

Day of Fasting and Prayer

By Pastor Rick Warren

WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that is taught in the Bible. Jesus expected his followers to fast, and he said that God rewards fasting. Fasting, according to the Bible, means to voluntarily reduce or eliminate your intake of food for a specific time and purpose.

“When you give up eating, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They make their faces look sad to show people they are giving up eating. I tell you the truth, those hypocrites already have their full reward. So when you give up eating, comb your hair and wash your face. Then people will not know that you are giving up eating, but your Father, whom you cannot see, will see you. Your Father sees what is done in secret, and he will reward you.” Matthew 6:16-18

WHY FAST?

There are many good reasons, and even health benefits, for fasting. However, our UNITED DAY OF FASTING is for three primary reasons:

1. Fasting gives you more time for prayer. You can use the time you'd normally spend eating as time in prayer for what God wants to do among us during this UNITED DAY OF FASTING. In the Bible, fasting is always connected with prayer.

“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 13:2-3 (NIV)

2. Fasting demonstrates the depth of your desire when praying for something. It shows you that you are serious enough about your prayer request to pay a personal price. God honors deep desire and praying in faith.

“Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.” Joel 1:14 (NIV)

“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Joel 2:12 (NASB)

3. Fasting releases God's supernatural power. It is a tool we can use when there is opposition to God's will. Satan would like nothing better than to cause division, discouragement, defeat, depression, and doubt among us. United prayer and fasting has always been used by God to deal a decisive blow to the enemy!

“So we fasted and prayed about these concerns. And he listened.” Ezra 8:23 (Msg)

“God says, ‘Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?’” Isaiah 58:6 (NIV)

THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING

Often in the Bible, God's people fasted immediately before a major victory, miracle, or answer to prayer. It prepared them for a blessing!

- **Moses fasted before he received the Ten Commandments.**

Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant the Ten Commandments. Exodus 34:28 NIV

- **The Israelites fasted before a miraculous victory.**

"Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar" (that is, En Gedi). Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah." 2 Chronicles 20:2-3 NIV

- **Daniel fasted in order to receive guidance from God.**

"So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes." Daniel 9:3 NIV

"While I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. He instructed me and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding.'" Daniel 9:21-22 NIV

- **Nehemiah fasted before beginning a major building project.**

"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 1:4 NIV

- **Jesus fasted during His victory over temptation.**

"For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry." Luke 4:2 Msg

- **The first Christians fasted during-decision making times.**

"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 13:2-3 NIV

TWO CAUTIONS

1. Remember that fasting is not "earning" an answer to prayer. God cannot be blackmailed by human effort. God wants to answer our prayers and He answers out of grace. Fasting simply prepares us for God's answer.
2. Fast only if your health allows it at this time. If you are able **only** to do a partial fast - do it in faith and God will honor your intentions.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

By Pastor Lance Witt, Saddleback Church

An Outdated Oddity?

When I was a kid growing up in church, I heard hundreds of sermons, sat through hundreds of small group lessons, and participated in dozens of programs at my church. Throughout all of those years saturated in “church,” I do not remember my pastor one time ever doing a message on fasting. I do not ever remember a small group lesson on fasting. I don’t ever remember our church being called to a time of prayer and fasting as we sought God on some important decision.

By default, I grew up thinking that fasting was something they did in the Old Testament that was sort of like animal sacrifices. We just don’t do it anymore. And I was fine with that. The idea of going extended periods of time without eating didn’t sound like my idea of fun.

An Assumed Practice!

But, then we read a passage like Matthew 6:16-18 (NIV): “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, 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 men 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.”

This passage comes right in the middle of Jesus’ teaching on prayer and giving. In this sermon, Jesus uses phrases like: “When you give” (v. 2), “When you pray” (v. 5), and “When you fast” (v. 16). Jesus assumes that his audience will give, will pray, and will fast. Fasting is not an option. It is not an oddity. Fasting, according to Jesus, is a *given*. In fact, fasting is mentioned more times in the Bible than baptism!

In the Bible, we observe the people of God fasting for a variety of reasons:

- They were facing a crisis
- They were seeking God’s protection and deliverance
- They had been called to repentance and renewal
- They were asking God for guidance
- They were humbling themselves in worship

The Danger in the Discipline

But there is an inherent danger in fasting. It is the same danger that is found in the practice of any spiritual discipline. We can turn fasting into an end unto itself, rather than a means to an end. It can become merely an external practice without an internal passion. It can be reduced to a habit without heart. We see an example of this in Luke 18:12, where Jesus tells the story of a Pharisee who bragged to God in prayer that he fasted twice a week. Pharisees habitually fasted twice a week, usually on the 2nd and 5th days of the week. These two days happened to be the major days for the Jewish market. That meant the city was packed with farmers, merchants, and shoppers. Therefore, these days of public fasting would have the largest audiences. Jesus condemned the practice of fasting when it was done in such a way as to receive public adulation.

We have an ability to take that which is sacred, holy, and meant to draw us closer to the Father, and turn it into a merely mechanical, religious drill that we use to impress others of our spirituality. What was intended to draw us to God now actually distances us from God because we have perverted it. And God notices. He prompted the prophet Zechariah to ask the people and the priests of Israel,

“During those seventy years of exile, when you fasted and mourned in the summer and at the festival in early autumn, *was it really for Me that you were fasting?*” (Zechariah 7:5 NLT)

- ❖ Fasting is not so much about food as it is about focus.
- ❖ Fasting is not so much about saying no to the body as it is about saying yes to the Spirit.
- ❖ Fasting is not about doing without, it is about looking within.
- ❖ Fasting is an outward response to an inward attitude and cry of the soul.

A Time of Feasting

When John Wesley spoke of fasting, he said “First, let it be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in Heaven.”

When we decide to set aside time to fast, here is what I think would please the heart of God. Let’s talk about this time of spiritual discipline not as a day of fasting, but a day of feasting – feasting on Jesus.

There is an orphanage in India where the staff and the children all fast every Friday. And you know what they call it? They call it their day of feasting on Jesus. And do you know what they do during their day of feasting? They pray for the American church. Now, that is humbling.

A Call to Fast

Joel 2:12-17 (NLT) *That is why the Lord says, "Turn to me now, while there is time! Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. [13] Don't tear your clothing in your grief; instead, tear your hearts." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful. He is not easily angered. He is filled with kindness and is eager not to punish you. [14] Who knows? Perhaps even yet he will give you a reprieve, sending you a blessing instead of this terrible curse. Perhaps he will give you so much that you will be able to offer grain and wine to the Lord your God as before! [15] Blow the trumpet in Jerusalem! Announce a time of fasting; call the people together for a solemn meeting. [16] Bring everyone—the elders, the children, and even the babies. Call the bridegroom from his quarters and the bride from her private room. [17] The priests, who minister in the Lord's presence, will stand between the people and the altar, weeping. Let them pray, "Spare your people, Lord! They belong to you, so don't let them become an object of mockery. Don't let their name become a proverb of unbelieving foreigners who say, "Where is the God of Israel? He must be helpless!" "*

1. **Fasting starts with the spiritual leaders.** Joel starts off his urgent call to a fast by saying, “Hear this, you elders.” (Joel 1:2)
2. **Fasting is often associated with a sense of spiritual desperation.** Joel 2:12 says, “Turn to me now, while there is still time.” Notice the sense of urgency and desperation.
3. **Fasting is a call to return to God.** (Joel 2:13) Israel’s first need, like that of the prodigal son, was just to come home to the Father. God doesn’t talk about the people’s need for better plans, programs, or strategies. He is simply saying to them: You have been unfaithful to me. Come home.
4. **Fasting is not about the externals.** In Joel 2:13, God says, “Don’t tear your clothing in grief, instead tear your hearts.” It is entirely possible to go without food and not have a true fast.
5. **Fasting is the response of a broken heart.** Why does Joel say, “Come with weeping, fasting, and mourning”? (2:12) Because repentance is the appropriate response when you have strayed.

And, God is responsive. “He is gracious and merciful...not easily angered” (2:13). Somehow, God is drawn to the empty, broken, needy, and weak. As Jim Cymbala says, “God is attracted to weakness.”

6. **Fasting is the humble response to immense responsibility.** Joel calls a solemn assembly. In verse 15 he says, “blow the trumpet...announce a time of fasting” and he urges everyone to get there — the elders, the children, the babies; he even says to get the bride and groom! Why? Because God’s name and reputation were at stake (2:17). The people of Israel were being urged to enter a time of fasting, with the direct result that they would preserve God’s reputation and glorify His name. That is an immense responsibility!

Fasting helps to express, to deepen, to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything...to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God. Andrew Murray

Plug into God’s Power

We have this incredibly powerful tool called prayer. But it will do us no good if we know it’s there, but we keep it in storage, never pulling it out and applying it to our problems, concerns, relationships, and responsibilities. Prayer is the tool that God has given us to use on all the disrepair in our lives, in our church, in our communities, in our country. I would urge you to use the experience of fasting to restore your focus and revive the power of prayer in your life. Feast on God during this important time.

Types of fasting

Although fasting in Scripture is almost always a fasting from food, there are other ways to fast. Anything given up temporarily in order to focus all our attention on God can be considered a fast (1 Corinthians 7:1-5). Fasting should be limited to a set time, especially when fasting from food. Extended periods of time without eating can be harmful to the body. Fasting is not intended to punish the flesh, but to redirect attention to God. Fasting should not be considered a “dieting method” either. The purpose of a biblical fast is not to lose weight, but rather to gain deeper fellowship with God. Anyone can fast, but some may not be able to fast from food (diabetics, for example). Everyone can temporarily give up something in order to draw closer to God.