There are other ways to practice the discipline of self-denial and voluntary weakness that are not tied directly to food (Isaiah 58). This is important for those who have a medical limitation to food fasting. Please see the question on alternative forms of fasting and self-denial later in this guide for more information.

Isn't fasting just for those with a special calling to that kind of thing?

No! While there are some exceptions (addressed later in this guide) the Bible is very clear that fasting is presumed to be part of a normal Christian experience.

But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.

Matt. 6:17-18 (NLT) editor's emphasis

One day some people came to Jesus and asked, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don't fast?" Jesus responded, "Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can't fast while they are with the groom. But someday he will be taken from them, and then they will fast."

Mark 2:18b-21 (NLT) editor's emphasis

My grace is enough for you, because my power is brought to perfection in weakness.

II Corinthians 12:9 (CJB) editor's emphasis

In the first two scriptures Jesus states clearly that He understands His disciples will fast. In the third scripture Paul shares God's promise that it is when we are weak (a condition of fasting) that His power is brought to perfection. There are also many other examples set for us by men and women in scripture showing fasting as a normal part of our spiritual experience. Some of these scriptures will be referenced later in this guide.

But what about grace? Why would God expect us to fast?

Fasting does not earn us anything! It does NOT give us more favor with God, it does not help us to be "saved" or cause God to love us more. Just as with any other form of obedience, done with a proper motivation **fasting helps us position ourselves to receive** all that God has for us. It is part of the denying of ourselves that Jesus talks about many times in scripture (ex. Matthew 10:37-39; 16:24-25). It is an important ingredient in helping us move the focus of our hearts and minds off the natural and onto what cannot be perceived or received with our natural senses.

It is quite literally an emptying of ourselves in the natural to "make room" for more of God. When we weaken ourselves, physically or otherwise, we express in a very real way our understanding that God is the true source of all our life.

Focus your mind on things above, not on things here on the earth.

Col. 3:2 (CJB)

We cannot be like Jesus and do the things we've been created to do without a life of self-denial. Fasting helps us begin this in earnest; we learn about exchanging our hunger for things in this life with a hunger for God (John 6:27, 51-58). We refrain from food, among other things, to express our desire for God. Instead of satisfying ourselves with natural things we learn to look to God for our satisfaction.

Is fasting as a Christian different from other kinds of fasting?

Yes, there are actually two important parts to the Christian fast. In fasting as a Christian the intent is to deny ourselves in the natural in order to gain something spiritually. We accomplish this not only by **abstaining** from things in the natural but by **feeding** ourselves spiritually at the same time.

In order to realize the full value of the Christian fast our abstinence must be coupled with things like Bible reading, prayer, worship, fellowship, service, etc. (Colossians 2:23). Curtailing our food intake without feeding ourselves spiritually is a diet!!!

This does not mean if we fast for a whole day that we *must* spend the entire day in prayer and Bible reading. But it does mean that we should allow for some *extra time* with the Lord during our fasting days.

Can't I just read my Bible and pray and get the same benefit without fasting?

Of course we do gain spiritually from Bible reading and prayer without fasting, but fasting is an intensifier. It helps make us *more* available and sensitive to what we can gain from reading our Bible and praying. And at some point we must begin trusting the wisdom of Jesus for our spiritual development when He says fasting is part of the Christian experience (Matthew 6:17-18; Matthew 9:14-15).

Do I have to commit to something for the rest of my life?

No, fasting is an ongoing *process*. Though fasting will remain a part of our Christian experience it is a dynamic, not a static experience; meaning how we fast will change as our life in Christ progresses. There are different seasons to our fasting. The way you fast today may not at all resemble how you fast a year or two from now. We must continue to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit for the part fasting should play in each season of our lives.

What sort of spiritual benefit do we get from fasting?

Fasting **teaches** us about hungering for God. When we subject ourselves to the experience of fasting we learn what we do to ourselves spiritually by not taking our Daily Bread (Bible reading and fellowship with the Holy Spirit). When we see how quickly our natural body weakens without food we begin to understand what happens to us spiritually when we take a “day off” from the Lord.

We are less sensitive to **spiritual appetites** (our desire for spiritual things) when we are ruled by physical ones. Our **spiritual sensitivity** also benefits as our physical appetites or desires are restrained. If we spend our entire fasting day just feeding on more of the world we will not gain the full benefit available to us in fasting.

