



THE PRAYER CLOSET

Encouraging & Equipping Believers in Prayer

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Fasting And Feasting

Fasting AND feasting!? Some would hardly connect these two things. People often ask me, "How can you stand to go without food for so long?" I can understand why they ask this. Fasting does involve denying your body for a period of time. I love food. I love to eat. It is a challenge.

Yet, this is looking at it from the wrong perspective. Too many times people focus only on the denial of the body. However, our focus needs to be on what we can enjoy. We can enjoy renewed fellowship with our Father. We can enjoy a heightened sense of praying and listening to the Father. We can enjoy fresh insight into God's Word. We can enjoy answers to prayer. We can enjoy a rich buffet of spiritual blessings when we fast! Fasting is about feasting on God and the things of God. It's more about what we get to experience and enjoy than what we have to deny ourselves.

Fasting doesn't start when you stop eating. Fasting begins when you start seeking God. It's not solely about denying yourself. It is denying yourself for the purpose seeking and enjoying God. Our focus must be God-centered and not self-centered. As much as you hunger for food, you are to hunger for God. As much as you crave something to eat, you must crave the glory of God in the answering of your request. As you much as you may want to eat, you must desire insight and direction from His Word.

When you view fasting solely from the perspective of what you will have to do without, it leads to discouragement and anxiety. It will be a hindrance to you when it comes to fasting. Yet, if you will view it from the feasting perspective – what you get to enjoy – it will encourage you and stir you to fast.

This issue of *The Prayer Closet* will focus on fasting. Perhaps you regularly practice fasting. Maybe you never have. Maybe you are wondering about it or even a little skeptical. I want you to see what the Word of God says about this subject. Moreover, more than that, I hope and pray that you will be encouraged to fast. Just as eating strengthens your physical life, fasting will strengthen your spiritual life.

What Is Fasting?

The most basic definition of fasting is that it is the act of abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose or goal. It is voluntary abstinence from food to accomplish a specific, God-directed purpose. The word for fasting in the Old Testament means, "to cover the mouth." The word for fasting in the New Testament means literally "not to eat."

To fast is to abstain from feeding the body in order to focus on feeding the spirit by seeking God. It is turning away from the natural in order to receive the supernatural.

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Eating is the most natural thing a person does. Fasting is interrupting this so that once can focus on God, His Word, and His will.

Fasting is pulling out of the hectic pace of life in order to have a special time of focusing on God in prayer. The Bible connects fasting with prayer. It is done in order to intensify prayer. In fasting, a person puts aside the desires of the flesh to wholeheartedly seek God in prayer. This provides a deeper experience of the power and presence of God. During a fast, it is not that God hears better, but that you listen better.

Perhaps you're reading this and wondering, "What if I can't go without food? Can I still fast?" There are believers who can't abstain from food because of medical reasons. The primary method of fasting is abstaining from food. Yet, it can have a broader meaning. Fasting can be the voluntary denial of a normal function for the sake of intensely spiritual activity.

For those who cannot abstain from food, this can be your way of fasting. There are many normal things that a person does daily that can be abstained from in order to seek God. If you are not able to abstain from food, you need to consider and pray about what you can deny yourself in order to seek God. Some of the things you might consider are abstaining from involvement from people, watching television, listening to the radio or devices, abstaining from sleep, the telephone, or the Internet.

However you choose to fast, you must keep in mind the feasting principle. I am abstaining from this to seek God. I am denying myself in order to experience and enjoy God, His Word, and His works.

Should A Christian Fast?

The subject of fasting receives a variety of responses. Some people are curious about it. Some are indifferent to it. Some believe that it should be relegated to monks in a monastery. Some feel that it is not for believers today.

Should a Christian fast? We must listen to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. In **Matthew 6**, the Lord Jesus Christ refers to

giving (**6:1-4**), praying (**6:5-15**), and fasting (**6:16-18**). Notice what Jesus says about these subjects. He says "when" you give, "when" you pray, and "when" you fast. The Lord Jesus Christ did not say, "If you give," "If you pray," or "If you fast." He is not giving an option to His people. You cannot choose what you want and leave off what you don't want. There's not a believer who would argue that God does not expect us to pray or to give. However, when we talk about fasting, all sorts of arguments are put forth as to why fasting isn't for today. The church today emphasizes giving and prayer. However, Jesus emphasizes giving, prayer, and fasting.

