

# Fasting

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Let's begin with a little quiz.

1. Who was the first person who fasted in the Bible? (Moses)
2. What was the longest length of time for a fast? (40 days)
3. Who were the people who fasted for this length of time?  
(Moses 3 times; Elijah 1 time; Jesus 1 time)

## A Biblical Perspective on Food Why Did God Give Use Food?

1. Enjoyment – Food is meant to be a source of joy (*Ecclesiastes 2:24-25, 5:18*). We are allowed to enjoy our food.
2. Sustenance – Both plants and animals are God's provision for our nourishment. (*Genesis 9:3*)
3. Fellowship – All through the Old Testament the people came together for fellowship over food. (*Genesis 18:1-8, Deuteronomy 12:6, 7, 18*). The family of Christ (had a meal – Love Feast) and then they would break together in the Lord's Supper. (*1 Corinthians 10:17*)
4. Worship – Paul says that every bit of food “Should be received with thanksgiving.” (*1 Timothy 4:3*) Hence every meal becomes an occasion for thanksgiving.

## What Fasting Is Not

1. A Manipulative Tool – It is not an attempt to twist God's arm or to win His approval. God doesn't respond to pressure.

One group of people in the book of Acts tried to get God on their side by manipulative fasting. (*Acts 23:12, 14*) But God did not hear and their plan.

2. A Hypocritical Religious Exercise – Based on *Luke 18:12*, we know the Pharisees fasted twice a week! The Talmud tells us that this was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> day (Mon and Thurs.). Why these days? According to the Pharisees,

it was because Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to get the law on the 5<sup>th</sup> day and returned on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day.

Real Reason – Market day in the City of Jerusalem was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> day! Everyone from the countryside came to town on these days. It was on these two days that the Pharisees chose to hold their fasts.

They would walk through the streets with their hair disheveled put on old clothes and cover their faces with dirt; they would cover their faces with white chalk in order to look pale; and they would dump ashes over their heads as a sign of their humility!

Fasting had become a “look at how spiritual I am”.

## **Greek Word Study**

The Greek word for fasting is: “One who has not eaten” “Who is empty”

“nestoia” (noun) – of voluntary abstinence from food

“nesteuo” (verb) – to abstain from eating

“Asitos” (adjective) – without food

## **Hebrew Word Study**

The Hebrew word for fasting is:

“Tsoma” – to fast (same idea as above)

Biblical fasting is deliberately abstaining from food for a spiritual reason, goal or purpose that involves Bible study, prayer and meditation.

Fasting in antiquity – Common among Greek’s and Roman’s.

- Fear of demons (played a role in it)
- Fasting was also seen as a means of preparing for dealing with deity

## Types of Fasting

1. Normal Fast – The person abstains from food but not water. (Number of days determined by individual or group) Jesus fasted 40 days. (**Matthew 4:2**)  
The common practice of a normal fast appears to be 1 to 3 days.
2. Partial Fast – The emphasis is placed on restriction of diet, rather than abstaining completely from eating.

Example: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (**Daniel 1:15**)

3. Absolute Fast – The person refrains from both food and water.  
(Not to exceed 3 days)

Example: **1 Kings 19:8 (Elijah), Deuteronomy 9:9-19 and Exodus 34:38 (Moses), Ezra 10:6, Esther 4:16 (Esther and Her household), Acts 9:9 (Paul)**

## Why Fast?

God said so – **Jeremiah 29:13-14**

Fasting puts things in proper focus. It is a physical way of saying, “Food and the things of this life are not as important to me now as (the subject of your fast).”

Fasting demonstrates humility.

## Principles of Fasting

1. Fasting is assumed by the New Testament. (**Matthew 6:16**)
2. The occasion for a fast is voluntary. When should a Christian fast? When he feels the Spirit of God is leading them to fast.
3. The length of a fast is voluntary. We have enough examples in the Bible.
  - A. One day (**Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 14:24; 2 Samuel 12; 3:35**)
  - B. Esther continued for 3 days.