If restraining our natural desires helps make us available to gain spiritually, the reverse is also true. When we indulge or satiate ourselves with natural things we limit ourselves spiritually.

The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity.

Luke 8:14 (NLT)

When we keep ourselves satisfied with earthly things, those desires for the pleasures of this world begin to **hinder the intensity** of our desire for God. Instead of being satisfied with natural things we need to learn how to be satisfied in God.

When practiced according to God's design fasting is a powerful weapon for helping us move in the direction of being more **satisfied in God** than in earthly things (maturity). Periodically

turning away from natural things that give us pleasure helps us check their power in our lives so that our satisfaction in God is not threatened or weakened by *legitimate pleasures* from this life.

I tried fasting but didn't see any spiritual benefit, I just felt miserable!

Enduring some physical, social or emotional challenges is part of the *benefit* of fasting. Jesus instructs us to deny ourselves (Mark 8:34) and we must trust His wisdom for our spiritual development. We must also trust that when God says He will reward fasting, (Matthew 6:18) then He will do just that.

Because fasting is a process one or two attempts at it may not always bring a tangible benefit. (Most often the benefit is only realized once the fast is over.) Fasting begins as a discipline and with practice becomes a weapon. Weapons proficiency requires training and practice for wise and effective use.

Are there any physical benefits to fasting?

While there are a few physical benefits to moderate fasting (one to seven days in length) it is not the reason why we fast. The fruit of self-control will deliver the same benefits, and more, without fasting (and with fasting weight loss normally returns once you start eating again).

I normally eat healthy foods, shouldn't that be good enough?

Choosing to eat wisely is a result of self-control and a direct evidence of the activity of the Holy Spirit in our life; a very good thing! But it is not our eating or our abstaining that has the power to influence our spiritual lives. It is in Christ alone that we are changed. This is why in the Christian fast we not only abstain from eating but we must also feed our spirits as we fast.

While eating properly is beneficial it still may not address the core issues addressed in fasting. Fasting is not about giving up what is bad for us. It is much more about forfeiting what is good (food) for what is best (God Himself). Fasting is denying ourselves what is good and necessary. It is not a judgment against the goodness of food (I Timothy 4:3-5) but it says we prefer God to even His good gifts and acknowledges that God alone is the true source of our life.

You have died with Christ and he has set you free from the evil powers of this world. So why do you keep on following rules of the world, such as, "Don't handle, don't eat, don't touch." Such rules are mere human teaching about things that are gone as soon as we use them. These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, humility and severe bodily discipline. But they have no effect when it comes to conquering a person's evil thoughts and desires.

Col. 2:20-23 (NLT)

What are some of the reasons why people fasted in the Bible?

The reason for the fast is a very important part of the fast. We should be very clear about our reason(s) for fasting. There are many different reasons in the Bible for fasting. Some are:

To be like Jesus	Matthew 4:2
To obey Jesus	Matthew 6:16-18; 9:15
Part of worship	Acts 13:2
	Luke 2:37
Preparation for service	Acts 13:3; 14:23
Physical Discipline	I Corinthians 6:12; 9:27
	James 4:1-10
At God's Command (corporate)	Leviticus 23:32
Mourning	I Samuel 31:11-13
Repentance and Forgiveness	Joel 1:13-14; 2:12
	Jonah 3:4-9
To Seek God's Help	II Chronicles 20:1-4
To Seek God's Favor	Esther 4:16
	Nehemiah 1:3-11
To Seek Direction from the LORD	Judges 20:24-27
To express our longing for Jesus	Matthew 9:15

In scripture fasting is frequently associated with prayer or intercession. Many of the scriptures listed above demonstrate the relationship between the intensity of the desire and the inclusion of fasting. **Fasting expresses intensity.**

What about those who can't fast for medical reasons?

Any normally healthy adult can safely fast from one to seven days without incurring any significant, permanent health problems, but there are some people for whom this type of fasting should only be done under the supervision of their primary health care provider. There are others for whom a full food fast is not an option.

