



Fasting for Lent

[Winfield Bevins](#) February 09, 2016 [Lent](#)

Lent is a time for prayer and fasting. It is a season of spiritual preparation in which we remember Christ's temptation, suffering, and death. Historically, the church has celebrated Lent as a 40-day period beginning on Ash Wednesday and concluding the day before

Easter. It is observed in many Christian churches as a time to commemorate the last week of Jesus' life, his suffering (Passion), and his death, through various observances and services of worship. Many Christians use the 40 days of Lent as time to draw closer to the Lord through prayer, fasting, repentance, and self-denial.



We live in a culture of fast food, instant gratification, and self-centeredness. One of the best ways to get our eyes off of ourselves and back onto the Lord is through fasting. However, fasting has practically been disregarded and forgotten in the comforts of the modern church. Fasting didn't end in Biblical times, there have actually been proclaimed fasts in America. Fasting is nothing new in American history. The pilgrims held three formal periods of fasting before leaving for the New World. During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress proclaimed July 20, 1775, as a national day of fasting and prayer in preparation for the war on independence.

WHAT IS FASTING?

What does it really mean to fast? According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, fasting means to abstain from food; especially to eat sparingly or not at all or abstain from certain foods in observance of a religious duty or a token of grief." Fasting and religious purposes cannot be separated because they are intricately intertwined. The Bible gives us numerous references to individual and corporate fasts. There were even certain days that were designated each year for fasting and prayer. Fasting is a gift that God has given to the church in order to help us persevere in prayer. Fasting draws us closer to God and gives power to our prayers. Our central motivation with this lesson is to teach about the reasons to fast, different types of fasting, and then discuss how to fast.

REASONS FOR FASTING

People have been fasting since the ancient days of the Bible. The Bible records numerous accounts where people, cities, and nations have turned to God by fasting and praying: Hannah grieved over infertility "wept and did not eat" ([1 Samuel 1:7](#)); Anna, who was an elderly

widow, saw Jesus in the temple and “served God with fasting and prayer” ([Luke 2:37](#)). Saul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, “was three days without sight, neither ate or drank.” ([Acts 9:9](#)). Cornelius told Peter, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour...” ([Acts 10:30](#)). Most people fast for religious and spiritual reasons, while others choose to fast for health reasons. There are several specific reasons that the Bible tells us to fast.

1. To be Christ like. ([Matthew 4:1-17](#); [Luke 4:1-13](#)).
2. To obtain spiritual purity. ([Isaiah 58:5-7](#)).
3. To repent from sins. (See [Jonah 3:8](#); [Nehemiah 1:4](#), [9:1-3](#); [1 Samuel 14:24](#)).
4. To influence God. ([2 Samuel 12:16-23](#)).
5. To mourn for the dead. ([1 Samuel 31:13](#); [2 Samuel 1:12](#)).
6. To request God’s help in times of crisis and calamity. ([Ezra 8:21-23](#); [Nehemiah 1:4-11](#)).
7. To strengthen prayer. ([Matthew 17:21](#); [Mark 9:17-29](#); [Acts 10:30](#); [1 Corinthians 7:5](#)).

Types of Fasting

In the same way that God appointed times and seasons to fast, He also designated several types of fasts. Because of certain medical problems, and physical needs, there are different types of fasting. Not everyone can go on an extended 5-7 day fast; in a similar way, not everyone can totally abstain from food and water. A person should exercise wisdom and consult their physician if they have any medical concerns before they fast, otherwise it could actually be harmful to your health. However, there are at least three types of individual fasts: absolute fast, solid food fast, and partial fast.

1. Absolute Fast

An absolute fast is conducted by abstaining from all food and water for a certain period of time. This is also known as the “total fast” because an individual chooses to abstain from all foods and beverages. There are several Biblical examples for the total fast. Moses and Elijah both abstained from food and water for forty days and forty nights. (Deuteronomy 9:9, 10:10, 18:25-29; 1 Kings 19:8). Although the Bible says they fasted for forty days, many people usually only totally abstain from food and water for three days.

2. Solid Food Fast

A solid food fast is where an individual may drink juice and water, but chooses not to eat solid food. Certain scholars and theologians think that Jesus may have drank water while in the wilderness since the Bible doesn’t say that he was thirsty after his forty day fast (see Matthew 4:2). Drinking water while fasting for several days can actually be therapeutic for your body. In any case, you should not fast for more than a week unless you consult a doctor.

3. Partial Fast

To fast simply means to “abstain” from something. A partial fast is where you choose to abstain from certain foods and drinks instead of complete abstinence of food or drink. The Bible tells us that Daniel abstained from bread, water, and wine for twenty-one days (Daniel 10:3). Others may choose to fast from television, computer, newspaper, and hobbies. This will help you free up some time to spend in prayer and reflection.

What Jesus Said About Fasting

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught a lesson about how to fast and how not to fast:

Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your father who is in the secret place; and your father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matthew 6:16-28)

We see that it is important to not brag or boast to others about fasting. The Jews of Jesus’ day used fasting and giving to make everyone think that they were more spiritual than others. But Jesus tells us that fasting should be done in secret so that it can’t be used as a way of bringing glory to ourselves. Fasting should make us humble instead of proud. In the end it is not our works, but our hearts that matter to God. God promises to reward openly those who fast and pray in secret.

6. Practical Steps for Fasting

There are several practical steps that you should follow before you begin fasting.

- You should decide which fast is better for you. As we said earlier, due to health reasons not everyone can do a total fast, for example. Also, sometimes work schedules and other duties may prevent an individual from a certain type of fast. You may want to begin with a partial fast and work your way to a total fast. Ultimately, you should pray and ask God what His will would be for your fast.
- Decide how long you want to fast. People in the Bible often chose to fast for a certain period of time. To prepare their hearts for the seasons, the early church would fast before Christmas and Easter. John Wesley chose Friday as a day of the week to fast. This was a day that he set aside for fasting and prayer unto the Lord.
- You should consult a physician before you go on an extended fast. If you have any physical problems then you will certainly want to follow this advice. Fasting can be healthy to the body when it is done right, but it can also be dangerous if you don’t exercise wisdom.
- Make sure that you have time to pray. Although some people fast for health reasons, it will not do you any spiritual good if don’t allow yourself time to pray. Be sure to get the most out of your fast and spend plenty of time in prayer, consider setting a few days for a retreat to totally fast and pray. When was the last time you can remember spending an entire day with the Lord?
- You should slowly begin eating soft food when your fast is over. If you have been on an extended fast from solid foods, it is a good idea to slowly reintroduce your system to solid food again. For instance, you may want to eat soup or salad for your first meal after a fast. Bananas or other soft fruit are also a great way to break a long fast.

Just do it! Many people never fast because they are afraid to do it or because they have never done it before. Don’t let fear or inexperience stop you from experiencing one of God’s greatest blessings. Probably all of the great heroes of the faith spent many hours fasting and praying unto the Lord.