- C. At the burial of Saul the feast was 7 days.
- D. David also fasted 7 days when his child was ill. (**2 Samuel 12:16-18**)
- E. 40 Days:

|        |         |                                  |
|--------|---------|----------------------------------|
| Moses  | 3 times | <b><i>Deuteronomy 9:9-18</i></b> |
| Elijah | 1 time  | <b><i>1 Kings 19:8</i></b>       |
| Jesus  | 1 time  | <b><i>Matthew 4:2</i></b>        |

4. How you spend your time while fasting is a personal decision, too. Please remember – there must be a time of study, meditation and prayer.
5. Fasting does not negate our responsibility to be obedient to God. We cannot fast and pray expecting God to bless when there is known sin in our lives. (**Isaiah 58:3-4**)

### **Times to Consider Fasting**

|                                               |                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mourning someone's death                      | <b><i>1 Samuel 31:13; 1 Chronicles. 10:12; 2 Samuel 1:12, 3:35</i></b>                |
| Mourning sin                                  | <b><i>Deut. 9:18; 1 Sam. 7:6; 1 Kings 21:27; Ezra 10:6; Jonah 3:5; Acts 9:3-9</i></b> |
| Situation of impending danger, for protection | <b><i>Jeremiah 36:9; Esther 4:3</i></b>                                               |
| Direction                                     | <b><i>2 Chronicles 20:1-20; Acts 13:2</i></b>                                         |
| Sickness                                      | <b><i>2 Samuel 12:15-23; Psalm 35:15</i></b>                                          |
| Special revelation                            | <b><i>Daniel 9:9-18; Jeremiah 29:10-13</i></b>                                        |

### **Conclusion:**

Enter with a positive faith that God will reward those who fast with the right motives. **Matthew 6:18**

Keep checking your motives concerning your fasts. Hypocrisy and spiritual pride can easily creep in. There is a reward for fasting, but only fasting done with the right mental attitude.

## Biblical Fasting

The act of fasting is an exercise that can make a person look very spiritual. Whether praying or fasting, the question becomes, what is your real motivation?

*“One morning at the breakfast table a father asked the blessing as usual. Quoting Bible verses, he piously thanked the Lord for all His bountiful provisions. After he concluded, however, he grumbled loudly about the poor quality of the food and berated his wife for the way it was cooked. He seemed to be disgruntled with everything. Finally, his young daughter interrupted him, ‘Dad,’ she began, ‘do you think God heard what you said when you prayed?’ ‘Certainly’, he replied confidently. ‘And did He also hear when you complained about the bacon and coffee just now?’ ‘Why of course!’ ‘Then which did God believe?’”*

Biblical fasting means more than just abstaining from food; it means to abstain from food in order to concentrate upon God and His answer to a particular matter.

Biblical fasting involves Bible study and prayer. The benefits of fasting can be beneficial, but also dangerous. It starts with motivation – why are you doing this?

The wrong motive:

1. To gain a sense of God’s approval and of self-approval
2. To fulfill a religious act
3. To gain recognition

Fasting for recognition is wrong. It poses several serious dangers that must be guarded against with all diligence:

1. *The danger of feeling super-spiritual.* Few believers follow a true fast. Therefore, when they really fast, they have to guard against a sense of super-spirituality and pride.
2. *The danger of over-confidence.* The believer’s confidence is to be in God, not in self. After a genuine fast, a believer usually feels spiritually confident, ready to go forth. He must go forth, depending upon the strength of Christ, and not upon his own energy and effort.
3. *The danger of sharing one’s fasting experience.* The believer has usually learned so much from being in God’s presence that he is anxious to share it, especially with those closest to him. The best

advice is to hush: share nothing, not even with one's dearest friend.  
*Fast before God not man!*

4. *The danger of changing one's appearance and the way one acts and behaves.* Any change whatsoever from one's normal behavior and routine attracts attention and ruins the whole benefit of the fast. As Christ says, "they disfigure their face" (act super-spiritual).  
*(Matthew 6:16)*.

Even though the Bible (not the Epistles) does not command that we fast nor how often, neither does God say don't fast. But if you do – the Bible tells us how.

We have the completed canon of Scripture. Remember the OT and early church did not fast until approximately AD 100. We also have the Holy Spirit along with Bible Doctrine telling us how to live the Christian Way of Life.

