

A Short, Practical Guide for Prayer and Fasting

Why call for a day of prayer and fasting?

These are tumultuous times that call for prayer and fasting. Deadly disease runs rampant; the world's economies are unstable; peace and safety are threatened at every turn. Now, "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). No matter what trials we face, all of Christ's followers "are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). Still, many of us struggle during these times as never before with hopelessness, loneliness, financial ruin, fear of violence, illness and death. The Scriptures teach that when followers of Christ face difficulties like these, we are to seek God's help through prayer and fasting. Jesus himself explained that once he left his disciples and ascended into heaven, "then they will fast" (Matthew 9:15).

In the Scriptures, fasting is the self-denial of some or all food or drink as the faithful express their intense concerns to God in special times of prayer and worship. It was practiced both privately and corporately and for short and long periods of time. Biblical fasting occurred in many settings. God's people mourned the death of loved ones with fasting (2 Samuel 1:11-12). They fasted to prepare for special times of renewal in the presence of God (Numbers 29:7). The faithful fasted to express heartfelt repentance over their own sins and the sins of others (Ezra 10:6). They fasted as they cried out to God in circumstances that required God's extraordinary help (2 Chronicles 20:3). It's no wonder then that throughout the history of the church, Christians have always turned to God in troubled times with prayer and fasting.

Sadly, modern evangelicals have largely lost sight of God's gracious provision of fasting. We labor under the burden of thinking that the faithful will be satisfied, even delighted with whatever terrible circumstances may come their way. As a result, we deny ourselves the opportunity to express our deep sorrow over sin, our desperate need for Christ, our longing for the renewal of the church and our intense desire to see Christ's merciful and just Kingdom spread throughout the world. Yet, as our difficult days bring us to a stark awareness of how much we need God's mercy, we must once again humble ourselves before the Lord through prayer and fasting.

How can my family and I engage in a day of prayer and fasting?

First and foremost, engaging in a day of prayer and fasting is a matter of the heart. The Scriptures do not prescribe precisely what we are to do and say. As James put it, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8). Above all, we are to find ways to humble ourselves before the Father, in Christ’s name and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

You can do this in many ways. If you have children, you may simply lead your entire family in special times of prayer as you fast during one or more meal times. One parent may care for the children as the other spouse has time alone with God. Couples may alternate between praying in solitude and praying together throughout the day. You may also be able to connect with other Christians outside of your home for a time of prayer sometime during the day. The variety of biblical examples indicates that God grants us much freedom.

Still, I have discovered through the years that many evangelicals today find it quite challenging to spend an entire day in prayer and fasting. So, let me offer two simple, practical suggestions.

Before the Day of Prayer and Fasting

Plan how you will devote yourself to a day of prayer and fasting.

1. Plan when you will have times of prayer during the day of fasting.
2. Plan readings from Scripture, a hymnal or a book of prayer for each time of prayer.
3. Plan specific thanksgivings and praise to God for each time of prayer. For example:
 - Blessings of God in your personal life
 - Blessings of God to your family members
 - Blessings of God in the lives of your friends and acquaintances
 - Blessings of God in your church
 - Blessings of God in your nation
4. Plan a specific focus for your requests during each time of prayer. For example:
 - Your own sins and personal needs
 - The needs of family members by name, especially the elderly and sick
 - The needs of friends and acquaintances by name, especially the elderly and sick
 - The renewal of your church and church leaders in Gospel ministry
 - Blessing and protection for medical professionals
 - Wisdom for specific government officials

On the Day of Prayer and Fasting

Repeat a similar process throughout the day of prayer and fasting.

1. Read aloud from the passage of Scripture, the hymnal or book of prayer you have chosen. (10 minutes)
2. Express the thanksgivings you have chosen. (10 minutes)
3. Pray for the needs you have chosen. (20 minutes)
4. Observe Rest and Quiet Reflection in the Presence of God. (10 minutes)