

Fasting

As a young Christian I was asked frequently to join fasts for different things .. I had a difficult time getting a clear picture on what the purpose of fasting was. Most people told me that fasting was about making some need known to God in a powerful way ... that by fasting He was more likely to respond. I was taught that fasting food was too difficult for most people, so instead, we could fast TV, movies, etc.

Over the years I have studied everything the Bible offers concerning fasting as well as seek guidance from my mentors concerning this subject. Let's first do a quick study of the word 'fast' itself within the Hebrew, Greek, and its translation to the English language:

The word for "fast" in the old testament comes from the Hebrew word צָם tsûm (pronounced tsoom). It is a primitive root directly translated to cover over (the mouth), that is, to fast: - X at all, fast.

In the New Testament (Greek), it is from the word νῆστις nēstis (pronounced nace'-tis) (from the negative particle νη nē and ἐσθίω esthiō es-thee'-o); it is translated not eating, that is, abstinent from food (religiously): - fasting.

Another word derived from nēstis is the word νηστεύω nēsteuō (nace-tyoo'-o); which is translated to abstain from food (religiously): - fast.

The Webster Dictionary has the following definitions for Fast

FAST, verb

1. To abstain from food, beyond the usual time; to omit to take the usual meals, for a time; as, to fast a day or a week.
2. To abstain from food voluntarily, for the mortification of the body or appetites, or as a token of grief, sorrow and affliction.
3. To abstain from food partially, or from particular kinds of food; as, the Catholics fast in Lent.

FAST, noun

1. Abstinance from food; properly a total abstinance, but it is used also for an abstinance from particular kinds of food, for a certain time.
2. Voluntary abstinance from food, as a religious mortification or humiliation; either total or partial abstinance from customary food, with a view to mortify the appetites, or to express grief and affliction on account of some calamity, or to deprecate an expected evil.
3. The time of fasting, whether a day, week or longer time.

Fasting deals specifically with *refusing to eat*. The original use of the word was literally translated "to cover the mouth." People who claim to fast by staying away from the TV, computer, phone, etc are either confused or have sat under misinformed teaching. Staying clear of those devices is NOT fasting. They are simply limiting distractions. While it certainly can be good for the spirit of a man to put away such distractions, to claim that as fasting is incorrect. I know there are many who will argue with me ... but they cannot do so while acknowledging scripture. I was taught that error as well... and it made sense at first until I began to read about fasting. Once I looked up the word for myself, it was clear. To fast means to deny the body of a physiological need for a spiritual or medical purpose.

So why food? What makes food so special? Well it's really simple. The body needs food. Without it, the body will die. The desire for food is the strongest urge the body has ... stronger than sex. Many would disagree with that statement but in truth most of us do not know what starvation feels like. Additionally, a person's level of self discipline is directly related to their food disciplines. A person who cannot control eating usually has all

types of balance issues in their life. The same is true for the person who fails to choose proper foods to eat, that person will usually have a history of making poor choices.

So what is the purpose of fasting? Well to answer that question I want to look at some scriptures.

The most revealing passages of scripture detailing the purposes and intentions for fasting are in Isaiah 58 and Joel 2. In both passages, God Himself is speaking ... I Him the subject matter expert anyways...

Isa 58:6 "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' "If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 If you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your darkness shall be as the noonday.

Joel 2:12 "Now, therefore," says the LORD, "Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." 13 So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. 14 Who knows if He will turn and relent...

Here are some other instances of fasting in the Bible and God's response:

- David fasts for the well being of his sick son he had through adultery - his son dies (2 Sam 12)
- David fasts repeatedly through the Psalms for God's mercy, guidance, and help - God is faithful (Psalms)
- Jehoshaphat calls for Judah to fast for deliverance from overwhelming attack - God protects Judah. (2 Chron 20)
- Nehemiah fasts for God's forgiveness and help when he hears of Jerusalem's desecration - God grants favor with the king and Nehemiah is allowed to lead the people of Israel back. (Neh 1)
- Ezra fasts for understanding, direction, and protection - God protects and guides them (Ezra 8)
- Ezra fasts for the failure of his people to be faithful to God. - The people repent.
- Esther calls for Israel to join her as she fasts for faith and understanding - God grants her favor and exposes Haman. (Esth 4)
- The king of Nineveh calls for a national fast for repentance and to seek God's mercy. - God grants mercy.
- Daniel and his friends fast the pleasures of being nobility in Nebuchadnezzar's court - God grants them favor, miracles, wisdom, etc.

While this list is not comprehensive, these scriptures provide us with plenty of information to make solid deductions about fasting.