Legalistic fasting becomes a danger to society by promoting a *faulty culture*. It distorts or distracts from God's grace program for that culture. This is seen in the influence of the apostate Pharisaical religious leaders of the First Century AD  
*(Matthew 5:20; 6:16-18; 15:1-20; 23:1-36)*.

This is seen in Cornelius in *(Acts 10:1-4, 30-33, 39-43, 44-45)*.

Pharisaical legalism made fasting into a ritual to gain the favor of God apart from faith in Jesus Christ. They rejected Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement and shadow Christology, and substituted ritual fasting. This brought condemnation from Jesus.

## **I. Fasting during the Age of Israel from the Old Testament**

1. People fasted as a result of mourning over calamitous circumstances.
  - A. Military defeat (*Judges 20:26; Nehemiah 1:1-4, 8*)
  - B. Death of a king (*1 Samuel 31:14; 2 Samuel 1:12*)  
Fasting was associated with funerals.
  - C. Terminal illness of a child (*2 Samuel 12:16-23*)
  - D. Personal distress of a king over the possible loss of a loyal subject  
*(Daniel 6:16-24)*

**Point of Observation:** *Personal grief or sorrow was associated with fasting.*

2. Calamitous circumstances lead the genuinely humble believer to pray from the soul (*Nehemiah 1:3-11; 2 Chronicles 20:1-4*)

**Points of Observation:** *Oftentimes fasting accompanied prayer. Confession of sin was associated with fasting.*

**Prayer does not prevail in every calamitous circumstance.**

**Prayer is not a problem solving device!**

David and Bathsheba - his first born son

- David prayed and fasted for seven days (*2 Samuel 12:16-23*)
- David fasted, wept, and prayed thinking the Lord might be gracious to him.
- David's prayer did not prevail.
- How does *Romans 8:28* apply? According to His will and His purpose.

3. Fasting has been used as a religious facade which is contrary to the will of God.

- Jezebel's legislation of a fast (*1 Kings 21:9-16*)
- Pharisees' fasting (*Luke 18:9-14*)

*Luke 18:9-14 (NASB77)* <sup>9</sup> *And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:*

**POD:** *Those who believe they are righteous by works view others with contempt.*

**POD:** *Those who know they are righteous because of what God has done in grace should view others with compassion.*

<sup>10</sup> *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. <sup>11</sup> "The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. <sup>12</sup> 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' <sup>13</sup> "But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' <sup>14</sup> "I tell you, this man...*

The tax collector, a convicted sinner, yet one who trusts in God.

*...went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."*

4. Oftentimes, fasting accompanied grieving over and confessing sin upon conviction (**1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 21:27; Nehemiah 9:1-3; Jonah 3:5-10**). Fasting is often associated with fear of destruction or divine discipline. It is an attempt to appeal to the mercy of God.
5. Fasting accompanied the seeking of God's deliverance through prayer (**Ezra 8:21-23; Nehemiah 1:3-11; Psalm 69:5-19, 109:21-31; Daniel 9:3-23; Jonah 3:5-10**).

## **II. Fasting during the Age of Israel as referenced in the Gospels**

1. It was the Father's will for the Humanity of Christ to fast during the wilderness testing for 40 days (**Matthew 4:2**).
2. It was appropriate for the Jewish Age believer to fast (**Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 2:36-37**).
3. It was not appropriate for the disciples to fast during the Age of Israel while the Lord was with them. (**Matthew 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-19**).

### **Matthew 9:14-15 (NASB77)**

<sup>14</sup> *Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"* <sup>15</sup> *And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom...*

*"Sons of the bridal chamber or wedding hall" - Reference to a group of wedding guests who stood closest to the groom and played an essential part in the wedding ceremony.*

Verse 15 continued - *...cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?*

- Jesus Christ – Bridegroom
- Disciples – attendants



- While Jesus Christ is with the disciples, the disciples aren't going to fast because it is a celebratory time as was the ancient wedding feast.
- Remember that fasting in the ancient world is associated with grief, sorrow, and mourning.

