

## What does the Bible teach about fasting?

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Biblical fasting involves abstaining from eating (and/or drinking) for spiritual purposes. In the Old Testament, Israel celebrated annual fasts, the most prominent being the Day of Atonement. There were also occasional fasts tied to specific historical events, sometimes individual and sometimes corporate.

Here are a few of the occasions for fasting:

- at a time of grief (1 Samuel 31:13; Nehemiah 1:4)
- at a time of repentance (1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 21:27)
- as an expression of humility (Ezra 8:21; Psalm 69:10)
- and as an expression of a need for God's guidance and help

What all of these fasts share in common is that ***they were an expression of dependence on God!***

Several New Testament passages give us insight about fasting:

- Fasting teaches us that God's Word nourishes us
  - Matthew 4:1-4 records the only example of Jesus fasting, just prior to Him being tempted in the wilderness. He faced temptation with these words, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3-5, which talks about the 40 years Israel spent in the wilderness, depending daily on manna to sustain them. He says that God humbled them and let them be hungry in order to teach them to depend on God's Word to sustain them. By His example of fasting, Jesus reminds us that food alone cannot sustain us. *We need to be nourished by God's Word.*
- Fasting teaches us that doing God's will sustains us
  - John 4:31-35 records Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. When the disciples return, they encourage Jesus to eat. He responds by saying, "I have food to eat that you know not of." Then He adds, "My food is to do the will of the Father." Again,

Jesus reminds us that food alone is not enough. *We are sustained by doing God's will.*

- Fasting teaches us that Jesus Himself sustains us
  - In John 6:48-50 Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die." We see this pictured symbolically in the bread and the cup of the Lord's supper. Jesus is the source of eternal life. *Fasting is feasting on Jesus.*

Jesus assumed that fasting would be a part of His disciple's spiritual life. In Matthew 6:16-18, He says, "when you fast," not "if you fast". He warns us not to fast to impress people, but to be near to the heart of God.

Fasting is designed to intensify our dependence on God by weakening our dependence on food and other things. How does it do that?

Fasting reveals and heals our dependence on food and other things:

We tend to rely on external objects to fill the discomfort caused by low self-esteem, unfulfilling work, unloving relationships, uncontrollable circumstances, etc. We can develop a dependence on these external objects and fasting can help remove the false peace derived from them.

Richard Foster says, "More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be repealed almost immediately. David writes, "I humbled my soul with fasting" (Psalm 69:20). Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear - if they are within us, they will surface during fasting.

Fasting teaches us that we can go without getting what we want and survive:

Fasting can free us from having to have what we want. Therefore, fasting can teach moderation or self-control, not only in relation to food, but in other areas as well. It teaches contentment. (1 Timothy 6:6)

Fasting expresses and deepens our hunger for God:

Richard Foster says, “Fasting reminds us that we are sustained “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Food does not sustain us; God sustains us. In Christ, “All things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). Therefore, in experiences of fasting, we are abstaining from food or other activities and feasting on God’s Word.

Fasting must always, first and foremost, center on God.

**It must be about Him.**