

THE WHYS AND HOWS OF NEW TESTAMENT FASTING

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Definition:

Fasting is temporary abstention from nourishment for religious reasons. (The word means “to be without food or hungry,” “one who has not eaten,” “to be empty,” “suffering hunger.”)

History of Fasting:

- The practice of fasting was present in all religions throughout the Ancient World. It was a common cultural custom and religious duty.
- Jews were required to fast once yearly, on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29)
- During the exile, Jews set aside dates for mourning and fasting to commemorate the fall and destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon’s temple [Zech. 7–8]
- Devout Jews fasted Mondays and Thursdays as an expression of religious devotion. (Luke 18:11-12)

Five Old Testament motives for fasting:

1. To express grief and mourning in time of calamity and affliction [Ps. 35:13; 1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:12]
2. To make urgent appeals to God in times of personal or national danger [2 Sam. 12:16; Jer. 36:1–10]
3. To demonstrate humility and the sincerity of one’s repentance [1 Kings 21:27; Deut. 9:18; Neh. 9:1]
4. To honor the solemn character of the Day of Atonement, the only day on which fasting was commanded by God. [Lev. 16:29, 31]

5. To prepare for a visitation of God [eg. Moses, Anna. Ex 34:28; De 9:9; Luke 2:37]

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do 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.

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." [Matthew 9:14-17]

Jesus' Teaching on Fasting:

- Fasting is for times of aching, yearning, and longing
- It was not appropriate for disciples to fast when bridegroom was there
- Patch of unshrunk [new] cloth and new wine represent the new reality that has come with Jesus – the Kingdom of God is here. The Bridegroom has come.
- The old wineskin = old concept of fasting
- Can't pour the new wine of the kingdom of God into the old cultural custom of fasting
- New Testament fasting is a "new wineskin." The practice has been revolutionized by the incarnation and atonement of Christ [Yom Kippur vs. Hebrews 8-9]

New Testament Fasting is:

- a basic spiritual discipline – "when" you fast
- a physical expression of heart-hunger for the coming of Christ
- a future-oriented counterpart to the past-oriented celebration of the Lord's Supper (longing vs. satisfaction)
- a means of awakening us to latent spiritual appetites
- a fearsome weapon in the fight of faith

- a statement saying, “This much, O Lord, I want your work to be done and your kingdom to come. This much, O Lord, I want you to return.” (John Piper in *Hunger for God*)

It is NOT:

- a religious duty
- an indicator of spirituality
- a formula for manipulating God
- a good way to loose weight

The importance of fasting is demonstrated by Christ, who fasted 40 days prior to beginning his ministry.

How to Fast – FIVE BASIC STEPS

Step One: Determine Your PURPOSE

What is the specific reason for which you are fasting? Defining your purpose will help you plan and follow-through with your fast. Review the five common objectives outlined in chapter one of this manual and decide which one best describes your purpose in fasting.

Five Common Objectives

1. Recharge
2. Refocus
3. Repent
4. Request
5. Reform

Town's Nine Biblical Fasts

[Elmer L. Towns, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough: A Guide to Nine Biblical Fasts* (Ventura CA: Regal Books, 1996)]

Elmer Towns has categorized nine biblical reasons for fasting in his book, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*. His categories also outline some biblical reasons for fasting:

1. The Disciple's Fast:

Purpose: Freeing self and others from bondage to sin

Key Verse: *This kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting* [Matt. 17:21]

Background: The Disciples couldn't cast out the demon. Jesus said they needed to pray and fast.

2. The Ezra Fast:

Purpose: To solve problems, lift loads, and overcome barriers

Key Verse: *So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.* [Ezra 8:23]

Background: Ezra was returning to Jerusalem from the exile to help rebuild. He and the people was very worried about safe passage/travel. Ezra didn't feel they could ask the Persian king for an army to protect them, so he had the people fast and pray for safety.

3. The Samuel Fast:

Purpose: For evangelism and revival

Key Verse: *So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the Lord. And they fasted that day, and said there, 'We have sinned against the Lord* [1 Sam. 7:6]

Background: Samuel led the Israelites in a fast to celebrate the return of the Ark of the Covenant from captivity, and to pray that Israel might be

delivered from the sin that allowed the Ark to be captured in the first place.

4. The Elijah Fast:

Purpose: To seek freedom from destructive thought patterns

Key Verse: *He himself went a day's journey into the wilderness ...He arose and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights.* [1 Kings 19:4,8]

Background: Elijah was depressed after the great victory on Carmel. He was fleeing from Queen Jezebel. Elijah needed victory over feelings of helplessness and despair.

5. The Widow's Fast:

Purpose: To intercede for the needy

Key Verse: *The jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord.* [1 Kings 17:16]

Background: Elijah's presence resulted in food for the widow of Zarephath. Presenting ourselves before God in prayer and fasting can relieve hunger today.

6. The Saint Paul Fast:

Purpose: To gain clear perspective and insight for crucial decisions

Key verse: *And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.* [Acts 9:9]

Background: Saul of Tarsus was struck blind. He desperately needed new direction for his life. He needed God's light.

7. The Daniel Fast:

Purpose: To gain increased health or healing

Key Verse: *Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank. [Dan. 1:8]*

Background: Daniel was exiled to Babylon. He kept himself from the pagan foods God had guided the Israelites not to eat. When tested, he was found to be more healthful than the other youth in the Kings Court.

8. The John the Baptist Fast:

Purpose: That our testimony and ministry be enhanced

Key Verse: *He shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. [Luke 1:15]*

Background: John the Baptist was a "Nazirite." This means that he had taken a vow that required him to avoid wine and strong drink. John was set apart for a special ministry to prepare the way for the gospel of Christ.

9. The Esther Fast

Purpose: For protection from the schemes of the Evil One

Key Verse: *Fast for me, and my maids and I will fast... and I will go to the king... and she found favor in his sight. [Esther 4:16; 5:2]*

Background: Xerxes plotted to destroy the Jewish people. Queen Esther's uncle Mordecai found out about the scheme. After fasting, Esther risked her life to appeal to the king of Persia. Xerxes' scheme was thwarted.

In the space below, or in your journal, write down your purpose for fasting:

Step Two: Map out Your PLAN

“Your plan will fail if you fail to plan”

1. What:

Determine what you will abstain from. There are different types of fasts. Some involve abstaining from all food, some involve abstaining from only certain types of food, and some involve abstaining from other things.

What you choose to abstain from depends on many factors, including your medical condition, your lifestyle, and your responsibilities. Be realistic and reasonable when choosing the type of fast. One type of fast is no more “spiritual” than the other types.

- A. No food. No water [Acts 9:9; Esther 4:15,16] Warning: Maximum 3 Days (WATER IS CRITICAL TO YOUR HEALTH. THIS TYPE OF FAST IS NOT RECOMMENDED)
- B. No food. Water only. (Maximum 40 days)
- C. No solid food. Juices only. [Bill Bright Fast - see appendix for details]
- D. No cereals or grains (Feast of Firstfruits) (Lev. 23:14)
- E. No fruit, vegetables, or meat. Whole grain bread and water only. [John Wesley Fast]
- F. No meat. Vegetables only. [Daniel Fast]
- G. No grapes or grape Products [Nazirite Vow] [Num. 6:3,4] –(no alcohol/vinegar/grape juice)
- H. No delicacies
- I. No electronics
- J. No sex (requires spousal consent 1 Cor. 7:5)

2. When:

Determine the duration of your fast. When are you abstaining and for how long? Beginners should start with shorter fasts.

- A. Part of a day: King Darius [Daniel 6:18] King David [2 Sam. 3:35]
- B. 24 hour: Yom Kipper Fast– from sundown to sundown [Lev. 16:29]
- C. 3 Day: Esther [1 Sam 30:12]
- D. 7 Day: Valiant Men of Jabesh Gilead [1 Sam. 31:11-13]
- E. 14 Day: Paul and Sailors [Acts 27:33]

- F. 21 Day: Daniel [Dan. 10:2,3]
- G. 40 Day: Moses [Ex. 34:28]; Jesus [Luke 4:1,2]
- H. “Many” Days: Nehemiah [Neh. 1:4]

3. Who:

Determine who [if anyone] will join you. Fasts can be personal or corporate. They can involve a small group of friends, a city, or even a whole nation.

- A. Individual (Luke 2:36-37; Dan. 6:18; Ps. 35:13)
- B. Spouses [1 Cor. 7:5]
- C. Friends and/or relatives [Esther 4:15,16]
- D. Larger Groups [Ezra 8:21-23]
- E. Church leaders and churches [Acts 13:1-3]
- F. Cities and Nations [Jon. 3:5-9; 2 Chron. 20:2,3]

4. How:

A. Determine what physical/social activities you will restrict

- Restrict TV, computer, and video games
- Restrict movies
- Restrict social outings
- Restrict strenuous physical exercise/exertion
- Restrict excess work

B. Determine where/when you will pray

- Identify places you will pray (“prayer closets”) and prayer times
- Try to maintain a consistent daily schedule
- Determine whether you will have dedicated days of prayer, where the whole day is set aside for prayer
- Determine whether you will meet with others for prayer

C. Write your plan down in your journal or fill out the “Fast Planner” form in the appendix of this manual

Remember, fasting is of limited value if it is not accompanied by times of prayer!

Step Three: Take Time to PREPARE

The success of your fast often depends on how well you prepare for the fast ahead of time. Spontaneous fasting definitely has value, but you will usually experience more benefits from fasting if your heart, mind and body are prepared ahead of time.

1. Spiritual Preparation

A. Deal with known sin

- Repent
- Ask for Forgiveness
- Extend Forgiveness
- Restitution

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Mt 5:23-25).

B. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal sin

C. Deal with what the Spirit reveals

D. Pray about your fast

- for strength
- for protection from spiritual attack/opposition
- for sensitivity to hear God's voice
- for increased faith and expectation
- for a humble heart
- for increased heart-hunger for God

2. Physical Preparation

- A. Consult your physician if you take prescription medications, have a medical condition or a history of medical problems. Some medical conditions may preclude fasting and others may require medical supervision. If you have any medical concerns, DO NOT fast from food without consulting a physician first!
- B. Do NOT stop medication without your physician's approval and supervision.
- C. Expectant and nursing mothers, diabetics, and those with other medical conditions should not deprive their bodies of essential nutrients. They can enter into the spirit of fasting in alternate ways.
- D. During a fast you will want to avoid all drugs, including natural herbal and homeopathic products.
- E. Eat smaller meals for several days before starting a fast
- F. Eat raw/fresh foods for several days before starting a fast
- G. Cut down/eliminate foods that are high in fat and/or sugar
- H. Cut down/eliminate caffeine
- I. Get adequate rest

3. Functional Preparation

- A. As necessary, enlist the cooperation of immediate family members or room-mates
 - This is especially important for those who have food preparation responsibilities
 - For functional reasons, you may need to advise your family or room-mates of what you are doing
- B. Prepare a "Closet"
 - A "prayer closet" is a place where you can have uninterrupted times of prayer
 - The goal is to eliminate interruption and minimize distraction
 - Office or study
 - Private Room
 - Your Car
 - Prayer Chair
 - A Hotel or Retreat Center

C. Stock up on necessary fasting supplies (depending on the type of fast you have chosen)

- Distilled Water
- Bottles of Water
- Fruit & vegetables
- Whole grain bread
- Juicer

D. Collect Resources

- Collect them in a basket or box
- Bible
- Journal and Pen
- Books
- Worship resources
- Hymnbook
- Book of Common Prayer
- Book of Christian Poetry
- Bible Study
- Prayer List
- Prayer Cards/Prayer Verses

E. Collect Other Items

- Water Bottle
- Music/ CD's/ CD Player or Walkman
- Quilt, Pillow, Sweater, Slippers, bean bag warmers

In the space below or in your journal, outline what you specifically plan to do to prepare for your fast:

Step Four: Follow through on your Commitment

1. What to expect as you begin

- A. You may experience temporary emotional challenges such as irritability, impatience, anxiety, or “the blues.”
- B. You will likely experience temporary physical discomforts: headaches, hunger pains, dizziness, lethargy, weakness, shivers, fatigue and/or sleeplessness.
- C. Headaches can be severe if you are withdrawing from caffeine and sugar.
- D. Your tongue may feel “coated” and your breath will be bad as your body clears itself of accumulated toxins.
- E. The emotional/physical challenges and discomforts will pass. As you continue to fast, you will likely experience a heightened sense of physical and spiritual well-being.

2. During your fast

- A. Limit strenuous physical activity and rest as much as your schedule permits
- B. Stick to a schedule – particularly with regards to the times you have planned for prayer and Scripture reading.
- C. The more time you spend with the Lord, the more meaningful your fast will be.
- D. Spend plenty of time in worship.
- E. Listen for the Lord to speak.
- F. Spend focused time praying and reflecting on your fast’s chosen purpose and/or theme.
- G. In your journal, regularly record your reflections, impressions, dreams, visions, experiences, as well as promises and directions you receive from God.

