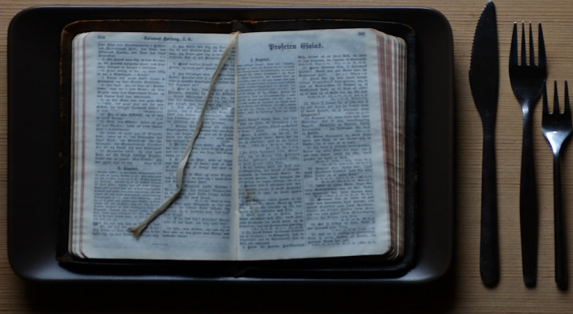


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Every endeavor has basic skills that support the success of the effort. For example, tying rope-climbing knots is a basic skill for rock climbing. Study skills are rudimentary for a student. These basic skills are sometimes called disciplines. They are practices from which success springs. The Christian life has disciplines which must be learned. The more we practice these disciplines, the more we grow and mature in them.

As followers of Jesus, we are to become more like Jesus. Spiritual disciplines are meant to help us grow in this godliness. We know this, yet often struggle to engage disciplines that position us to grow in godliness. Even when we engage these disciplines, we often feel frustrated with how difficult they are and how little they seem to change us. Take heart, if this is where you are. The fact you desire for greater fruit in your life is evidence of the Holy Spirit working in you. Sanctification is both a wonderful and challenging journey. We will have seasons of great joy and triumph and seasons of great discouragement and struggle. It is our hope these lessons on Spiritual Disciplines give you greater understanding, hope and most of all, a more fervent pursuit of God.

While the discipline of fasting is not unique to the Christian experience, nor is it explicitly commanded in Scripture, the Christian church does have a long history surrounding the practice. It has stemmed from numerous examples and teachings on fasting found in the Bible. Throughout the Biblical account, fasting has been practiced by many. Moses, Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel and Jesus are just a few of the many examples. Fasting is found among the elite as well as common people, the rich and poor, men and women, individuals as well as communities and among the godly and ungodly. In this document, we will draw from the Biblical record as we examine this practice from several angles. We hope this look at the topic will yield us better informed on fasting as practiced in the Bible. We also hope it will equip us to appropriately practice the discipline ourselves. This document will attempt to answer the following:

1. What is fasting?
2. Why do we fast?
3. How do we fast?

## WHAT IS FASTING?

Biblical fasting is denying our bodies of physical nourishment. When the word “fast” is used in the Bible, it can be used to describe a habit of a religious person (*Luke 2:37*), a characteristic of mourning (*Psa 35:13*), or merely a period of time when someone is without food for a period of time (*Matt 15:32*).

## WHY DO WE FAST?

When considering the practice of fasting, “Why we fast”, is the most important question to ask. The Bible gives us warnings about wrong motives for fasting (*Isa 58, Matt 6:16-18*). When fasting is practiced with discernment it has the wonderful potential to be a blessing to us and others. Four reasons to fast are below.

### For Mourning

The primary context for fasting in the Bible is grief. The overwhelming number of examples in the Biblical record for fasting comes out of the seedbed of sorrow. Fasting then, is used as an outward expression for mourning. Crying, weeping, silence and being in a down cast disposition are all well understood expressions for grief today. These expressions are at times appropriate, as well emotionally advantageous. In this way, fasting is yet another physical expression of troubling circumstances.

# Fasting

Jesus associates fasting with morning when he addressed the question of fasting among John the Baptist's disciples. *Matthew 9:14-15* says, "Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast." He uses the analogy of a bridegroom being with his guests. Therefore, there are times for fasting and times for feasting. Events such as weddings, birthdays, holidays, etc. are not appropriate times to fast because these are times of joy and feasting. Periods where mourning and fasting are appropriate include times of deep disappointment (*Neh 1:4*), sin and repentance (*Jonah 3:5*), death and sickness (*1 Sam 31:13; Ps 35:13*), and impending danger (*2 Chron 20:3; Ezra 8:23*).

In this way, fasting is primarily a response. Fasting was the way people in the Bible responded to the times when the brokenness of the world was amplified in their lives. When our hearts are troubled in some way, fasting allows the body to ache along with our hearts. Therefore, it should help us become more in tune with the sufferings around us, and assist us to respond to these sufferings. By fasting we respond physically to the brokenness we encounter in this world. In so doing we align ourselves with the heart of God concerning these matters.

## For Devotion

There is a common understanding in Christendom that fasting is a discipline for the devout. An expression for serving God. Anna, for example, was a widow "which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (*Luke 2:37*). The Pharisee in *Luke 18:12* is said to have fasted twice a week. Christian history includes many examples of revered men and women who practiced a lifestyle of fasting as a way of devotion to God. The Bible does talk about the need for us to discipline our bodies, such as in Paul's strong words in *1 Corinthians 9:24-27*. However, we carefully acknowledge that the Biblical examples from which we draw these conclusions are vague in helping us understand just exactly why they were fasting. Fasting then, for the reason of devotion, should be left to one's conscience.