Some people who should NOT do full food fasting include:

- Persons who are physically too thin or emaciated
- Persons who are prone to anorexia, bulimia or other behavioral disorders
- Persons with weakness or anemia

- Persons with tumors, bleeding ulcers, cancer, blood diseases or heart disease
- Persons with chronic problems of the kidney, liver, lungs, heart or other major organs
- Persons who take insulin for diabetes or who have hyperglycemia
- Persons recuperating from surgery or accidents
- Women who are pregnant or nursing

While full food fasting may be out of reach for some, the spiritual benefits of practicing self denial are not. The fact is that very often those with medical conditions are already under some dietary restraint *because* of their medical condition. When we take the attitude of doing it for the Lord and add the “feeding” part of the Christian fast you have a very good long term discipline of self denial! But there are also other ways to practice self denial that do not include food.

What are some alternatives to full food fasting?

There are many forms of voluntary weakness (self denial).

As an example we sacrifice:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|----|--------------------|
| • Physical Strength | in | Food Fasting |
| • Social/Relational Strength | in | Solitude |
| • Financial Strength | in | Tithing and giving |
| • Strength to Accomplish (Time) | in | Prayer |

Some other alternatives to a full food fast might be:

- Partial food fasting mixed with varying lengths of abstinence
- Time restraints on eating (not before noon, not after 3:00 PM etc.)
- Entertainments (TV, movies, video, books, sports, eating out, etc.)
- Favorite pastimes (shopping, various recreations, computer, hobbies etc.)

The partial food fast might be an option for some with medical limitations but it is also an excellent way to begin exploring the grace of fasting. The partial food fast is modeled for us by Daniel who ate “no satisfying food” for three weeks (Daniel 10:3).

You can mix the partial food fast with varying lengths of time. A more severe restriction on what you allow yourself to eat might be combined with a shorter length of time for the fast; the more generous you are about what

you can eat the longer period of time you can choose to abstain. For example you might choose eating only fruits and vegetables for a week or two or try eliminating your favorite foods for a month or more.

Restricting your eating by time of day is another option, eating only one meal a day or choosing to eat only during certain hours. An example of this might be not eating between 6:00 am and 6:00 pm or only eating between 11:00 am to 1:00 pm, etc., and practicing this for several days or more.

You can also augment a total abstinence fast (no solid food) with fruit juice or clear vegetable broth. A very small amount of juice (normally diluted by one half to two thirds) or broth can have a very dramatic effect on your energy level while fasting. Remember we are engaged in trying to make ourselves more available to the Holy Spirit not just trying to see how miserable we can make ourselves feel in the process.

As with any fast it is always wise to restrict, if not eliminate all entertainments and spend that time in extra Bible reading, prayer, worship, fellowship, or service. Remember, in the Christian fast we are not just abstaining from food but in place of eating we are feeding our spirit.

How do I get started?

As has already been mentioned, fasting is a process and it is wise to start with manageable lengths and progress from there. You might begin by skipping one meal in a day. If you choose this option it is wise to set a time frame for not eating, like 9:00 am to 6:00 pm. If you just say you are going to skip lunch and eat at 11:00 am and then eat again at 1:00 pm, you have in fact skipped lunch, but you have not fasted!

The next level of intensity would be eating only one meal in a day (no snacking!).

After that you might choose a 24 hour fast going from, say 6:00 pm on Tuesday evening till 6:00 pm on Wednesday evening. This way you have done a full 24 hours but still had at least one meal each day.

The next level would be a full 36 hour fast. An example of this would be not eating from 6:00 pm on Wednesday evening until 6:00 am on Friday morning. In this instance you have gone a full waking day without eating.

You also always have the option of combining partial food fasting with varying lengths of time.

You will have much more success with regular fasting intervals than trying to do something only once or twice a year. As with any form of self denial there will be some discomfort but if you start gradually and increase over time your body will learn how to adapt and you will be amazed at what you will be able to tolerate while continuing to fulfill your obligations. The objective is the ongoing practice of making ourselves available to God, not just getting one big “fasting trophy” and spending the rest of our life talking about it.

A special note for those with physically, mentally or emotionally strenuous jobs:

All fasting is not equal! For a delivery driver who is lifting hundreds, if not thousands of pounds in a day, a 24 hour fast is more intense than for someone who is sitting at a desk most of the day. Some jobs are just more physically, mentally or emotionally demanding than others and you must allow for this and let the Holy Spirit show you what is right for you.

Is there anything I should do to prepare for a fast?

