

## **CHRIST FELLOWSHIP'S VIEW FASTING**

Biblical fasting is not a way of asserting one's will, but a means of opening oneself up to the work of God. Biblically you fast not to gain political power, attract attention for a good cause, or lose weight. Instead you fast to seek God with all your heart, to repent of your sin and seek his will.

At Christ Fellowship we want to grow deeper with God. Fasting may be a step you could take that would help you grow deeper with God. In many circles, fasting is a neglected truth. From 1861 to 1954 there was not one book published on the topic. In other circles, fasting has been over-emphasized and sensationalized as some kind of magical technique that unlocks the secrets of God, makes prayer more powerful or is the key to a great spiritual life.

Fasting is especially significant for us living in America where delayed gratification, self-denial and moderation are foreign concepts.

### **BIBLICAL PATTERNS**

Fasting is abstaining from food for spiritual reasons.

In the Bible, fasting and prayer almost always go together. Fasting expresses our humility and our total dependence on God. As an extension of the concept, a person can fast from media or something similar.

Below is a chart of every clear example of a person or group fasting. Not included are situations where a person went without eating for other reasons. There are many ways to analyze and classify the biblical patterns God has given us. You can see that sometimes fasting is individual between one person and God and other times it is corporate, the whole nation, city, group or church fasted together. The examples listed of fasting are roughly in the order they appear in the Bible.

The purposes of each fast are classified in four basic groups:

1. Seeking God
2. Repenting of sin
3. Mourning a death
4. Dealing with a crisis

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Not every example fits perfectly in one of these categories and some cross several categories. The duration of each fast is given in days if the Bible tells us the timeframe. Most fasts were for 1 day, one for 3 days, one for 7 days, one for 3 weeks and three for 40 days.

<b>PERSON</b>	<b>REFERENCE</b>	<b>PURPOSE</b>	<b>TIME</b>
<b>Moses</b>	<b>Exodus 34:28</b>	<b>Seek God</b>	<b>40</b>
The first mention of fasting comes in Exodus where Moses fasted for 40 days when he was receiving the Ten Commandments. In this case, Moses supernaturally went without food or water for 40 days. That is physically impossible, so this was a unique miracle of God signaling a huge new step in God's historic revelation of himself with the giving of the Law to Israel.			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>Leviticus 16:29,31; 23:14, 27, 32</b>	<b>Repent</b>	<b>1</b>
The whole nation of Israel was told to fast on the Day of Atonement; the holiest day in Israel's religious calendar. On that day, they reminded themselves of their sin. They needed God's cleansing. Today modern Jews call this day, Yom Kippur. In the New Testament, we learn that the Day of Atonement looked forward to the ultimate cleansing from sin. In the Old Testament, the high priest had to offer sin offerings each year for his own sins and the sins of the people. This annual repetition of the sacrifices served as a reminder that perfect atonement had not yet been provided. Jesus, however, through his own blood brought eternal redemption for all people who trust in him (Hebrews 9:12).			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>Judges 20:26</b>	<b>Crisis</b>	<b>1</b>
In the time of the Judges, Israel fasted because of an internal battle among the tribes of Israel.			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>1 Samuel 7:6</b>	<b>Repent</b>	<b>1</b>
The great prophet, Samuel, led the nation of Israel to return to God with all their hearts, getting rid of foreign gods and idols. He said, "Commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only" (1 Samuel 7:3); so they fasted and confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD" (1 Samuel 7:6).			
<b>David</b>	<b>2 Samuel 12:16, 22</b>	<b>Crisis</b>	<b>7</b>
King David fasted to ask God not to take the life of his son born from his adultery with Bathsheba. The child died as God had said he would.			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>1 Samuel 31:11-13; 2 Samuel 1:12</b>	<b>Mourn</b>	<b>1</b>
King David and much of the Israelite nation fasted to mourn the deaths of King Saul and his sons. Fasting seems an appropriate manifestation of sorrow over death.			
<b>David</b>	<b>2 Samuel 3:35</b>	<b>Mourn</b>	<b>1</b>
King David fasted to mourn the death of his general Abner.			
<b>Elijah</b>	<b>1 Kings 19:8</b>	<b>Seek God</b>	<b>40</b>