Verse 15 continued - *But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.*

4. However, it was appropriate for them to fast once the Lord was taken away from them (**Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:20**) – *Mourning because of the Bridegroom's departure.*
5. Issue of **Matthew 17:21** (NASB77) <sup>21</sup> [*"But this kind (a demon) does not go out except by prayer and fasting."*]

**Matthew 17:14-20** (NASB77) <sup>14</sup> *And when they came to the multitude, a man came up to Him, falling on his knees before Him, and saying,*  
<sup>15</sup> *"Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic, and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water. **Symptomatic of demonic possession.***

<sup>16</sup> *"And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him."*  
<sup>17</sup> *And Jesus answered and said, "O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me."*

**Matthew 16:4** (NASB77) <sup>4</sup> *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign;*

### **Tangible things that they can see because they lack faith!**

**Jesus rebukes them for that lack of faith.**

<sup>18</sup> *And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" <sup>20</sup> And He said to them, "Because of the littleness of your faith;*

- A compound; Oliigos + Pistis – *"Quantity or degree of measure of faith."*

- Faith here is an intangible attitude of trust that only the Lord can measure because it's immaterial like an attitude that is manifested by the Spirit of God.

*for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you.*

**Mark 9:23; 10:27; 11:24 – Parallel accounts!**

6. Fasting was a means of humbling one's soul (**Psalm 35:9-21 cf. Leviticus 23:27-28; Isaiah 58:3**).

***Psalm 35:11-13 (NASB77)*** <sup>11</sup> *Malicious witnesses rise up; They ask me of things that I do not know. <sup>12</sup> They repay me evil for good, To the bereavement of my soul. <sup>13</sup> But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting; And my prayer kept returning to my bosom.*

7. Fasting acceptable to God [during the Age of Israel] and is directly related to the soul (**Isaiah 58:3-12; Jeremiah 14:10-12 cf. Daniel 9:3-23; Joel 2:12-18; Zechariah 7:5**). Fasting is often associated with stressful situations in life (usually self-imposed).

Hannah upset: **1 Samuel 1:7-8**

Jonathan upset: **1 Kings 19:1-8**

***Jeremiah 14:10-12 (NASB77)*** <sup>10</sup> *Thus says the LORD to this people, "Even so they have loved to wander; they have not kept their feet in check. Therefore the LORD does not accept them; now He will remember their iniquity and call their sins to account." <sup>11</sup> So the LORD said to me, "Do not pray for the welfare of this people. <sup>12</sup> "When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence."*

***Joel 2:12-18 (NASB77)*** <sup>12</sup> *"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping, and mourning; <sup>13</sup> And rend your heart and not your garments." Now return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow*

*to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, And relenting of evil. <sup>14</sup> Who knows whether He will not turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him, Even a grain offering and a libation For the LORD your God? <sup>15</sup> Blow a trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, <sup>16</sup> Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and the nursing infants. Let the bridegroom come out of his room And the bride out of her bridal chamber. <sup>17</sup> Let the priests, the LORD'S ministers, Weep between the porch and the altar, And let them say, " Spare Thy people, O LORD, And do not make Thine inheritance a reproach, A byword among the nations. Why should they among the peoples say, ' Where is their God?' " <sup>18</sup> Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, And will have pity on His people.*

Fasting was attached to Jewish Festivals of Shadow Christology “Day of Atonement”.

This is true in any form of worship: ***Singing, Prayer, Giving, Helping, Function of one’s spiritual gift or execution of responsibility of the Believer Priesthood.***

8. A fast was imposed by authorities in times of distress and observed to mourn calamitous historical events (***Jeremiah 36:4-9; Joel 1:14; Zechariah 7:5 cf. 8:19***).

For example, they would fast over the fall of Jerusalem (***2 Kings 25:1-4 cf. Zechariah 8:19***)

9. During the Millennial reign of Christ, the fasts will become celebratory feasts (***Zechariah 8:1-19***).

### **III. Fasting during the Church Age as revealed in the New Testament Epistles (Acts – Revelation)**

1. Fasting was associated in seeking the will of God through prayer in the early Church (***Acts 13:1-4; 14:21-23***).

***Acts 13:1-4 (NASB77)*** <sup>1</sup> Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup> And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for

*Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."* <sup>3</sup> *Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.* <sup>4</sup> *So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, (leading) they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.*

These men were so intent on doing the will of God – in seeking the will of God through prayer – that it resulted in food being placed below the priority of doing the will of God.

