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# Fasting

## A Discipline of Abstinence

Rob Rogers                      January 5, 2020

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***Biblical Fasting is a central, crucial, life-giving, soul-centering, world-impacting practice that ought to be a regular part of every Jesus follower's life.*** Today we're going to get an overview and understanding of this practice that will prepare us for our church-wide corporate fast to begin on January 11<sup>th</sup>.

This ancient spiritual discipline is largely foreign to the "C"hurch today... and while there is no specific command for us to fast in the Bible, fasting is seen as incredibly powerful practice throughout both the Old Testament and New Testaments.

Ezra, Esther, Moses, King David, the entire city of Nineveh fasted as an act of repentance toward God, Anna in Luke 2, Cornelius in Acts 10, the Apostles fasted to seek God's will in Acts 13 & 14, Paul stated that he fasted often. Jesus Himself fasted in preparation for His confrontation with the devil in the wilderness, and in preparation for the work God had given Him to do.

Jesus, as he instructed His followers, started by saying, "When you fast..." He didn't say, "If you fast..." He said, "**WHEN.**"

### WHAT FASTING IS WHY FASTING MATTERS HOW TO FAST

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## What Fasting Is

*Sometimes in order to better understand what something IS we first need to understand what it is NOT.*

### **Biblical Fasting is NOT:**

- **Physical Discipline Only**
  - While there may be physical benefits to fasting, the primary purpose of a biblical fast is never weight loss or some type of physical cleanse.
- **Penance**
  - Biblical fasting is not self-inflicted punishment for sin that somehow brings pleasure to a sadistic God. That's not who God is, or what He asks of us.
- **Power Play**
  - A way to manipulate or control God in order to get Him to do what you want.

*"A fast is not a hunger strike. Fasting submits to God's commands.  
A hunger strike makes God submit to our demands."<sup>1</sup>  
~ Ed Cole*

- **Proof of your Spiritual Depth**
  - You don't fast to prove to others how spiritual you are. God knows your motives, and your motives will make or break the impact of your fast.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredricks, Randi. *Fasting: An Exceptional Human Experience* (AuthorHouse, Dec 20, 2012) 320

## Question — So, what is Fasting?

- **Leviticus 16:29**

“This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth *day* of the month, you shall afflict your souls...

- This verse is God’s instruction regarding the Day of Atonement ritual in the Old Testament. But the phrase “*afflict your souls*” is also translated as self-denial. It’s speaking of fasting as not just denying the body, but denying my desires... my appetites... my wants.
- Fasting is a way of saying that food, drink, physical sustenance is actually secondary to something else...
- **So, fasting is an act of self-denial... but it’s not JUST an act of self-denial...**

*“The voluntary abstention from an otherwise normal function—  
most often eating—for the sake of intense spiritual activity.”<sup>2</sup>  
~ Dallas Willard*

Willard’s definition tells us that ***the purpose of fasting is to go without something temporal, in order to hunger for the eternal.***

**Fasting is physical abstinence  
for the purpose of spiritual engagement.**

- You’re going without something that you need — *for something that you need more.*
- You’re going without something important — *for something of utmost importance.*
- Fasting is not just self-denial — *it’s self-denial for spiritual investment.*
- **Luke 9:23**  
“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him **deny himself**, and take up his cross daily, and **follow Me**.
  - Jesus describes the essence of discipleship as self-denial, for the purpose of spiritual engagement.
  - You deny yourself, in order to follow, to become more like Christ, to be made more and more into His image to do His will

This is why every time you see the discipline of *fasting* in the bible... you never see it as an isolated practice. *Fasting* is always intimately linked with the practice of *prayer*.  
*Fasting* and *prayer* go hand in hand!

**And while you can have *prayer* without *fasting*,  
you can’t have *fasting* (in the biblical sense) without *prayer*.**

*“Prayer is reaching out after the unseen;  
fasting is letting go of all that is seen and temporal.”<sup>3</sup>  
~ Andrew Murray*

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## Why Fasting Matters

**First and foremost, fasting matters because Jesus modeled it, and assumed our regular practice of it. He said, “When you fast...” not “if you fast...”**

- Now, even if there was no stated, or implicit benefit of fasting, based on the fact that Jesus assumed we would do it — fasting must be a prioritized act of obedience for every Jesus follower.

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<sup>2</sup> Willard, Dallas. *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings* (Zondervan, Jun 13, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Esan, Ade. *Prayer: The Weapon of Our Warfare* (AuthorHouse, Sep 15, 2011) 69

- But the great news is, there are enormous spiritual benefits in exercising the spiritual discipline of fasting.

## Seven Benefits of Fasting

### 1. Victory Over Temptation

- **Matthew 4:1-4**

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. <sup>3</sup> Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” <sup>4</sup> But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*’”

- Jesus fasted in preparation for spiritual battle, and had victory over temptation.

