

Special Study: Biblical Fasting

Excerpted from "Finish Strong: The Message of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi" by Rolan Monje, ipibooks.com

[Matthew 6:16] When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

Definition and examples

Fasting is abstinence from food for spiritual reasons. The Greek word for fasting is *nesteuo* (used above), a compound from *esthio* ("to eat") and a negating "n." To fast simply means, "not to eat." During biblical times, the people of God would refrain from eating and drinking for certain periods of time. Examples include Moses, David, the people of Nineveh, Esther, Paul, and Jesus.

Although the reasons for fasting vary—some fasted as part of mourning, some out of piety or petition—all fasting is associated with prayer. In depriving oneself of food and water (a related Hebrew word means "to afflict"), prayer becomes more fervent and God-focused.

The apostles of the New Testament period practiced fasting during times of crucial decision-making as well as during important phases of church life.

[Acts 13:2] While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

[Acts 14:23] Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

The basic fast

The Israelites were required to fast once a year during *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. This 24-hour fast was from sunset of one day to sunset of the next (see Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:32). The command to deny (ESV "afflict") oneself probably meant some form of penitence or introspection with fasting (cf. Isaiah 58:3, 5; Psalm 35:13). The basic sense goes back to a heightened awareness in one's relationship with God.

Jesus and the disciples practiced this basic fast in the New Testament, but also did so for extended periods of time. In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus pictures a situation in which Christians are among other people going about their normal duties and activities. In fact, soldiers involved in the activity of warfare sometimes fasted (1 Samuel 14:24) as well as the sailors on the ship with Paul (Acts 27:33). There is a certain sense in which fasting, even in the midst of your daily activities, becomes a constant prayer to the Lord.

Fasting as a helpful discipline

As with other spiritual disciplines, fasting must be seen as part of training in pursuit of godliness (1 Timothy 4:7b). Done consistently, it enhances growth. It breaks spiritual ground, especially when coupled with godly habits like Bible study and meditation.

Fasting brings exciting benefits. It quickly moves a person from the physical to the nonphysical realm, helping one to reflect on the things that are more important and lasting. Determinedly connected with

prayer, it increases reliance on God. And when someone consciously depends more on God, it produces strength (John 4:31-34). This is also why fasting may be seen as preparation for spiritual battle.

Overall, the sacrifices involved in fasting make a lot of sense. One abstains from something of value to achieve something of *greater* value. Don't underestimate the power of fasting!

Practical suggestions

1. Read Scriptures on fasting to prepare your heart and mind. Isaiah 58 is an all-time favorite. Observe the heart behind this passage.
2. Fasting may be done occasionally or as a regular event (periodic). Plan it well and don't be impulsive (like Saul in 1 Samuel 14:24). Be clear on your purpose.
3. It is a good idea to decide how long you are going to fast before you start. Christians usually start with short periods of time (with supervision) until they gain proficiency with fasting.
4. Fasting does not have to be a major departure from everyday routines. Practice fasting as part of your regular schedule. That is, try to "schedule" your activities around fasting (or despite it). Remember how Jesus advised his disciples to go about their business on a fast day as they would on any other, so that only God would know of their sacrificial deed.
5. The "Daniel Fast" (Daniel 1) may be seen as a "partial fast." This gives some the idea of refraining from types of food, TV, movies, sports/hobbies, etc. Note that the text in Daniel is descriptive more than prescriptive.
6. Lastly, don't get undernourished! Feed on Scripture during your fast. Fasting goes well with meditation. Job 23:12 says "I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread" (cf. Matthew 4:4).