Because Jesus modeled the practice of fasting and took the time to instruct His disciples in the discipline, it should be a strong indication that He still desires us to fast today. Fasting is not just for a select few, the "super-saints." It is something that needs to be a part of every Christian's life. Just as Christians need to give and pray, they should also fast. Fasting is not obsolete, outdated, or fanatical. It is a spiritual exercise that needs to characterize the lives of those who follow Christ.

In **Mark 2:18-20**, the Lord Jesus Christ is confronted by the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. They were fasting and wanted to know why Christ's disciples were not fasting. Jesus uses a common event in that day to explain why His disciples were not fasting like they were. He uses the illustration of a wedding.

Before the wedding ceremony, there was great feasting and rejoicing. Jesus compares Himself to a bridegroom and His disciples as the friends of a bridegroom. They were rejoicing, eating, and drinking. Yet, there would come a day when the bridegroom would be gone. This refers to when the wedding ceremony is finished and the bridegroom left.

Jesus says, "But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then they shall fast in those days" (**Mark 2:20**). He is referring to His death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. He clearly states that the time of fasting for His people is when He returns to the Father. The time for fasting is after His ascension to

heaven! From His ascension to His return, the followers of Christ are to fast and pray. Fasting is not obsolete or outdated; it is current and relevant until He comes.

The words of Jesus indicate that fasting was to be practiced by His people after He returned to the Father. Because of this, the early church obeyed and practiced fasting. They fasted on a regular basis. In **Acts 13:1-3**, the church at Antioch fasted before the Lord. In **1 Corinthians 7:5**, the apostle Paul calls on husbands and wives to give themselves to times of prayer and fasting. In **2 Corinthians 6:5**, Paul says that he spent much time in fasting.

It was the common practice of early Christians to fast. They devoted two days of the week, Wednesday and Friday, to this. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in 315 AD wrote, "Who does not know that the fast of the fourth and six days of the week are observed by Christians throughout the world?"

In **Matthew 6**, the Lord Jesus Christ is dealing with the wrong way to fast. He is not teaching that fasting should be forsaken. He is declaring the right way to fast. By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast, He simply assumes that we will fast. It is to characterize those who follow Jesus. Fasting is as important to Jesus as giving and praying is.

What Fasting Is Not

We've been examining what fasting is. At this point, I feel the need to look at what it is not. Like every other God ordained religious practice, fasting can be misused or abused. There are false ideas about fasting that keep Christians from it and may hinder those who practice it. It's important that we understand what fasting is not.

- *Fasting is not a way to earn merit or favor from God.* Fasting does not bring a person into a right relationship with God; it does not earn His favor or forgiveness. The only way to be made right with God and forgiven of your sin is through faith alone in Christ

alone. There is no religious ritual that any person can do in order to earn a right

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standing before God. People receive the favor and forgiveness of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (**Romans 3:24-28**).

- *Fasting is not a substitute for repentance and godly living.* Fasting is a powerful spiritual discipline. God honors and blesses true fasting. However, it is not a substitute for repenting of one's sins and striving to live a holy, obedient life. Fasting without the pursuit of holiness is an abomination to God. It does not substitute for the daily striving to live a holy life.
- *Fasting is not an attempt to manipulate God to do our will.* Fasting does not force God to do your will. It should not be seen as a way to coerce God to do what you want. It is an opportunity to humble yourself before God in order to lay out your requests to Him and seek His will for those matters. Fasting is not a clever way to manipulate God. It is a time to pour your heart's desires out to God for His wise and powerful intervention and blessing.

The God-Directed Purposes Of Fasting

We've already looked at what fasting is and what it's not. We've seen that the followers of Jesus are to fast. Now, we need to investigate the purposes of fasting. In other words, what should we seek God about when we fast? The Scripture offers the following God-directed purposes of fasting:

To Humble Yourself Before God

Fasting enables us to express humility before God. It is a powerful way to humble yourself before God. It is saying to God, "I want and need You more than I do any food or anything else. I can make it without food but I can't make it without You." Fasting is the physical expression of how hopeless you are and how much you need God (**Ezra 8:21; 1 Kings 21:27-29; Psalm 35:13**).

To Strengthen Prayer

Fasting is one of the best things you can introduce to your prayer life. It is God's appointed way of strengthening and

intensifying your praying. As Wesley Duewel writes, "Fasting is still God's chosen way to deepen and strengthen your praying. You will be poorer spiritually and your prayer life will never be what God wants it to be until you practice the privilege of fasting" (**Ezra 8:23**). As Arthur Wallis writes, "The man who prays with fasting is giving heaven notice that he is truly earnest . . . He is expressing his earnestness in a divinely appointed way. He is using a means that God has chosen to make his voice heard on high." God is always pleased to hear the prayers of His people. Yet, His heart and hand is moved and stirred by those who fast and pray.

To Seek God's Guidance

Through fasting, a person can receive guidance concerning God's will. The Bible presents two examples of this. In **Judges 20**, the eleven tribes of Israel were preparing for war against the tribe of Benjamin. The soldiers gathered at Gibeah because the men of that city had committed a shocking sin. For two straight days, the Benjamites defeated the army of Israel and inflicted thousands of casualties. Incredibly, the army of Israel outnumbered the Benjamites 15 to 1. On the third day, the army of Israel sought God's guidance with prayers, tears, and fasting until evening (**20:26**). When they did this, the Lord made His will plain to them (**20:28**). It is only after they sought Him with fasting that the Lord gave guidance and victory. Another example is **Acts 14:23**. Before Paul and Barnabas would appoint elders in the churches that they founded, they prayed with fasting in order to receive God's guidance. They saw the need to pray and fast for guidance. Through fasting, we humble ourselves and seek the One who loves to guide our lives.

To Express Grief To God

Fasting is a way to express the depth of your grief to God concerning sin. It may be your sin. Fasting does not secure cleansing and forgiveness for sin. It is only when a person confesses and repents of sin that one

experiences this (**1 John 1:9**). Yet, there are times when fasting should accompany our confession and repentance. As God's children,

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it grieves us when we sin against Him. One of the tangible ways that we express this grief is fasting. By fasting, we are giving a tangible expression of our grief over sin. I have dedicated days of fasting to grieving over my hardness of heart, my coldness in prayer, my stubbornness to go my own way, my personal sin. I did confess these things but the grief was so deep that I had to fast. God will bless this and honor this. It will also unleash His power in your life to fight and overcome these sins. At the same time, it may be the sin of someone else. When jealous King Saul attempted to murder innocent David, Jonathan, Saul's son, responded by fasting (**1 Samuel 20:34**). This will add power to your prayers. It will help you to pray intensely for those who have sinned and are facing its bitter consequences.

To Seek Deliverance And Protection

One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek God's deliverance from an enemy or circumstance. Fasting to seek God's protection or deliverance can be done corporately or individually (**2 Chronicles 20:3-4**; **Esther 4:16**; **Psalms 109:24**). Fasting, rather than fleshly, worldly attempts, should be our first line of defense. It will unleash God's protection in our lives. At the same time, when we find ourselves bound by something, we must pray and fast. Fasting and prayer can break those things that bind us whether it's another person, a sin, a circumstance, or our past.

To Express Repentance And Return To God

Fasting for this purpose is similar to fasting for the purpose of expressing grief. Yet, fasting can represent more than just grieving over sin. It can be the outward expression of a real inward change that has taken place in a person's life. Fasting can reveal that we are turning away from sin and are returning to God with a renewed commitment and fresh obedience to His Word (**1 Samuel 7:6**; **Joel 2:12**; **Jonah 3:5-8**). Fasting can be a way of saying, "Father, I have sinned. I have

determined in my heart to repent and live differently.” It is a tangible expression of what has gone on in our hearts.

To Express Concern For The Work Of The Lord

Fasting can be done in order to express to God your concern for His work in your church, your area, or your country. A person can fast and pray to see a mighty move of God in a church, to see a church work through its problems, or to call on God to extend and make fruitful the ministry of the church. Examples of this are **Nehemiah 1:3-4** and **Daniel 9:1-3**.

To Minister To The Needs Of Others

In **Isaiah 58:6-7**, God emphasizes fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others. The people complained that they had humbled themselves and fasted before the Lord. Yet, God had not answered. God reveals that they had fasted for their own wicked purposes and not for ministering to others (**58:3-4**). The kind of fasting that pleases God is one that results in concern for others and not just ourselves. Fasting that flows from a heart unconcerned about others is an abomination to Him. You might consider fasting for one meal or one day and use that time to minister to others. Fast for a couple of meals and use that money to give to the needy or a worthy ministry. The purpose in this type of fast is to take the time or the money you would have normally expended on the meal(s) and dedicate it to ministering to someone.