**Application** — *There is constant spiritual warfare happening over your life.*

**Question** — is there some sin, or some temptation that you can’t seem to overcome? Something that the devil is using to keep you beaten down, weak, and ashamed?

**A lifestyle of fasting prepares you for spiritual battle  
and can give you victory over temptation.**

### 2. Increases Our Faith

In Matthew 17, the disciples had previously worked miracles and brought healing to people but they couldn’t cure this one boy of epilepsy... but Jesus could. They approached Jesus in private and asked Him, “*Why couldn’t we cast this demon out?*” Jesus rebukes them and the whole crowd for their lack of faith, and then He says — you couldn’t cast it out because...

- **Matthew 17:20-21**

“Because of your **unbelief**; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have **faith** as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. <sup>21</sup> However, this kind does not go out except by **prayer and fasting.**”

- **Jesus links fasting with faith** with our ability to trust God to do the impossible!

**You want to see God work miracles in and through your life?  
You want to believe and see God do the impossible?  
Fast and pray.**

### 3. Brings Personal Guidance

In Acts 10, Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, was fasting and praying — and an angel appeared to him instructing him to send for Peter — to have Peter come and declare to Him the ways of God. Cornelius is so sure that Peter would show up, he gathers his family and friends, and then Peter shows up to a packed house, ready to hear from God. So Cornelius says to Peter:

- **Acts 10:33**

“Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.”

- Tell us the profound, world-changing things God commanded you to tell us, Peter.

**Application** — Do you need God’s guidance? Do you need Him to reveal to you your next step in your career, your relationships, your finances, your marriage, your ministry, your mission? Do you need Divine Guidance for this next season of life?

**Fast and Pray with expectancy that God will guide you.**

#### **4. Brings Collective Guidance**

- **Acts 13:2-3**

As they ministered to the Lord and **fasted**, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”<sup>3</sup> Then, having **fasted and prayed**, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

- As the early church leaders fasted and prayed the Holy Spirit spoke to them, and specifically called out Barnabas and Saul from that community to be sent out to Apostolic, pioneering, church planting, missional work in the first century world.

When the early church appointed elders and leaders, they would fast and pray, seek God’s guidance for that particular body of believers, and appoint those leaders according to the Spirit’s guidance and wisdom.

**Question** — Has God given you influence within a community of people? In other people’s lives? Has he given you positional authority over others that He’s called you to serve? Fast and pray, not only for God’s guidance in your own life, but for the will of the Holy Spirit for others as well.

**Fasting and praying doesn’t just bring God’s guidance for you, but brings God’s wisdom and guidance for a community, a body of believers, the collective whole.**

#### **5. Deliverance & Protection**

In **Ezra 8**, Ezra declared a corporate fast and prayed for a safe journey for the Israelites as they made the nine-hundred-mile trek to Jerusalem from Babylon — an incredibly dangerous journey. They had no military protection (**Ezra 8:21-23**). God answered their request and protected them.

**Application** — Are you entering a season of risk? Is your future uncertain? Is God asking you to step out into something that terrifies you? Fast and pray. Seek God. Ask for his protection as you obey Him.

#### **6. Spiritual Insight & Influence**

Under the rule and authority of the Nebuchadnezzar, Pagan King of Babylon, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaal, and Azariah, fasted and prayed...

- **Daniel 1:17**

God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

- Directly after this, Daniel and his friends were chosen to have higher levels of responsibility and influence in the royal courts of Babylon.
- Daniel fasted and prayed and was gifted with spiritual insight and granted positional influence.

Again, in **Daniel 10** — Daniel fasted and prayed for three weeks, and an angel appeared to him and said:

- **Daniel 10:12**

“...from the first day that you **set your heart** to **understand**, and to **humble yourself** before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words.”

- The angel equates fasting and prayer with humility and understanding

**Application** — *Fasting and prayer don't guarantee positional influence. If that's why you fast, your fasting is in vain because your motives are askew. But, regular times of fasting increase your ability to perceive and understand eternal and spiritual matters — you'll gain spiritual insights, and be able to share them when the opportunity presents itself.*

## 7. Divine Favor & Provision

In **Nehemiah 1**, Nehemiah gets news that the Hebrew people in Jerusalem were suffering and in great distress, after they had escaped from Babylonian captivity. The gates and walls that protected Jerusalem were destroyed, and there was no protection from Israel's enemies.

- **Nehemiah 1:4**

So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah, mourned for His Hebrew brothers and sisters in distress and acknowledged his limited capacity to do anything about it by fasting and interceding day and night

We don't know how long Nehemiah fasted, it could have been up to 4 months... but what we do know is that God gave Nehemiah incredible favor with King Artaxerxes. As a result of his obedience and boldness, he was sent with provision, and permission to rebuild the city.

