

# Notes on Fasting

*Pastor Horace C. Michael*

## **Fasting Is Expected**

Notice Jesus' words at the beginning of **Matthew 6:16–17**, “When you fast . . .” By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we will fast.

Compare these words with His statements about giving and praying in the same passage, “So when you give . . .” (**Matthew 6:2–3**), “But when you pray . . .” (**Matthew 6:5–7**). No one doubts that we are to give and to pray. See also **Matthew 9:14–15**.

## **Purposes for Fasting**

Whenever you fast, you should do so for at least one of these purposes. Notice that not one of the purposes is to earn God's favor. We cannot use fasting as a way to impress God and earn His acceptance. We are made acceptable to God through the work of Christ Jesus, not our work. Fasting has no eternal benefit for us until we have come to God through repentance and faith (**Ephesians 2:1–10; Titus 3:5–7**).

### **1. To Strengthen Prayer**

When Ezra was about to lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem, he proclaimed a fast in order for the people to seek the Lord earnestly for safe passage. They were to face many dangers without military protection during their nine-hundred-mile journey. “So we fasted and petitioned our God about this,” says **Ezra 8:23**, “and he answered our prayer.”

The most important aspect of this discipline is its influence on prayer. The Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying. You'll notice that in one way or another, all the other biblical purposes of fasting relate to prayer.

Nehemiah (**in Neh. 1:4**) “fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.” Daniel (**in Daniel 9:3**) devoted himself to plead with God “in prayer and petition, in fasting.” In a direct command through the prophet Joel, Israel was told, “‘Even now,’ declares the LORD ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning’” (**Joel 2:12**). It wasn't until after “they had fasted and prayed” that the church in Antioch “placed their hands” on Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus and “sent them off” on the first missionary journey (**Acts 13:3**).

### **2. To Seek God's Guidance**

There is biblical precedent for fasting to more clearly discern the will of God. In Judges 20 the other eleven tribes of Israel prepared for war against the tribe of Benjamin. Through prayer they sought the Lord before going into battle. Even though they outnumbered the Benjamites by fifteen to one, they lost the battle and twenty-two thousand men. It wasn't until they prayed and *fasted* that the Lord told them: “Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands” (Judges 20:28).

According to Acts 14:23, before Paul and Barnabas would appoint elders in the churches they founded, they first prayed with fasting to receive God's guidance.

Fasting does not *ensure* the certainty of receiving clear guidance from God. Rightly practiced, however, **it does make us more receptive** to the One who loves to guide us.

### 3. To Express Grief

Three of the first four references in the Bible to fasting connect it with an expression of grief. As mentioned in Judges 20:26, the Israelites wept and fasted before the Lord not only to seek His guidance, but also to express their grief for the forty thousand brothers they had lost in battle.

When King Saul was killed by the Philistines, the men of Jabesh Gilead “fasted seven days” after his burial (**1 Samuel 31:13**). When David and his men heard the news, they took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel (**2 Samuel 1:11–12**).

We may also fast because of grief over our sins. Although it’s not a spiritual self-flagellation, biblical confession does involve at least some degree of grief for the sin committed. And inasmuch as fasting can be an expression of grief, it can serve as a voluntary, heartfelt part of confession. There have been a few occasions when I’ve grieved so deeply over my sin that words alone seemed powerless to say to God what I wanted. And though it made me no more worthy of forgiveness, fasting communicated the grief and confession my words could not.

Fasting also can be a means of expressing grief for the sins of others, those you know or society in general. When a jealous King Saul was trying unjustly to kill David, Jonathan did not eat for a day, “because he was grieved at his father’s shameful treatment of David” (**1 Samuel 20:34**).

### 4. To Seek Deliverance or Protection

One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances.

After being notified that a vast army was coming against him, King Jehoshaphat was afraid and proclaimed a fast for all Judah. People from all over Judah came together to seek help from the Lord (**2 Chron. 20:3–4**).

We’ve already read of the fast called by Ezra when he led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem. There we noticed that they fasted in order to strengthen their praying. But notice from the larger context of **Ezra 8:21–23** that they prayed with fasting for God’s protection: “I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.”