1. **Fasting does not impress God.** God is not deceived by a fast. He looks to the heart of a man and sees the intentions ... that is a scary thought. Many people foolishly believe that by fasting, God overlooks sinful actions and decisions.
2. **Fasting does not help God to hear us nor does it make Him love us more.** God is restrained in His love for us by nothing. His justice does not restrain in Him ... His justice is why Christ died. We do not fast so that God will move. Believing that is bondage.
3. **Fasting helps us get into a place where we can clearly hear in the spirit what God is leading us to do.** God is always speaking ... always leading, but our ability to hear Him is constantly numbed by living in the flesh. A fast places the believer in a state where he is no longer listening to his flesh. This act strengthens the believer spiritually in a way that nothing else can. If a person is not sure which direction is God's will, fasting is the most direct choice to get into a place to hear!
4. **Fasting is the most powerful and direct way a person can be delivered from sinful desires and addictions.** The body has urges...food being the strongest. If the urge to eat can be defeated, than any other urge can be as well. We like to believe that deliverance can come without getting to that level ... but Jesus disagreed (Matt 17). Christ overcame the world ... we are promised that through Him we can as well.
5. **Fasting implies the believer will also be aggressively in prayer and scripture meditation.** For a person to deny the body food yet fail to pray is nothing more than a crash diet. Fasting places the believer in a spiritual state to clearly hear the voice of God to find understanding, direction, deliverance, etc. Prayer is our only means to interacting with God and only in the scripture is His word revealed. Whatever we feel led to do must align with the Bible.
6. **Fasting helps us to deal with situations we can't change.** Sometimes it is hard to bloom where you are planted. We often pray for God to get us out of environments we don't like or to change the environments/people etc. But the most powerful prayer we can make is for God to open our hearts to be receptive to His will. That prayer will always be answered with a yes! God has not called us to live in a green house. We can't be used to reach the lost if we are unwilling to lovingly and earnestly live among them.
7. **Fasting helps us to overcome the deepest of personal wounds.** Unforgiveness will lead to bitterness which cuts through a believer like a hot blade in butter. Some wounds are deep ... God is deeper. Fasting puts us in a place where we can see it for what it is and let it be taken.
8. **Fasting helps us to be more effective in our ministry.** I could not imagine ministering to God's people without fasting. We don't know what other people need. Shoot, we often are deceived within ourselves. When we look to be a vessel for deliverance to others, doing it without God's direct instruction is foolish.
9. **Fasting is private and voluntary.** Jesus taught us to do it in secrecy. For some strange reason fasting seems to be a pretty social thing in some Christian circles though Jesus clearly teaches us to do it in secrecy. (Mat 6:16) I would be wary of anyone who tells you about the fast that he or she is on unless you are part of the situation in an unavoidable way. In cases where groups are involved with the situation, requesting them to join you is perfectly reasonable. I recommend ministry teams fasting together for common direction. However, it is absolutely wrong to enforce a fast on anyone else. Forcing spouses, children, employees, staff etc to fast is spiritual abuse and manipulation.
10. **Fasting doesn't necessarily mean 'no food whatsoever.'** What is known as the "Daniel Fast" is a fast consisting only vegetables and water. Some people go without any solid food but still drink

liquids. Some people deny themselves meat. Some deny themselves sweet foods. But it is vitally important that we don't seek pleasure through either the food we do eat or anything we are doing during that time.

I strongly recommend that all believers fast at least once a year. Some people are not in positions to do total fasts. Some work demands and health issues may keep a person from being able to do a total fast. But everyone can fast something. I recommend that every believer starts each year with a total fast. I believe in fasting routines during the year. For instance, deciding that the first Monday of every month will be a total fast. Another example would be for a person to fast a meal on a given day every week. Others may choose to sporadically fast. Whatever the choice, I urge you to do it. But it is vitally important that during the fast you seek God. Just don't go without food. Don't lie to yourselves and skip a meal that is convenient. Do it where no one will know... even if that means you have to attend dinners and the like. You will find that by devoting yourself to seeking God this way, His presence is much more real and near than you realized.

A fast that I try to make a yearly discipline is a 21 day fast. I begin by going through a total fast. Once I cannot maintain my energy, I begin taking water. As time goes on I will take vegetables but without salt or season for the remainder. Periodically I will return to just water. I am not telling you this to brag, I'm urging you to do this for yourselves. You can do it! You need to do it! I also choose days in 1, 2, and 3 day increments to fast. I have personally not experienced any change within myself to better hear the voice of God by fasting only one meal .. but I still do it regularly out of discipline. I rarely share with anyone that I am fasting. I only share it with my wife (generally) so she will understand why I am not eating.

I don't need to hear anything that He has not already written down. If He never gives a human as much as a whisper His word is enough. I want to make this clear. Fasting has greatly helped me to clearly understand what God has been leading me to do all along, but not because I suddenly can see Him in my room, or because His voice speaks in the whirlwind ... but because His scripture becomes clear to me. God tends to speak to us through His Word ... hence the name. It wasn't called a manuscript for a reason. READ IT!!!

Can we fast other physiological needs? Well, the answer there is one of interpretation. Paul teaches that married couples, during times of fasting, may restrain themselves sexually.

1 Cor 7:5 Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment.

But the idea is that during a fast, we should not be distracting ourselves from one bodily urge by fulfilling ourselves with another. The emptiness we feel is to be considered as we strengthen our spirit. The flesh wars against the spirit, and the spirit the flesh. I believe that going without sex, sleep, etc usually accompanies a fast but do not themselves replace the denying of the body the food it so desperately thinks it needs.

Every believer should fast. Every believer should pray. Every believer should search the Scriptures. What an impact we could have in the lives of the lost and hurting we would be if that were true!!

That's my take anyways!