## For Breakthrough

There has been some attention given to fasting as a means to fighting against the demonic forces. Scriptures often referenced are *Daniel 10*, Jesus' temptation, and the time when Jesus told his disciples that some demons only come out "by prayer and fasting" (*Matt 17:21; Mark 9:29*). Just as we saw with fasting as a way for devotion, we should likewise notice that the examples are few with regards to demonic spiritual warfare. Furthermore, varying interpretations swirl regarding why Daniel and Jesus fasted in these cases. However, let us acknowledge that spiritual warfare is real and is more than reason enough for us to respond to that brokenness with fasting.

## For Direction

Fasting is often associated with seeking direction from God. The early church prayed and fasted. They also had the clarity to send Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey. *Acts 13:1-3* records it this way. "Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." We notice that God spoke to the church while they were ministering and fasting. In addition, once direction was given they continued to fast. We see again the Biblical record suggests fasting is instrumental in providing direction, yet we still are left reading between the lines to understand exactly why the early church was fasting. Fasting for direction, once again, should be left to individual conscience.

The common thread weaving through the biblical fasting narrative is that fasting is a reaction. Individuals respond to their grief, personal brokenness, oppression and indecision with an outward physical abstinence from food.

## Discussion Questions:

1. How do you grieve the brokenness you experience in your life?
2. Describe how you grieve the brokenness you see in the lives of others.
3. How similar is your grief compared to what God grieves about?
4. Describe how fasting could better align your sorrow with the heart of God.
5. What does it mean that fasting is primarily a response and not a manipulative tool for effect?

## HOW TO FAST?

### Afflict your souls

What does fasting look like? In short, it varies in appearance. Completely giving up food and sometimes also drink is called a full fast. This is the primary way in which fasting was practiced. When fasting is referenced, it is likely referring to a *full fast*. In *Jonah 3*, Nineveh “*proclaimed a fast*” (v. 5), which is later clarified by saying, “*Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water*” (v. 7). Here it is made clear the fast included abstaining from food and drink, but other times the text only says that the person was going without food without any reference to drink.

A full fast is not the only way abstaining from food was practiced. In *Daniel 10:2-3* it says, “*In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.*” Where it says “bread,” it means food in general. Daniel was still eating and drinking, but he gave up part of his diet in order to mourn. This type of practice has been called a *partial fast*. There is a range of partial fasts that can be practiced. One type is called a *juice fast* where one gives up all food but still drinks juice over the period of the fast. This allows believers to still feel the pangs of hunger, but some nutrients are being provided. Other partial fasts could include giving up meat or sugar or anything else that would still bring about the effects of mourning and denial. Creativity is allowed in exploring fasting. For those who are pregnant or have diabetes or other health issues, partial fasts could be a way for them to participate in fasting without causing severe health complications, but a doctor should be consulted in cases such as these. Partial fasts are also a way to extend the length of one’s fast. Fatigue quickly sets in during full fasts, so eating some food can extend the period of time without severe fatigue.

# Fasting

There is also freedom to abstain from other things other than food. In *1 Corinthians 7:5* it says, “*Defraud ye [husbands and wives] not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.*” Here Paul suggests that giving up sexual relations with one’s spouse can accompany a fast. Thus, we see that giving up something good and beneficial for a period of time can be used in a similar way to fasting. Caution needs to be given here. Fasting is not an excuse for overindulgence. If someone feels that they are overindulging on social media for example, to the extent that they are sinning, giving it up would not be fasting. If something is causing one to sin, then it needs to be cut back or cut out. This common Christian experience should not be seen as fasting.

What one abstains from is not the end we seek in fasting. The mechanics of how one fasts is not the ultimate concern. The goal for fasting is to afflict our souls. This is found in *Leviticus 16*, which explains the Day of Atonement. This is the only time where God commands a fast to be put on the Jewish calendar year. It says, “*And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all*” (v. 29). Historically Jews would fulfill this command to “afflict their souls” by fasting (see *Acts 27:9*). This then seems to be the basic principle for what fasting should result in: “*ye shall afflict your souls.*” This can be seen also in *Ezra 8:21*: “*Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God.*”

## With Prayer

Fasting is often accompanied with some sort of petition. The times mentioned above where they fasted and mourned over sin is usually coupled with a petition for mercy from God. The times of sickness are often coupled with a petition for healing, and the times of impending danger are coupled with petitions for God’s salvation. Fasting, however, is not always done with a petition, such as when people grieved over the death of someone (e.g. *1 Sam 31:13*), nor is petition always done with fasting. Petitions are coupled with fasting when the severity of the situation naturally requires it. God grieves over sin, death and the brokenness that has resulted from sin. Fasting draws us closer to having the same feelings as God does during grievous times. While we don’t necessarily fast for an effect, it is not uncommon for an effect to occur because we’ve aligned ourselves with God’s heart and petitioned Him regarding our brokenness.

At the heart of fasting is a longing for God to mend the brokenness. We fast over bent and broken realities in the present world as a deep longing petition that Christ would reconcile all things. When our future hope becomes our reality, there will no longer be a reason to mourn or petition through fasting.