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The great prophet Elijah fasted supernaturally like Moses for 40 days without food and maybe even water. He sought God and experienced the Lord speaking to him at the end of the 40 days. His fast directly preceded the calling of his successor, Elisha.			
<b>Ahab</b>	<b>1 Kings 21:27-29</b>	<b>Repent</b>	<b>?</b>
In contrast with righteous Moses and Elijah, Ahab is one of the most wicked, despicable characters in the Bible along with his wife Jezebel. However, later in his life, Ahab repented with fasting, humbling himself before God, so God held back the judgment he was going to bring against Ahab. There is hope for all of us. If you sincerely repent and turn to God, he will forgive you.			
<b>Jehoshaphat</b>	<b>2 Chronicles 20:3, 4</b>	<b>Crisis</b>	<b>?</b>
In the time of King Jehoshaphat, a huge army came to attack Judah. Jehoshaphat called a fast for all Judah. They sought the Lord in prayer. The Lord said to them, "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's" (2 Chronicles 20:15). Another army came and destroyed the army arrayed against Israel, and Israel was able to gather up all the plunder.			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>Ezra 8:21-23</b>	<b>Crisis</b>	<b>?</b>
In a crisis, under Ezra, he proclaimed a fast for a safe journey back to Jerusalem after their exile.			
<b>Ezra</b>	<b>Ezra 10:6</b>	<b>Repent</b>	<b>?</b>
Later Ezra fasted, this time individually in mourning and repentance over the unfaithfulness of the exiles who intermarried with the pagan women.			
<b>Nehemiah</b>	<b>Nehemiah 1:4</b>	<b>Crisis</b>	<b>Days</b>
During the exile when Nehemiah learned of the desperate condition of Jerusalem - the wall was broken down and the gates burned - he fasted for days repenting and asking God to give him success in asking the king of Babylon to allow him to go help fix the problem. The king did so, and Nehemiah led the people to rebuild the walls.			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>Nehemiah 9:1-2</b>	<b>Repent</b>	<b>?</b>
Later like Ezra, Nehemiah had to call a fast for repentance because the Israelites had fallen back into gross sin. He led them in confession and reading of the Scripture, and worshipping God.			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>Esther 4:3, 15, 16</b>	<b>Crisis</b>	<b>3</b>
When Xerxes was king of Persia, Israel faced another huge crisis. A high official named Haman hated the Jews so he authored a decree to destroy them; sort of like an ancient Hitler. At the time, providentially God placed a courageous Jewish woman named Esther in the King's palace. She discovered the plot and risked her life to approach the king about it. Before approaching the king, she asked all the Jews in the capital city to fast for three days. The king granted her request and the Jewish nation was saved.			
<b>David</b>	<b>Psalms 35:13; 69:10; 109:23</b>	<b>Crisis</b>	<b>?</b>
Three times in the Psalms, King David mentioned his own fasting.			

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<b>Daniel</b>	<b>Daniel 9:3</b>	<b>Repent</b>	<b>?</b>
Then during the reign of Xerxes's son, Darius, the prophet Daniel fasted to repent; he confessed to God on behalf of the whole nation because of their sins.			
<b>Daniel</b>	<b>Daniel 10:2-3</b>	<b>Seek God</b>	<b>21</b>
Later Daniel fasted for three weeks, abstaining from choice food, meat and wine. He fasted to understand a message from God that had come in the form of a vision. After his fast, God revealed the meaning to him.			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>Joel 1:13, 14; 2:12-15</b>	<b>Repent</b>	<b>?</b>
The prophet Joel called a national fast for repentance.			
<b>Nineveh</b>	<b>Jonah 3:5</b>	<b>Repent</b>	<b>?</b>
Another prophet, Jonah, who is perhaps most famous for being swallowed by the large fish, was sent by God to tell the pagan city of Nineveh that God was going to destroy them for their sin. The Ninevites believed God to Jonah's shock and dismay (because he hated them for what they had done). They declared a fast and because of their repentance, God had compassion. He changed his mind and did not bring the destruction he had threatened. The city was spared.			
<b>Israel</b>	<b>Zechariah 7:3-5; 8:19</b>	<b>Ritual</b>	<b>1</b>
As Israel's religious traditions developed, we learn from Zechariah that in addition to the Day of Atonement, at least four more regular fasts were added to their religious calendar of observances.			
<b>Jesus</b>	<b>Matthew 4:2</b>	<b>Seek God</b>	<b>40</b>
In the New Testament, we have few references to fasting. Jesus set a model for us when he fasted for 40 days in the wilderness just before beginning his ministry.			
<b>John the Baptist</b>	<b>Matthew 9:14-15</b>	<b>?</b>	<b>?</b>
We know from one of Jesus' comments that John the Baptist and his followers fasted but we are not told why. It may have been to seek God, to repent or as a spiritual discipline.			
<b>Anna</b>	<b>Luke 2:37</b>	<b>Seek God</b>	<b>?</b>
After he was born, Jesus' parents took him to the temple to dedicate him to the Lord. An 84-year-old widow named Anna was there. The Bible tells us: "She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37). What a model of devotion. God gave her the privilege of seeing the Savior of the world, and so the rest of her life she spoke about the child to everyone.			
<b>Church</b>	<b>Acts 13:2-3</b>	<b>Seek God</b>	<b>?</b>
Outside of the Gospels, there are no clear references to fasting in the New Testament Epistles and only two mentions in the Book of Acts. In Acts 13 at the church in Antioch, they were worshipping the Lord and fasting when the Holy Spirit told them to set aside Paul and Barnabus for God's work. So, after			