To Overcome Temptation and Yield Yourself To God

Fasting can be a means of enabling a believer to overcome sin and dedicate yourself to the Father in fresh commitment. The most famous example of fasting for this purpose is in **Matthew 4:1-11**. Matthew records that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights. This prolonged fast provided Him with the spiritual strength He needed to face the onslaught of Satan’s temptations, the strongest He would face until Gethsemane. Fasting can give you spiritual strength in the face of temptation. It can also help you confront and root out habitual sin. When a believer yields to a

particular sin, it can get deeply rooted in one’s life. It will not be easily rooted out. Fasting is a

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means of receiving grace and power to root it out.

To Express Love And Worship For God

Fasting can be an act of sheer devotion to God. The Gospel of Luke describes an unforgettable woman by the name of Anna. This woman was only married seven years when she became a widow. After this, she devoted herself to prayer and fasting in the temple. She spent over a century of her life worshiping God through prayer and fasting (**Luke 2:37**). By fasting, you are telling God that you love Him more than food or whatever you deny yourself. You are declaring to Him that He is more important to you than anything else. This honors God and is a form of intense worship. It also reveals that your stomach is not your god as is true of the enemies of the cross of Christ (**Philippians 3:19**). You can fast solely for the purpose of worshiping Him and declaring your love for Him. You can do this through an extended fast or you can skip meals spending that time adoring Him. You can also use fasting to prepare for the Lord’s Supper. Through repentance, humility, and fasting, you can focus supremely on the Lord Jesus Christ as you partake of the Lord’s Supper.

To Increase Your Discernment

Fasting sharpens our ability to discern the kingdom of light, and the kingdom of darkness. Discernment enhances our ability to see God’s perspective in a given situation. Anna’s fasting sharpened her discernment, recognizing Jesus as the Messiah (**Luke 2:36-38**).

To Hear From God

Intercession without the direction of the Holy Spirit is pointless and ineffective. It is essential to discover God’s direction for our prayers (**Acts 13:2**). Fasting makes us receptive.

To Release God’s Power In Your Life

God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (**James 4:6**). As we humble ourselves

and fast, it makes us open and receptive to receive God's power for service, witness, and glorifying Him.

To Build Our Faith

As we fast and pray, it can strengthen and increase our faith. During a fast, we focus on God and His Word, which the Spirit uses to build our faith (**Romans 10:17**).

How Should A Believer Fast

How do you fast? I would suggest the following guidelines for carrying out a fast.

✓ *Determine the purpose of your fast.*

Ask yourself, "Why should I fast? What should I seek God for?" Call on the Holy Spirit to direct you in determining the purpose of your fast. Fasting must have a spiritual, God-directed purpose. God cannot and does not honor self-centered fasts.

✓ *Determine what kind of fast you will pursue.*

The Bible reveals that God's people have fasted in a variety of ways. Although the Bible does not give labels to these fasts, I will use the following terms to describe them.

- (1) **Absolute** – Abstaining from food and water for a period of time; Should only be entered into after intense prayer; Use with extreme caution; Never over 2 to 3 days (**Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:10; Acts 9:9**).
- (2) **Juice** – No food; only water and juices; most common fast observed by Christians (**Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2**).
- (3) **Partial** – The believer limits the kind of food he eats; Denies himself certain types of food or particular foods; **Daniel 1:12** is the biblical example of this type of fast; Characterized by taking only small portions of fresh vegetables, fruit, water, and juices.

✓ *Determine the length of the fast.*

In the Bible, there is no prescribed time for the length of a fast. Jesus does not give any command concerning how often or how long you fast. This is up to you and the leading of

the Holy Spirit. You will need to pray and determine the length of your time of fasting. It is important to remember that you need to build your fasting "muscles." Once cannot attempt a

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forty day fast if you have never fasted. You need to begin by starting with skipping a meal and then moving from there. The Bible records fasts of various lengths:

One day or part of a day (**Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Samuel 1:12, 3:35; Nehemiah 9:1; Jeremiah 36:6**)

One night fast (**Daniel 6:18-24**)

Three day fasts (**Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9**)

Seven day fasts (**1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 12:16-23**)

A fourteen-day fast (**Acts 27:33-34**)

Forty-day fasts (**Deuteronomy 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8; Matthew 4:2**)

Fasts of unspecified length (**Matthew 9:14; Luke 2:37; Acts 13:2, 14:2-3**)

✓ *Prepare yourself physically.*

Your body needs to be prepared to go through a fast. You might consider the following suggestions to physically prepare for a fast:

- (1) Eat smaller meals before your time of fasting;
- (2) Avoid high fat and sugary foods;
- (3) Eat raw fruit and vegetables two days before your fast;
- (4) Change your schedule so that you do not have to do a great deal of physical exertion.
- (5) Drink copious amounts of water.