Here are 10 questions, adapted from Henry Blackaby’s “*Experiencing God*” that can help you recognize God’s work in your life. Reflect on these questions and record your answers in your journal.

[Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, “Experiencing God” (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Press, 1994)]

- i. What is God revealing to you about Himself?
- ii. What is God revealing to you about His purposes?
- iii. What is God revealing to you about His ways?
- iv. What Scripture is God using to speak to you about Himself, His purposes or His ways?
- v. What is God doing in your life that is causing you to experience His presence?
- vi. What particular person or concern is God giving you a burden to pray for? What has He guided you to pray for in this situation?
- vii. What has God done that has given you a sense of His timing or direction concerning any aspect of His will?
- viii. What word of guidance or truth do you sense God has spoken to you through another believer?
- ix. What adjustment is God leading you to make in your life?
- x. What acts of obedience have you accomplished this week? What further steps of obedience does God want you to take?

H. Be flexible/ adaptable during your fast. Follow through on God's direction. Respond to his guidance.

I. Expect the unexpected.

3. Ending your fast

A. End your fast gradually!

- Ending your fast takes as much planning and attention as starting it. This rule becomes increasingly important based on the length of time you have been fasting.
- Do NOT eat solid foods immediately!
- Reintroducing heavy, solid foods can have dangerous medical consequences. Don't go from fasting to feasting. This can severely damage your health.
- End an extended water fast by eating a non-acidic fruit such as watermelon

- Add raw, fresh salads and vegetables (avoid seasoning, spices and dressings)
- On the third day, add whole grain bread, a few tablespoons of solid food and/or broth with steamed vegetables.
- Eat several smaller meals or snacks each day
- Avoid milk, seasonings, fatty foods and rich desserts for a few days until your digestive system has been re-accustomed to processing food.
- Breaking an extended fast (a food-abstention fast that has lasted 3 or more days) should take several days.

B. Expect Post-Fast Physical, Mental and Spiritual Challenges

- You may experience “the broom-tree syndrome” – slight depression after going through the spiritual intensity and “high” of a fast.
- You may experience emotions such as sadness, longing, and “abandonment” as you get back into the normal routine of life.
- You may face difficulty with self-control in your eating habits and spiritual disciplines.
- Heightened spiritual attacks during the post-fast period are not uncommon.
- Expect that the Evil One will try to rob you of what you have gained. Do not be unaware of his schemes.

Step Five: Aim for Continued Obedience

1. A humble, obedient lifestyle of obedience:

To be effective, fasting must be accompanied by an ongoing lifestyle of obedience. Fasting is of no use unless it flows from the proper spirit. In Isaiah 58, the Lord condemns those who go through the motions of fasting yet continue in sin. He gives some examples of the types of on-going sins that go against the proper spirit of fasting:

- seeking your own pleasure (v. 3)

- oppressing those under your authority - abusing your leadership position (government/employers/church leaders/husbands/parents/ etc.) (v.3)
- quarrelling and fighting (v. 4)
- lashing/ striking out at others (v. 4)

These examples stand in contrast to the on-going lifestyle behavior that the Lord expects of those who fast. Fasting in the right spirit means that we seek to obey and follow Christ on an ongoing basis. A proper spirit of fasting will result in behavior such as this:

- loosing the bonds of wickedness (v. 6)
- lifting yokes and burdens (v. 6)
- helping the oppressed go free (v. 6)
- sharing your bread with the hungry (v. 7)
- bringing the homeless poor into your house (v.7)
- covering the naked (v. 7)
- treating your family members with respect and not despising or neglecting them (v. 7)

These lists are far from comprehensive. There are many other on-going sins that could be added to the first list and ongoing attitudes/actions of righteousness added to the latter. It's important to understand the point God is making... He is not saying that we need to be perfect in order for our fasting to be worthwhile. But he IS saying that in order for our fasting to be worthwhile we must do it in the right spirit. Fasting is of little value as an isolated religious experience or demonstration. But it is of great value when it is part of a believer's ongoing humble pursuit of obedience and godliness.

2. Rewards for fasting in the right spirit:

Jesus promised that God the Father will reward those who fast in the right spirit. "*And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. [Matthew 6:18]*

What are the rewards of fasting in the right spirit? The Lord outlines some of the rewards in Isaiah 58:

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear....Then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard....Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.”