Yes! There are some very important things to think about before you begin your fast.

Determine your Purpose or Motivation for the Fast

This can be as simple and general as just wanting more of God, to something very specific like guidance for a particular question and anything else in between.

Determine the Kind of Fast

Answer questions like “How Long” and “What Type” of fast. Choosing a fast will partly depend on your occupation and normal physical demands. Avoid fasting over holidays or special family days and minimize unnecessary activities (shopping, errands, visiting, or entertainment). Think about how much additional time you will spend “feeding” your spirit with prayer, worship, fellowship, service, or Bible reading.

Write down your reason(s) for the fast, the length and type of fast and put it in your Bible.

It is important to actually write these things out because when you are in the middle of a fast your reasons for doing it can become very hazy and it is helpful to be able to look at your reason(s) and remember clearly why you started in the first place.

If you do not commit to a definite type of fast with a firm beginning and ending it will be too easy to wander away from your original intentions. It is good to have these things written out to strengthen your resolve when you are weak or wavering.

Physically

- Consult your doctor* if you have any physical limitations or are on any medications (see the list of those who should NOT food fast)
- Consider your scheduling and physical exercise limitations
- Avoid sugar, alcohol, and caffeine, at least three days prior to your fast
- Resist having that “last big feast”

*Many medical doctors are untrained in the area of fasting and may object to any kind of a full food fast. If you are in good health you may want to get a second opinion from a Christian doctor or nutritionist and proceed with caution.

Spiritually

- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you
- Spend some time in self-examination and confession
- Follow through on any restitution as led by the Holy Spirit
- Prepare some scriptures for meditation

Socially

- Consider who will need to know about your fast
- If you live with children use the fast as a teaching example and explain simply (depending on their ages) what you are doing and why. This will help them to view fasting as a normal part of being a Christian, just like going to church.
- It is wise to have someone praying for you, especially if you are just beginning or are attempting a long term fast
- It is also helpful to have one or two people to whom you can be accountable during your fast
- Weigh the concerns of your loved ones and those in authority with the leading of the Holy Spirit
- Consider what you will say to those who will inevitably notice you are not eating (“I have other plans for lunch today...”). Do not seek it out, but don’t be afraid to be honest with anyone if the subject becomes unavoidable. This is an open door for you to share about who God is in your life.
- Think about how you will handle the family mealtimes

For longer fasts reading some Christian literature devoted to long term fasting is recommended

Long term, water only fasting is not advised without advice from those who have participated in this kind of activity. It is best done under the supervision of those to whom you are spiritually accountable.

Do you have any helpful hints or pointers for me while I am fasting?

Some Physical and Emotional Effects to Expect

Be prepared for some temporary social, physical and mental discomforts!

Missing the social or mental pleasure of eating is usually as intense as the physical desire to eat

You may find yourself feeling irritable and impatient early in the fast. This is partially a result of the tension created in your body as it looks for an alternate source of energy. Practice patience! Over time your body comes to understand what to do and this tension subsides.

Hunger Pangs – the first three days are generally the worst. This is your body learning to make the switch from using the food in your digestive tract (which usually stays about three days) to burning stored fat.

Later in the day may prove more challenging both emotionally and physically than early in the day, plan on spending some of that time with the LORD.

Feeling cold or tingling sensations is the body conserving its energy!

Light-headed or dizziness from a sudden change in position - this should be minor and temporary.

Body aches and/or headaches can be a result of the body burning fatty tissue

Sleeplessness (built in extra time with the LORD!)

Bad breath, increased body odor, a white coating on your tongue. These are a normal result of your body throwing off the toxins which were stored in burned fat. Avoid gum or breath mints as these will stimulate digestive juices in your stomach. Alfalfa tablets will help control bad breath.

Headaches or stomachaches are commonly associated with salt, sugar or caffeine withdrawal. Eliminating these prior to the fast will help minimize

these discomforts.

Physical weakness – the weakness experienced in a moderate fast is again due to the body trying to conserve energy while looking for an alternate energy source. Physical activity should be minimized which provides the perfect opportunity to spend more time in prayer and Bible reading, etc.

Lower back pain may indicate you are not drinking enough water

Weight loss – though some may list this as a benefit, it is only temporary, weight will return once you begin eating again.

