

FASTING A BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

FASTING DEFINED

The Old Testament contains two words for fasting. צום) tzum) literally means “to cover the mouth”. אָנָה) anah) means “to afflict oneself” which includes humbling your spirit while denying your body food. Both words imply an abstention from food. In the New Testament, the Greek word for fasting, νηστεύω (naystewo), is the verb “to eat” (ἐσθίω) with a negation in front of it, which literally translates “not to eat”. Strictly speaking, fasting means to go without food specifically (while still drinking water) and usually done from evening to evening. Fasting is a universal human activity, often connected to politics, health, and other religions. Biblical fasting, specifically, is going without food in order to seek the Lord as a response to moments of intense grief or overwhelming need. Fasting makes us physically hungry to awaken our longing for spiritual food to sustain us.

EXAMPLES OF FASTING

God commands his people to fast only one time in the Bible: on the 10th day of the 7th month known as the Day of Atonement, the day God would deal with his people’s guilt from sin. They were to seek the Lord as they sought his pardon. We do, however, see many other categories of people fasting in the Bible.

area of grief or sickness when you or someone you love is sick or has passed away. When King David’s child is sick, he fasts (2 Samuel 12:26; cf Psalm 35:13).

guidance for a big decision when you need wisdom and discernment regarding a job change, in your marriage, parenting, etc or facing any big challenge in life. When Esther goes before the king to plead for the life of her people



RESOURCES ON FASTING

- **Celebration of Discipline** by Richard Foster (Ch. 4)
- **Fasting for Beginners** by David Mathis

[Click here to read the article.](#)

- **Passage Insight: Purpose of Fasting** by The BibleProject

[Click here to watch the video.](#)

HOW TO FAST

If one of the 4 categories listed is happening in your life, then pray to discern if the Lord might be inviting you to fast. It can be a one time thing or an ongoing weekly/monthly/annual practice, depending on the nature of the situation. Discern what day would be good. Tell a friend or family member so they know and can pray/process with you. During the fast, be sure to drink plenty of water. During the times you would usually eat, spend that time praying through the grief, or guidance, or struggle, seeking the Lord’s presence and trusting in his promises.

she has everyone fast for 3 days (Esther 4:16). When Paul encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus, which would affect the rest of his life, he fasts for 3 days (Acts 9:9).

sin or struggle when you need to deal with your sin or struggle with addiction, and want to seek God's mercy and pardon. When the people of Nineveh in Jonah hear God's judgment for sin, the king called for a fast (Jonah 3:5).

training in righteousness

when you want to train and discipline the body against temptations. Paul afflicted himself with prayers and fasting often to subdue his body so he might not be disqualified (see 1 Cor 9:27 and 2 Cor 11:27 - the word translated "without food" is the Greek word *νηστεύω* from above, which communicates intentional practice of fasting).

JESUS AND FASTING

Jesus fasted 40 days to begin his public ministry. He also discusses fasting in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 16:16-18). This teaches us two things. First, he says "when" not "if", assuming the church will continue to fast (see also Matthew 9:14-17). Second, he warns us that we must fast to seek the Lord, not to be seen by others.



REASONS TO NOT FAST

Jesus warns us that fasting can very quickly become something we do to earn praise from others. Please do not fast if you are thinking God will love you more or he will be required to fix all the problems in your life. The goal is to humbly seek the Lord and experience his presence, not to manipulate him with your actions. Additionally, some of us struggle with our relationship to food, and for this reason, it might be unwise to pursue the spiritual practice of fasting. The New Testament does not command us to fast, so please pray and use discernment when implementing it as a part of your Christian life.



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