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they fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Fasting occurs in the context of worship and in the selection of leaders.			
<b>Church</b>	<b>Acts 14:23</b>	<b>Seek God</b>	<b>?</b>
Paul and Barnabus on their missionary journey went back to each city they had visited and appointed leaders. The Bible tells us they “appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord” (Acts 14:23). Fasting again is associated with seeking God for leadership in the context of worship.			

## **BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES**

**Historical biblical patterns show us truths that we must follow today. First, is there a command to fast in the Bible? Must we fast?** Fasting is never commanded in the Bible, but it was assumed by Jesus that his followers would do so.

In the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus gave instructions on proper fasting he said, “When you fast . . . and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:16-18).

Jesus did not command fasting, but by saying, “when you fast,” he seems to assume that his followers will fast. This assumption is clearer in his answer to John the Baptist’s disciples, who asked why Jesus’ disciples did not fast:

*Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast” (Matthew 9:15).*

Jesus said his disciples did not need to fast while he was with them, but when he rose from the dead and returned to heaven, then his disciples would fast. Jesus’ comments still do not constitute a command, but they do indicate that he anticipated his followers would fast.

So, it would be wise and helpful for most followers of Jesus today to practice fasting. However, before you jump into fasting, the following are some dangers in fasting.

## **DANGERS IN FASTING**

Fasting is much more than not eating. Fasting is a matter of our hearts. Consider the following dangers:

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1. **PRIDE:** Doing it as a badge of spirituality.  
This is the prime danger Jesus warned against this in the Sermon on the Mount when he taught:

*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).*

Jesus' point was not secrecy, but motive. The issue is not privacy. You can give, pray and fast publicly with right or wrong motives. The issue is motive.

2. **LEGALISM:** Make it a law and judge others  
The religious leaders of Jesus' day that were called Pharisees had made fasting into a law. They required people to fast twice a week. In Luke we read:

*The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11-12).*

It was a ritual and he was judging others based on their not doing what he thought they should do.

Historically various Christian traditions have identified certain days of the week; or times of the year as fast days, but the Bible does not do this. We need to understand that God does not honor fasting per se, but what it represents in our hearts. Fasting does not have value by itself. To not eat is fine, but it does not have intrinsic value like praying or reading the Word of God. Fasting is always in conjunction with confession, prayer, or seeking God. Do not make fasting a law and judge others. We are all free to fast or not to fast.

3. **MANIPULATION:** Trying to get God to do what you want  
People want to get God to do what they want him to do so they try to do things to get God to notice them or pay attention to them. Some people

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think fasting will get God to hear them better. This happened years ago when the prophet Isaiah was alive. The people complained to God:

*"Why have we fasted," they say, "and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?" (Isaiah 58:3a).*

Through Isaiah, God asked them, is this the kind of fast I have chosen? Is this what you call an acceptable fast to the Lord? God said this is not the kind of fasting I have chosen. God wants our hearts and our obedience not some ritual observance. Fasting is not some magical power making prayers more potent to convince God to do what you want. Fasting is just the opposite, a discipline to humble ourselves and submit ourselves to what he wants to do in us and through us.