The best-known cooperative fast in Scripture is the one in **Esther 4:16**. It was called by Queen Esther as part of her appeal to God for protection from the king’s wrath. She planned to enter the court of King Xerxes uninvited to appeal to him for the protection of the Jews from mass extermination.

When our church has a day of fasting to grieve for the sins of our country, we also include prayers asking the Lord to protect and deliver us from enemies that might result from our sins. We realize that He often disciplined Israel for her sins by allowing national enemies to gain advantage over her militarily or economically. Perhaps we don’t think as often of the reality of national sin as we should, and how Christians will experience part of any national judgment that comes, even though we did not contribute directly to the national sin.

Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against “persecution” from family, schoolmates, neighbors, or coworkers because of our faith. Typically, we’re tempted to strike back with anger, verbal abuse, counteraccusations, or even legal action, instead of appealing to God with fasting for protection and deliverance.

### 5. To Express Repentance and a Return to God

This is similar to fasting to express grief for sin. But as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can also signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.

The Israelites expressed repentance through fasting in 1 Samuel 7:6 when “they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’”

In **Joel 2:12**, the Lord specifically commanded His people to signify their repentance and their return to Him by fasting: “‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’”

Not only can fasting express repentance, it can be in vain without repentance. As with all spiritual disciplines, fasting can be little more than a “dead work” if we have persistently hardened our hearts to God’s call to deal with a specific sin in our lives. We must never try to immerse ourselves in a spiritual discipline as an attempt to drown out God’s voice about forsaking a sin. It is a perversion of fasting to try to use it to balance a sinful part of life we want to continue feeding.

## 6. To Humble Oneself Before God

Fasting, when practiced with the right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him.

One of the most wicked men in Jewish history, King Ahab, eventually humbled himself before God and demonstrated it by fasting: “When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.” As a result, God resolved to delay His judgment (**1 Kings 21:27–29**).

One of Israel’s godliest men humbled himself before the Lord in the same way. King David wrote, “I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting” (**Psalms 35:13**).

**Remember that fasting itself is not humility before God, but should be an expression of humility. There was no humility in the Pharisee of Luke 18:12, who bragged to God in prayer that he fasted twice a week.**

## 7. To Express Concern for the Work of God

Just as a parent might fast and pray out of concern for the work of God in a child’s life, so Christians may fast and pray because they feel a burden for the work of God in a broader scope.

A Christian might feel compelled to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experienced tragedy, disappointment, or apparent defeat. This was the purpose for Nehemiah’s fast when he heard that despite the return of many Jewish exiles to Jerusalem, the city still had no wall to defend it. After his fast, Nehemiah then went to work to do something tangible and public to strengthen this work of God. (**Nehemiah 1:3-4**)

## 8. To Overcome Temptation and Dedicate Yourself to God

Ask Christians to **name a fast by a biblical character** and most will probably think of the supernatural fast of Jesus prior to His temptation in **Matthew 4:1–11**. Verse two of that familiar passage tells us that Jesus fasted “forty days and forty nights.” **In the spiritual strength of that prolonged fast** He was prepared to overcome a direct onslaught of temptation from Satan, the strongest He would face until Gethsemane. It was also during that fast that He privately dedicated Himself to the Father for the public ministry He would begin soon thereafter.

**Nowhere in Scripture are we asked to fast for forty days, or for any specific length of time.** But that doesn’t mean there is nothing from Jesus’ unique experience for us to apply to ourselves. One principle is this: Fasting is a way of overcoming temptation and of freshly dedicating ourselves to the Father.

There are times we struggle with temptation, or we anticipate grappling with it, when we need extra spiritual strength to overcome it. Perhaps we are traveling (or our spouse is traveling) and temptations for mental and sensual unfaithfulness abound. At the start of school or a new

job or ministry there may be new temptations, or it may seem appropriate to dedicate ourselves anew to the Lord. Often we face decisions that place unusual temptations before us. Do we take a new job that will mean much more money but much less time with the family? Do we accept the promotion and transfer that would end a significant ministry in our local church? In times of exceptional temptation, exceptional measures are required. **Fasting to overcome temptation and renew our dedication to God is a Christ like response.**

## 9. To Express Love and Worship to God

By now you may have associated fasting only with dire circumstances. But the Bible also says that fasting may be an act of sheer devotion to God.

