

Topic 26: Fasting

Cultivating an Appetite for the Things of God

“‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’”

—Joel 2:12



Maybe you’ve heard spiritually minded people speak about *fasting*. Or perhaps you’ve got friends who have given up certain foods or habits for Lent. What’s all that about? And more importantly, why is fasting such an important practice for the disciples of Jesus?

In this lesson, we want to examine this obscure, often misunderstood practice.

- ▶ What is it?
- ▶ Why is it important?
- ▶ How do we practice it?

When you hear the word “fasting,” what thoughts and images come to mind?



What is fasting?

The Old Testament Hebrew verb “to fast” is *tsoom*. It means, as we might expect, to abstain from food. The comparable New Testament Greek word is *nēsteuō*. This word has the added nuance of meaning “to be empty.”

Biblical fasting, then, as defined by most people, is choosing to go without food—and sometimes drink—for a specified length of time. There are other types of fasts, but we’ll start with food.

Bible Study

1. What's the longest time you ever went without eating? What were the reasons?

Why Is Fasting Important?

The Bible seems to set forth at least four purposes for fasting.

Purpose #1: To show sorrow for sin, whether personal or national.

In the table below, read the verses in the right column, and in the left, write down who it is that is fasting to show sorrow for sin. Identify whether this is an example of personal or national sorrow.

Who is expressing sorrow?	Scripture
	"When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the Lord'" (1 Samuel 7:6).
	"So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: 'Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws'" (Daniel 9:3-5).
	"Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles" (Ezra 10:6, ESV).
	"They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.' When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 1:3-4).



2. Why not just pray about sin? Why the added step of denying oneself food?

Purpose #2: To attempt to hear from God and/or to seek his intervention.

Fasting can help us focus on seeking God and listening to hear his voice.

Circumstance	Scripture
When Esther was going to ask the Persian king to spare her fellow Jews.	"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16, <small>ESV</small>).
Before the Jewish exiles began the trip back to their homeland.	"And there by the Ahava Canal, I gave orders for all of us to fast and humble ourselves before our God. We prayed that he would give us a safe journey and protect us, our children, and our goods as we traveled. For I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to accompany us and protect us from enemies along the way. After all, we had told the king, 'Our God's hand of protection is on all who worship him, but his fierce anger rages against those who abandon him.' So we fasted and earnestly prayed that our God would take care of us, and he heard our prayer" (Ezra 8:21-23, <small>NLT</small>).

3. Imagine you had a friend who said, "Fasting seems like you're just trying to manipulate God—Look at how serious I am—I'm not even eating! Now, God, you have to give me what I'm asking for!" How would you respond to this friend?



Purpose #3: To seek discernment for a looming decision or guidance for next steps.

Circumstance	Scripture
Paul, immediately after his conversion.	"He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink" (Acts 9:9, NLT).
The church, before sending out missionaries.	"Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:1-3).
Paul and his cohorts, before appointing and commissioning church leaders.	"They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust" (Acts 14:21-23).

4. How and why might fasting help you have clarity when you face big decisions?

Purpose #4: To practice self-control.

"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control;

"Fasting is abstaining from anything that hinders prayer."
—Andrew Bonar

and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in

your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:5-8).



Remember the idea that the Greek word for fasting, *nēsteuō*, also means “to be empty”? This is why fasting is important to disciples of Jesus. Sometimes we “fill up” on the wrong things. We become so satiated with earthly things, we don’t have appetite or room for the things of God.

“Prayer is reaching out after the unseen; fasting is letting go of all that is seen and temporal. Fasting helps express, deepen, confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.”
—Andrew Murray

When we choose to do without something to which we’ve grown accustomed, and perhaps even attached, we feel empty and needy. *And that’s a good thing, not a bad thing!* The goal with fasting is to take our emptiness and our restless powerful longings to Jesus, who alone can satisfy. The point is to deprive ourselves, to exercise self-control over any and all powerful appetites so that we can focus more fully on God and cultivate our love for and trust in him.

What is something that would be hard for you to give up—even temporarily?

How Does Fasting “Work”?

In the Old Testament, only one fast a year was commanded—the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29, 31; 23:27–32). Late in Jewish history, other fasts were instituted (Esther 9:31; Zechariah 8:19). All other

NOTE

Fasting is not a statement about God’s good gifts. When we choose to abstain from food or sex or technology, we are not denigrating those things. Each, when viewed and used properly, is a wonderful blessing from God. Fasting is one way to help us make sure those good things don’t become paramount things. Fasting helps us redirect our desires toward the only one who can truly satisfy us.

fasting was personal and/or voluntary. Since the Jewish people saw sunset as the end of the day, they would often eat supper just before sunset, then fast until supper after sunset the following day (thus skipping a breakfast and a lunch).

In the New Testament we don’t find any explicit commands to fast. We note that Jesus fasted (Matthew 4:2) and he assumed his disciples would (Matthew 6:16–18; Luke 5:33–35). From the passages already given, we know that Paul participated in the spiritual practice of fasting.

“Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.”
—Martyn Lloyd-Jones



5. What would be some good reasons for you to fast in your life right now?

6. What would be some wrong reasons to fast?

7. What's your biggest takeaway from this lesson?

“The purpose of fasting is to loosen to some degree the ties which bind us to the world of material things and our surroundings as a whole, in order that we may concentrate all our spiritual powers upon the unseen and eternal things.”
—O. Hallesby

Take-Home Reflections



Tips and Reminders for the Spiritual Discipline of Fasting

- ▶ If you have a chronic medical condition or are pregnant, check with your physician first.
- ▶ Drink plenty of water.
- ▶ Start small—instead of fasting for a day, fast for one meal.
- ▶ Consider fasting from a particular kind of food to which you feel unhealthily attached such as desserts or caffeine.
- ▶ Remember that fasting from things we *want*—such as entertainment—can sometimes be harder than things we really *need*—like food.
- ▶ Remember fasting isn't magic, and it doesn't obligate God to give you what you seek (2 Samuel 12:16–20).
- ▶ Use missed meal times—prep, cooking, eating, and clean-up—as opportunities to draw near to God and pray.
- ▶ Don't be legalistic. If not drinking coffee gives you a splitting headache, then drink your morning java!
- ▶ Don't make a public declaration of your fasting (Matthew 6:16–18).
- ▶ Don't limit fasting to food. You may abstain from shopping, the Internet, social media, excessive exercise, going to movies, email, watching sports, even sex with your spouse for a brief time (1 Corinthians 7:5).
- ▶ Break your fast carefully. Don't gorge on whatever you've been fasting from.

Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our memory verse, Joel 2:12.
 2. Read and consider Isaiah 58:6–7.
 3. Wrestle with one or two of the following:
 - ▶ Does the thought of doing without certain things—even temporarily—make you fidgety or nervous?
 - ▶ What things do you turn to when you begin to feel restless or empty?
- ▶ What “wants” in your life would you find most difficult to deny yourself?
 - ▶ The purpose of fasting, or abstaining from a thing, is to loosen that thing's grip on your soul. Fasting is an external practice meant to restore or foster internal health. Agree or not? Why?
 - ▶ When it comes to you personally, would fasting from food be the best way to restore or foster internal health? Or would another form of fasting be more effective? Why?