## Duration

Another aspect of fasting relates to the period of time that one should fast. We must remember that fasting is not a magical formula and does not always produce exact, desired results. The examples in the Bible show great diversity: from morning until the evening (*Judges 20:26*), for a day (*1 Sam 7:6*), for three days (*Est 4:16*), for seven days (*1 Sam 31:13*), for three whole weeks (*Dan 10:3*), for forty days and nights (*Exo 34:28*). The typical length seems to be for a day, but longer periods happen during times where the circumstances call for a greater length. There are times where there seems to be a prescribed time period over which the people fast, such as the Day of Atonement each year, and there are other times when the length is determined by the reason for the fast. The basic principle learned here is that the severity of the situation determines the severity of the fast. This principle is clearly seen in *2 Sam 12* where David is told that his child would die (v. 14). David fasts and pleads to God (v. 16), but on the seventh day, the child dies (v. 18). When David heard the news, he stops his fasting (v. 20). The circumstances that cause the reason for fasting may be useful in determining the length of the fast.

# Fasting

## Guard your expectations

Since fasting is primarily a response, it is more focused on the cause rather than on a hopeful effect. We should not fast with an attitude which says, "See God, I am fasting, therefore you ought to do something." Fasting does not put God at our mercy but rather, we are putting ourselves at His mercy. Whatever effect does happen as a result of fasting, we can be sure it is due to our personal alignment with God and not that we endured hunger pains. Therefore, fast because your circumstances demand it, but guard your expectations of the results or effects. This concept wonderfully frees us to fast.

## Love others

Fasting is not solely a personal endeavor. It is not a time for us to turn inward, but instead to turn outward towards others. If our intent is to look spiritual then we are off on the wrong foot. Isaiah reprimands Judah for fasting without care for the needy. Consider the text out of *Isaiah 58*. "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" (*Isa 58:3-7*). When we fast we should be aware of the needs of others and be ready to serve them. Since mourning is at the heart of the purpose of fasting, then we could fast to lean into the pain others experience and plead to God on their behalf.

## With Others

Fasting can be done individually as well as corporately. The majority of the fasting references in the Bible deal with corporate fasting. For example, Esther asked others to fast with her before she went before the king. The day of Atonement fast was practiced by the congregation. Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. (*2 Ch 20:3*). The church fasted in *Acts 13*. It is not uncommon to see fasting practiced in community. Yet Jesus's warning in *Matthew 6* must be carefully considered. "Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly" (*Matt 6:16-18*). This passage shows the great importance of stewarding how we personally fast. Fasting is something that can easily produce spiritual pride. In short, our fasts are God directed. This can be done individually or in a group. Fasting should never be done to win affection or attention from others. There will be circumstances where it is appropriate for a group of people to fast together. It could be a couple or a group of friends. It could be a family or even an entire church or country. Whoever is affected by the grievous event and is willing to join can be asked to fast.

## Discussion Questions:

1. What is one way you can “afflict your soul” in a fast?
2. Are there biological limitations you have that should be considered when determining how you fast?
3. Why does loosening us from expectations free us to fast?
4. Do you feel comfortable enough with fasting to ask someone to fast with you? If not, what needs to be done to get to that point?
5. While fasting may not primarily be done to achieve some effect, why do we often see an effect that rises from the fasting practice?

## A Guide to Fasting

What follows is a step-by-step guide which is not meant to be used in a mechanical manner. This is simply a guide to help you think through how to start applying fasting in a practical and useful way.

### Step 1: Consider brokenness that troubles you.

As discussed above, fasting is a response to times of sin, sickness, death, danger, and anything else that causes one to be in a state of humility. This step is the launching pad into the actual practice of fasting.

- What brokenness do you or others endure?
- What situations or loved ones do you grieve over?
- What personal needs cause you sorrow?
  - o Sin
  - o Lack of love
  - o Lack of wisdom
  - o Danger
  - o Oppression



# Fasting

**Step 2: Determine if you will fast alone or with others.**

**Step 3: Determine a level of fasting that is appropriate.**

- What will you abstain from?
- How long will you abstain from it?

**Step 4: Determine when to fast.**

There are no hard fast rules here. Fasting may begin spontaneously when a grievous event takes place. However, there may be occasions where determining a time will be more orderly. By planning a fast you may be able to select a day when proper focus can be devoted to the practice.

**Step 5: Follow through**

Carry out your fast.

- Afflict your soul by means of fasting
- Accompany it with prayer
- Guard your expectations for effect

## Resources:

- “Biblical Fasting” by HarvestCall  
<http://www.harvestcall.org/Websites/harvestcall/images/Downloads/Biblical%20Fasting.pdf>
- “What is the Purpose of Fasting” by Donald Whitney: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Szq34U6tWIM>
- Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words: Fast, Fasting: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?topic=VT0001003>
- Kirk Plattner: 2019-02-07 - Topical; ISU Bible Study, <https://accentral.apostolicchristian.org/sermons>
- *Fasting* by Scot McKnight