✓ *Prepare yourself spiritually.*

Fasting is an intense time of seeking the Lord. Because of this, you need to take time to prepare spiritually. You might consider the following steps to prepare spiritually for your fast.

- (1) Ask God to give you the strength to focus on Him and seek Him during your fast.
- (2) Enlist a prayer partner who will pray for you during your time of fasting.
- (3) Ask God to reveal to you your sin. Confess every sin that the Holy Spirit brings to your mind and accept God's

forgiveness for these things (1 **John 1:9**).

- (4) Seek forgiveness from all that you have offended and forgive all those who have

hurt you (**Mark 11:28; Luke 11:4, 17:3-4**).

- (5) Plead with God to fill you with the Holy Spirit (**Ephesians 5:18**).
- (6) Plead with God to show you any areas of your life that you are trying to control. Confess this as sin to God and call on Him to enable you to surrender it to Him (**Romans 12:1-2**).
- (7) Meditate on the character of God (**Psalms 48:9-10, 103:1-8, 11-13**).
- (8) Firmly fix in your mind the spiritual purpose(s) for your fast.

What Do You Do When You Fast?

When I preach and teach on fasting, one of the most common questions that I get asked is, "What do I do when I fast?" The following are some suggestions on what to do during your time of fasting.

Pray

During a fast, the most important thing that you can do is to pray. Fasting is an intense time of seeking God through prayer. Its purpose is to seek Him, hear from Him, and experience His presence and power in a fresh way. Spend as much time as possible in prayer. Make every effort possible to spend as much time in His presence through prayer.

The Word Of God

During a fast, it is crucial to read and meditate on the Word of God. This is the primary way that God will speak to you, convict you, encourage you, and change you. Ask God to lead you to a particular Scripture section, chapter, or book. I have found it helpful to choose a selection of Scripture for a fast. During the fast, I read and read and read the section. I meditate on it and pray it. For instance, during a recent fast, I spent much of the time reading and meditating on the Beatitudes. During the fast that God convicted me to start The Prayer Closet Ministries, I read

and meditated on the book of Joshua. When you determine the section to focus on, call on God to teach you what you need to see from that section. Read the section as much as you can. Meditate on it deeply, considering what God is saying to you during that fast.

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Journal

It's important to record the insights and directions that God gives you as you fast. You might consider making a section for fasting in your journal. On the other hand, you might consider creating a fasting journal. Write down the insights, leadings, and conviction that God grants you. This will enable you to see God's work at in your life. It will also provide valuable lessons for the future when you fast again.

Worship

During a fast, take time to adore and praise God. It's interesting to note how the fast in **Acts 13:2** is described, "And they ministered to the Lord, and fasted." They ministered to the Lord – what a concept! We often talk about the Lord ministering to us. What are we doing for Him? During their fasting, they focused on their Father. They adored Him. They exalted Him. They praised Him. They lifted up His name and His praise. This is how we minister to Him and is a necessary part of our fasting.

Rely

During your time of fasting, remember and rely on the promise of Jesus Christ, "That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret; and my Father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly" (**Matthew 6:18**). Christ promises that the Father will respond when we fast with right motives, seeking Him in faith and repentance. This is a sure promise of Jesus Christ; receive it by faith! God honors humble sincere fasting.

The Ultimate Goal

What is the ultimate goal of fasting? It is none other than God Himself. It is adoring Him and experiencing Him in deeper ways. It is drawing near to Him and yielding ourselves to His power and grace. True fasting will draw us closer to God and His purposes.

The Christian author Steve Hawthorne shared about a 7 day fast he experienced. He went on this fast in order to seek God for direction concerning His ministry. At the end of the fast, a friend asked him if he received the guidance he was seeking. His answer was, "Probably not . . . but I do know the Guide better."

This is what fasting is all about – focusing on the Father. We fast to or for the Father (**Matthew 6:18**). Seeking Him. Desiring Him. Longing for Him to be glorified in your life. As we have seen, there are a variety of reasons fast. But, ultimately, God is the object of our fasting.

The Challenge

Although not every believer is called to the same level of fasting, the Word of God

teaches that believers should fast. Believers should seek to grow and mature in their understanding of fasting. At the same time, we should be sensitive and open to the Spirit concerning our need to fast and pray. Elmer Towns writes, 'If every Christian fasted, the results could shake our society like a windstorm bending a sapling. Christians would demonstrate that they live differently, that their faith is imperative, that the Almighty works in their daily lives.' What is the Spirit saying to you about fasting?



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