Then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

*Then you will find your joy in the Lord and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”
The mouth of the Lord has spoken. “ [Isa. 58]*

- Spiritual breakthrough [“light will break forth” Isa. 58:8]
- Healing [Isa. 58:8]
- Increased Righteousness [Isa. 58:8]
- Protection [Isa. 58:8]
- Answered Prayer [Isa. 58:9]
- Greater Intimacy with God [Isa. 58:9]
- Enlightenment, clarity and insight [Isa. 58:10]
- Guidance [Isa. 58:11]
- Satisfied Desires [Isa. 58:11]
- Strength [Isa. 58:11]
- Refreshment [Isa. 58:11]
- Restoration [Isa. 58:11]
- Renewal [Isa. 58:11]
- Increased compassion [Isa. 58:12]
- Increased “anointing”- you will have more to give [Isa. 58:11-12]
- Increased effectiveness in ministry [Isa. 58:12]
- Increased spiritual power [Mark 9:29]
- Increased victory [Isa. 58:14]
- Destruction of Satan’s strongholds [Mark 9:29]
- Deliverance from the demonic [Mark 9:29]
- Joy, gladness, and cheer [Zech. 8:19; Isa. 58:14]
- You fast – and He’ll serve up a feast [Isa. 58:14]

Planning Form

1. PURPOSE:

My Primary Purpose for this prayer/fast:

- recharge
- refocus
- repent
- request
- reform

specific comments about purpose:

2. DATE/TIME:

List date(s) and/or time you are planning to take your Time Out.

Will your time of prayer be accompanied by fasting? YES NO

3. TYPE/DURATION OF FAST: (if applicable)

I will abstain from: _____

Starting Date: _____ Time: _____

Ending Date: _____ Time: _____

4. DETAILS:

I am praying/fasting alone with others
who?

Restricted physical and social activities:

Tentative Prayer Schedule:

When:

Where:

When:

Where:

When:

Where:

(continue on separate page if necessary)

Specific elements/activities I would like to incorporate into my Time Out:

5. SCHEDULE: (pencil-in selected elements)

6:00 _____

6:30 _____

7:00 _____

7:30 _____

8:00 _____

8:30 _____

9:00 _____

9:30 _____

10:00 _____

10:30 _____

11:00 _____

11:30 _____

12:00 _____

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17:30 _____

18:00 _____

18:30 _____

19:00 _____

19:30 _____

20:00 _____

20:30 _____

21:00 _____

21:30 _____

22:00 _____

6. PREPARATION:

Identify what you need to do to prepare for your fast. Check off as completed.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

7. COMMITMENT:

By the grace of God I commit myself to this fast.

Date:

Signature:

The Bill Bright Fast (Juice Fast)

[This schedule can be modified to suit your circumstances and tastes]

1. Morning: Fruit Juice

- Apple, pear, grapefruit, papaya, watermelon, or other fresh squeezed or blended fruit juice. If the fruit is acidic, dilute it half and half with distilled water. If at all possible, do your own juicing. If you can't juice your own, buy juices without sugar or additives.

2. Noon: Vegetable Juice

- Three equal parts of lettuce, celery and carrots – juiced.

3. Afternoon: Herb Tea

- Add a drop of honey to herbal tea. Avoid caffeinated or black tea.

4. Evening: Vegetable Broth

- Boil potatoes, celery and carrots. Do not add salt. After the vegetables have boiled for approximately half an hour, pour the broth into a container. Store the broth in the refrigerator. Warm the broth before drinking.

Tips on Juice Fasting

- Drinking fruit/vegetable juice will decrease hunger pains and provide some natural sucrose energy. This will strengthen you to maintain your fast.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables make the best juices. Suggested vegetables and fruits include leafy green vegetables, celery, cabbage, beets, carrots or melon, lemons, grapes, and apples.

- Acidic fruits such as oranges and tomatoes may be used, but should be mixed with water to avoid irritating your stomach
- Avoid caffeine.
- Avoid chewing gum or mints as the chewing action will stimulates the digestive mechanism of the stomach

[adapted from Bright, Bill "7 Basic Steps to Successful Fasting & Prayer" Booklet available from New Life Publications. A Ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ. 100 Sunport Lane. Orlando, FL 32809 copyright 1995. Adapted from "The Coming Revival: America's Call to Fast, Pray, and Seek God's Face," (New Life Publications: 1995).]