**Application** — *Nehemiah had a comfortable life in the King's palace, but he didn't let that lull him into a spiritual slumber. In the comfort and abundance of Williamson County, it's so easy to fall into spiritual apathy... to allow the convenience and comforts we enjoy to convince us that we don't really need God.*

- fasting is a way to remind yourself that you are utterly dependent on something greater than what this world could ever provide for you...
- we have access to the King of Heaven...
- when we fast... and when we pray, we can allow God to take our prayers and turn them into provision for our brothers and sisters suffering religious persecution all around the world

**Question** — *What might God do if we were to fast and to intercede for our friends, neighbors, brothers, and sisters who are day-by-day facing unfathomable persecution?*

*What might God do if we humbled ourselves, if we fasted and prayed, and acknowledged our utter dependence on God as a regular practice as followers of Christ?  
There's no telling how God might move.*

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## How to Fast

*Let's get practical...*

Beginning on January 11<sup>th</sup>, we'll be posting daily on the church website, thoughts and ideas that will help you with your fasting and prayer. Also, every day, there will be an early-morning video on both Steve's and the church's FaceBook pages, all designed to help us make the most of our 21-day-fast.

**"How-to"** There are very few rules when it comes to fasting. Here are a few different types of fasts to help guide your journey... the type of fast you choose is between you and God — your motives are what matters.

### 1. Full fast – No food. Liquids Only.

- A typical “Full Fast” is actually no food and no drink for 1 – 3 days. Doing that for 21-days is not a good idea.
- Even with liquids, this type of fast is very serious, and should be done thoughtfully and carefully, especially for an extended period of time like 21 days. Most often in scripture these types of fasts last anywhere from 3 – 7 days. There are instances where these types of fasts extend longer than that, but in those instances, there is direct guidance from God or a supernatural ability given by God to complete this type of fast.
- If you’re new to fasting, don’t start off by trying to do this for 21 days. It will be wildly unpleasant for you... and anyone that happens to interact with you. “Hangry” will take on a whole new meaning.

### 2. Daniel Fast – Planted Foods & Water

- **Daniel 1** refers to vegetables, but in the original language it means things that are sown, which would include fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. Daniel actually practiced this type of fast for 10 days, and then later for 21 days.

### 3. Partial Fast – Restriction of Your Choosing

- This could be that you don’t eat food from sunup to sundown. Or that you abstain from at least one meal/day for 21 days or a specific type of food for 21 days. It could be abstaining from coffee, alcohol, sugar... it’s really up to you.
- Another type of partial fast might be from electronics, social media, all forms of entertainment... the Bible also refers to mutually consented sexual fast between a husband and wife as well in **1 Corinthians 7**.

*But whatever it is you abstain from, remember that the point of your fast is to create a physical hunger that drives you to deeper levels of intimacy with God, to find your satisfaction and fulfillment in God...*

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## Closing Thoughts

*In Dallas Willard’s book, **Spirit of the Disciplines**, he puts forward this idea that if we continue to view disciplines of abstinence (silence, solitude, and fasting in particular) as disciplines of deprivation, we’ll never actually understand and enjoy the full weight of these disciplines.<sup>4</sup>*

- **2 Corinthians 4:16-17**

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward *man* is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, <sup>18</sup> while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

- Paul is specifically referring to the persecution of the church here, but the principle applies to fasting as well

*Fasting is simply letting go of that which is seen, to reach for that which is unseen.* Many of us view it as a time-bound sacrifice for God, but it’s not that at all. According to Paul, it’s not even a sacrifice... Paul says, anything you give up in this life is building something much greater for you in the life to come!

*And when that truth sinks in,  
**we view fasting not as a sacrifice but an investment.**  
Disciplines of abstinence become joyous because we know  
**that our light affliction is working for us  
a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory!***

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<sup>4</sup> Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (Harper Collins, Oct 6, 2009)

***Church, any sacrifices we make in this life, ultimately is no sacrifice at all... it's an investment that will reap eternal rewards that the can never be taken away.***

***So, what do you say we —  
not sacrifice —  
but invest in what matters most  
starting on January 11<sup>th</sup>  
and watch and see what God does?***

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## **Discussion Questions**

1. Why did Jesus assume that fasting would be a regular, prioritized, spiritual practice of every single one of His followers?
2. As a follower of Jesus, do you believe that Jesus expects that fasting should be a regular practice in *your* life?
3. Discuss: “You can have prayer without fasting, but you can’t have fasting (in the biblical sense) without prayer.”
4. Prayerfully, what are some things in your life that you would benefit by fasting from (time spent on phone, television, social media, certain foods)?
5. How would you utilize that extra “saved” time in spiritual engagement?
6. Which of the 7 Spiritual Benefits of Fasting do you need in your life today?
7. What do you think God could do in you, and in our church, if YOU, along with the other members in our body, REALLY DID Fast and Pray together in our Corporate Church Fast?

# NOTES