

Hungry for God

A guide to fasting



Fasting is an important spiritual discipline that can lead to spiritual growth, answers to prayer, and a deeper relationship with God. It is mentioned often in the Bible. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes,

Scripture has so much to say about fasting that we would do well to look again at this ancient Discipline. The list of biblical personages who fasted becomes a “Who’s Who” of Scripture. Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the Queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the Apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son.

Richard Foster

On top of this, Jesus assumes His followers will fast. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs us,

When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. **Matthew 6:17-18**

Notice that Jesus says “when” you fast — not “if” you fast.

In spite of this, fasting has often become a neglected spiritual discipline by modern-day Christ-followers. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, comments on this teaching of Jesus about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount:

For evangelicals, this whole question of fasting has almost disappeared from our lives and even out of the field of our consideration. How often, and to what extent have we thought about it? What place does it occupy in our whole view of the Christian life and the discipline of the Christian life? I would suggest that the truth probably is that we very rarely thought of it at all. . .

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*

As a result, many modern-day Christ-Followers often have a lot of questions about this important spiritual discipline. Today we will address five of these frequently asked questions.

What is fasting?

In the Bible, fasting simply refers to abstaining from food and beverages (or certain kinds of food and beverages) in order to pursue God for some specific spiritual purpose.

Why should we fast?

Fasting is a way to pursue God's Presence and supercharge our prayers. When we fast, we abstain from food because we are hungry for something more important than food. We are hungry for God — and for His will, direction, and intervention in our lives.

What should we expect while fasting?

Everyone is a little different when it comes to their experience of fasting. Some people find that when they fast, they experience a heightened sense of God's Presence and a deep sense of spiritual well-being. They find it easier to connect with God and hear His voice through the Word and prayer. For others, fasting is more of an act of obedience. They don't necessarily feel closer to God or experience more spiritual power while fasting. However, they often receive powerful answers to prayer or major spiritual breakthroughs after the fast.

When should we fast?

Fasting can be done at any time, but historically, people in the Bible usually fasted during times of special need. For example, King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:1-30) and Queen Esther (Esther 4:16) led Israel in fasts when the whole nation was facing imminent destruction through war or genocide. The prophet Joel called Israel to fast as an act of repentance for their sin and rebellion:

*Declare a holy fast;
call a sacred assembly.
Summon the elders
and all who live in the land
to the house of the Lord your God,
and cry out to the Lord . . .*

*“Even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Joel 1:14; 2:12*

Daniel fasted to seek God for insight into a mysterious “revelation” he received (Daniel 10:1-3). Jesus fasted to prepare for His ministry (Matthew 4:1-11). The leaders of the church at Antioch were worshipping the Lord and fasting when the Holy Spirit spoke to them with strategic instructions for Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-4). Paul and Barnabas fasted when they commissioned elders for their new churches (Acts 14:23). As you can see, in Scripture, fasting is usually associated with times of special need — whether it’s for deliverance, repentance, guidance, or empowering. However, the Holy Spirit may lead you to fast for a wide variety of reasons.

How should we fast?

When people fast in the Bible, they usually abstain from all food and beverages — except for water. However, Daniel is an exception. At one point in his life he went on a “partial fast” where he fasted from all “choice foods”, including meat and wine (Daniel 10:1-3). Occasionally, there are examples of an “absolute fast” — where someone fasts from all food and beverages, including water (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9). This is highly unusual. In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes,

There are also several examples in Scripture of what has rightly been called an “absolute fast,” or an abstaining from both food and water. It appears to be a desperate measure to meet a dire emergency. . . It must be underscored that the absolute fast is the exception and should never be engaged in unless one has a very clear command from God, and then for not more than three days. **Richard Foster**

Fasting in the Bible lasts various lengths of time. There are examples of one-day, three-day, seven-day, twenty-one day and forty-day fasts. If you believe the Holy Spirit is calling you to go on a long fast, it’s always a good idea to consult with your doctor to make sure this is safe for you. It is also important to stay hydrated when you fast.

Fasting is an important spiritual discipline. When led by the Holy Spirit, it can lead to spiritual growth, answers to prayer, spiritual breakthroughs, and a deeper relationship with God.