During Your Fast

These are general suggestions only. Your body may react or tolerate things differently and you should go with what works best for you.

- Drink Water (over three days without water is considered deadly).
- Drink natural (no sugar added) fruit and vegetable juices, diluted one-half to two-thirds
- Fruit juice (restorers) in the morning, vegetable juice/broth (builders) in the afternoon
- Avoid highly acidic juices (citrus, pineapple, tomato)
- Milk is considered a pure food, take it if your conscious allows for it.
- But for longer fasts avoid drinks containing protein or fat, like soy or milk as these “restart” the digestive processes.
- Nutritionists debate the value of taking vitamins or food supplements during a fast. Some say they can only be absorbed while eating food. You may find that they are upsetting to your stomach. This would be a personal conviction whether to maintain some vitamins or minerals during your fast.
- Avoid caffeine, it is a stimulant and will work against the physical aspects of the fast.

If you are doing a partial food fast it is possible you will have the opportunity to eat something during the fast that you are not sure is in the “OK to eat category”. These decisions are hard to make in the middle of a fast and the best choice is to just pass on anything you are not sure about.

If you “blow it” and eat something you should not have eaten, don’t give up! Just continue on and finish what you started. You will still be better off in the end, even if you did falter.

Breaking Your Fast

When breaking shorter fasts (one to three days in duration) using common sense about what you choose to eat and how much you eat will generally be sufficient to bring you safely back to normal. For the first day avoid large meals, fatty foods, meats and foods or drinks with high sugar content. Begin with light foods in small portions on the first day.

Breaking an extended fast (seven days or more) is as important as the fast itself. Your body’s digestive system has been “asleep” and you will need to wake it gently and gradually. After a 40 day fast you should plan on at least three days of transition before returning to eating normal foods and quantities. The physical side effects of unwisely breaking a long term fast can be quite severe.

*God – you are my God!
I can't get enough of
you! I've worked up such
hunger and thirst for God,
traveling across dry and
weary deserts. So here
I am in the place of wor-
ship, eyes open, drinking
in your strength and glory.*

Psalm 63:1-2 (The Message)

Much of what your system will tolerate you will learn from trial and error but it is better to error on the side of caution when you are just learning about what works best for you. Most recommend breaking the fast by gradually adding raw or steamed vegetables to your diet in increasing quantities and moving gradually to fresh fruits.

Eat smaller portions more frequently throughout the day. How much you eat is as important as what you eat.

Take smaller bites than normal and chew your food more thoroughly than you may be used to.

For digestion to begin your body must produce thousands of enzymes. This takes time, energy and nutrients! Make sure you give your body time to build its enzyme production. Your body has been resting and it doesn't function “half asleep” any better than you do! Limit the variety of foods you eat in the first few days. Different foods require different enzymes and simpler is better while your body is “gearing back up”.

Do not drink a lot of liquid during meals. This will dilute the digestive juices your body is creating to digest the food. Your body has to heat iced beverages before they can be absorbed and this also takes energy away from

its ability to produce what is needed for digestion.

Carefully consider your schedule on the days you will be breaking a long-term fast. It is not unusual to experience some nausea, cramping or diarrhea.

Avoid beginning with starches such as potatoes, breads (except for “Melba Toast”), rice, pasta, etc. The primary reason for this is that although they are easy to digest they swell in your digestive system and it is too easy to eat more than you should and end up with severe digestive discomfort.

*God blesses you
who are hungry
now, for you will
be satisfied.*

Luke 6:21 (NLT)

Avoid meats, fats and dairy products for the first several days after a long term fast; begin introducing them slowly and in small amounts.

Although you may feel hungry after a long term fast, be mentally ready to eat only small portions of simple foods on the first few days.

Some suggested resources:

www.billbright.com/howtofast/*

A Hunger For God, John Piper

Celebration of Discipline, Richard J. Foster

Fasting For Spiritual Breakthrough, Elmer Towns

Roots and Fruits of Fasting, Mary Ruth Swope*

The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives, Dallas Willard

- * Most suggestions in this guide regarding nutrition and the physical reactions to fasting have been taken from these two resources

VCFNP.com
vineyard
christian fellowship of north phoenix

6250 W Peoria Ave
Glendale, AZ 85302

tel 623.934.4000
fax 623.934.3747