“*Laying on of hands*” in the ancient world signified identification with someone.

*Acts 14:21-23 (NASB77)* <sup>21</sup> *And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,* <sup>22</sup> *strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, " Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."* <sup>23</sup> *And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

2. Luke recognizes the Day of Atonement on which the Jewish Age believer fasted as he recalled his travels with Paul in *Acts 27:9*.

There is no indication that Paul and Luke fasted on that day. Jewish people observing the Day of Atonement would have fasted

Fasting was attached to Jewish Festivals of Shadow Christology. “The Day of Atonement” was the only regular fast day stipulated in the OT although tradition later added other fast days to the Jewish calendar. (*Leviticus 16:29*) Yom Kipper (*Leviticus 16:29-34;23:26-32; Acts 27:9; Jeremiah 36:6*).

After the Babylonian exile, four other yearly fasts were observed by the Jews (*Zechariah 7:5; 8:19*). In Jesus time the Pharisees fasted twice a week (*Luke 18:12*). (*Mark 2:18*) They fasted on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> months of the Jewish year. It was a reminder of negative volition that led to reversionism and divine discipline.

3. There is no command for the Christian to fast in the New Testament Epistles.
4. There is no reference to the believer or church fasting in the New Testament Epistles other than in the book of Acts.

The only occurrence where the context is seeking the will of God is in (*Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-23*).

5. **Fact** – The book of Acts is the inspired history of the early Church in a transitional period of God’s economics.

From the Age of Israel to the Church Age  
From the age of Law to the age of Grace

This transitional period was a learning process for believers; there were things they had to get over.

This transitional period included dreams, visions, and the sign gifts.

An example found in *Acts 10:1-16* – The Lord commands Peter to eat food that was previously considered unclean in the Mosaic Law.

*This was one way the Lord taught Peter that things had changed!*

*1 Timothy 4:4-5* *For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the Word of God and prayer.*

6. Therefore, fasting as a spiritual exercise is a form of asceticism which is inappropriate for the Church Age Believer.

We do not FAST to gain God’s approval or His forgiveness because they have been freely bestowed at salvation in this *age of grace*.

7. However, fasting may occur as a result of seeking the will of God through prayer.

Fasting is nothing more than denying the body its natural desires when the believer is occupied with the will of God. When seeking that will, it takes precedence over anything in the believer’s life.

**Rule of Application** – If a shade of application is stated in the New Testament Epistles (from the Law or the Gospels), then the shade of application applies to the Christian living today.

Our only *shade* is found in the book of Acts which records the transitional history of the early church.

**Mark 9:23 (NASB77)** <sup>23</sup> *And Jesus said to him, "If You can!" All things are possible to him who believes."*

**Mark 10:27 (NASB77)** <sup>27</sup> *Looking upon them, Jesus said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."*

**Mark 11:24 (NASB77)** <sup>24</sup> *"Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you."*

**John 14:13 (NASB77)** <sup>13</sup> *"And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."*

The issue in these passages is: ***Faith and Faith in the One who can and will because He has promised!*** How does all this relate to fasting in the Gospels?

**Matthew 17:21 (NASB77)** <sup>21</sup> *["But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."] Verse 21 is not included in the early manuscript.*

**Mark 9:29 (NASB77)** <sup>29</sup> *And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."*

**Matthew 17:21 (NASB77)** <sup>21</sup> *["But this kind (**demon**) does not go out except by prayer and fasting."]*

**Conclusion:** *Psalm 109:21-24 (NASB77)* <sup>21</sup> But Thou, O GOD, the Lord, deal kindly with me for Thy name's sake; Because Thy lovingkindness is good, deliver me; <sup>22</sup> For I am afflicted and needy, And my heart is wounded within me. <sup>23</sup> I am passing like a shadow when it lengthens; I am shaken off like the locust. <sup>24</sup> **My knees are weak<sub>1</sub> from fasting<sub>2</sub>**; And my flesh has grown lean, without fatness.

1. **Weak** – “to tremble, to be unstable”
2. **POD:** **Fasting will reduce your fatness; however it will sap you of much needed strength to go about your day.**