4. **SELF-FOCUS:** Doing it to lose weight, not to seek God  
Are you fasting because it will benefit you physically or are you doing it for God? The prophet Zechariah asked the people of Israel:

*Was it really for me that you fasted? (Zechariah 7:5).*

We must ask ourselves the same question. At the core, a true biblical fast is for the Lord.

## **REASONS FOR FASTING**

1. **REPENTANCE:** Confess, humble yourself, mourn  
First, we saw many examples of fasting for repentance from sin. Individuals like wicked Ahab and cities like Nineveh and nations like Israel repented in fasting, expressing deep sorrow for their sin, and God heard them. Because of their sincere confession and deep remorse, he stopped or delayed his judgment. At times we too would do well to fast in repentance.
2. **CRISIS:** Attack, death, deliverance, protection  
It is also appropriate to fast in crisis. In fact, many of the biblical fasts came in times of crisis. That was true for Jehoshaphat, Nehemiah and Esther. If you are in a crisis, you may be well-served by taking a day off work to fast and seek God.
3. **DECISIONS:** Choose a leader, advance the kingdom  
Major decisions call for fasting especially when they involve advancing God's kingdom or choosing leaders. We see this in the Book of Acts.

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4. **DEVOTION:** Seek God in serious prayer, worship  
Fasting is a great way to help you seek God in serious prayer and worship. God wants us to seek him and if we do, he promises he will be found by us.

## **BENEFITS OF FASTING**

Fasting carries with it several great benefits.

1. Fasting teaches us temperance or self-control, moderation and restraint with our fundamental drives. Most of us have too few experiences with self-denial. Fasting gives us the opportunity to deny ourselves temporarily. By taking hold of our appetites, we can increase our self-control in many areas of our lives.
2. Fasting teaches us life is more than food. Fasting can be humbling because it reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. We use food to comfort ourselves, to cover our lack of self-worth, to deal with stress and express our happiness. Fasting reveals things that control us and confirms our utter dependence on God. We can discover that life is so much more than food (Luke 12:33). Our belly is not our God (Philippians 3:19; Romans 16:18); rather our body is God's servant and ours (1 Corinthians 6:13).
3. Fasting teaches us to focus intensely on God. It can intensify your prayer, your focus on God. When fasting, you can give yourself to an undivided, intense devotion to the Lord. You are expressing a value, that your spiritual life has priority in your life. Andrew Murray says, "Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting is the other with which we let loose and cast away the visible." Fasting can help you open up to God with an intense focus.

## **HOW SHOULD WE FAST?**

1. With right motives – humility  
Avoid the dangers of fasting to show others how spiritual you are and don't judge others who may not choose to fast. Avoid fasting to manipulate God for what you want or simply to lose weight. Fasting must center on God, not on you. Fast for God. Fast for good reasons: to repent of your sin, in a crisis, for a major decision or to devote yourself

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to God. Use the time to pray and commune with God; don't let it be just a regular day in which you simply do not eat.

2. With common sense – wisdom

Remember God is not impressed that you are not eating; he is looking at your heart. Take the time you would have spent eating and give that time to God. Pray, read his Word, listen to him.

Be sensible about your health. People with certain medical conditions should not fast for a whole day. Talk with your doctor if you have a question about it. There are no biblical guidelines for the length of a fast. The pattern is that most fasts were one day, which for the Jews was from sunrise to sunset, so 24 hours. Most biblical fasts were from all food entirely.

People ask should I drink only water or could I have fruit juices or a Powerade? God does not address these specific questions. They are between you and God. The real issue is not the nature of your fast or its length, but the real issue is your heart. You can even fast from things other than food. You can fast from certain kinds of music, from TV, movies, video games, or anything that might distract you from God.

Fasting is voluntary. Ask God what he would have you do. Consider fasting to seek God with all your heart.

*Christ Fellowship's views on this subject are guided by the authoritative Word of God.  
Not all biblical references in the Word of God pertaining to this subject are listed.  
Biblical references are from the New International Version (NIV) 2011 unless otherwise noted.*