In **Luke 2** there is an unforgettable woman whose entire eighty-four years are flashed before us in three verses. Her name is Anna. The summary of her life is found in **Luke 2:37**: “She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.” Although Anna’s story is significant primarily in the context of Mary and Joseph presenting the newborn Jesus at the Temple, how she lived from day to day is what concerns us here. Anna was married for only seven years before being widowed. Assuming she married as a young lady, this godly woman devoted at least half a century, night and day, to a worship of God characterized by “fasting and praying.”

Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in God. **Fasting honors God and is a means of worshiping Him** as such. It means that your stomach isn’t your god as it is with some (see **Phil. 3:19**). Instead it is God’s servant, and fasting proves it because you’re willing to sublimate its desires to those of the Spirit.

Christians throughout history have fasted in preparation for the Lord’s Supper. In addition to the elements of repentance and humility before God in this kind of fast, it is also intended to help the person focus on adoring the One who is represented in the Supper.

**Another way of fasting to express love and worship to God is to spend your mealtime in praise and adoration of God.** A variation is to delay eating a particular meal until you have had your daily time of Bible intake and prayer. Just remember that your fast is a privilege, not an obligation. It is the acceptance of a divine invitation to experience His grace in a special way. If you can’t fast with the faith that you will find more satisfaction and joy at that time than in delaying a meal, then freely eat in faith (Romans 14:22–23). But may we yearn for days when God will cause us to crave the spiritual banquet of worship more than any smorgasbord.

**Before we fast we must have a God-centered purpose.** But even at our best we do not deserve what we desire, nor can we force God’s hand. Having said that, however, let’s balance that truth with the incontestable promise of Jesus in **Matthew 6:17–18** that God will bless a biblical fast by any of His children. And whether or not you receive the blessing you hope for, one thing is sure: If you knew what God knew, you would give yourself the identical blessing that He does. And none of His rewards are worthless.

## Types of Fasts

1. A **normal fast** is *abstaining from all food, but not from water*. **Luke 4:2** says that Jesus “ate nothing” during His forty-day fast, but it does not say He drank nothing.
2. A **partial fast** *limits food but is not abstention from all food*. For ten days Daniel and three other Jewish young men had “vegetables to eat and water to drink” (**Daniel 1:12**). Historically, Christians have observed partial fasts by eating much smaller portions of food than usual for a certain time and/or eating only a few simple foods.

3. An **absolute fast** is *the avoidance of all food and liquid*. We're told that Ezra (**Ezra 10:6**), Esther (**Est. 4:16**), and the Apostle Paul (**Acts 9:9**) abstained from all food and drink for a short period of time.
4. The Bible also describes a **supernatural fast**. When Moses wrote of his meeting with God on Mount Sinai, he said, "I stayed on the mountain *forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water*" (**Deut. 9:9**). 1 Kings 19:8 may be saying that Elijah did the same thing when he went to the site of Moses' miraculous fast. **These fasts required God's supernatural intervention and are not repeatable apart from the Lord's specific calling and miraculous provision.**

### **The People and Fastings**

1. A **private fast** is what Jesus was speaking of in **Matthew 6:16–18** when He says we should fast in a way not to be noticed by others.
2. **Congregational fasts** are described in **Joel 2:15–16**: "Blow a trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly." At least a part of the congregation of the church at Antioch was fasting together in **Acts 13:2**, as evidenced by Luke's words, "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting."
3. The Bible also speaks of **national fasts**. Here is the response of King Jehoshaphat to an invasion: "Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah" (**2 Chron. 20:3**). The Jews were called to a national fast in **Neh. 9:1** and **Esther 4:16**, and the king of Nineveh proclaimed a fast in response to the preaching of Jonah (**Jonah 3:5–8**).

"Copied from Discipleship Journal Issue 67 - Jan/Feb 1992. Copyright © 2000 by The Navigators. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved."