

Lesson Plan & Study Guide



Spiritual Disciplines: Fasting

iFOLLOW

Walking with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

Version 1.0 - 11/17/10



About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting

This presentation is designed for people who have decided to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Learning Objectives

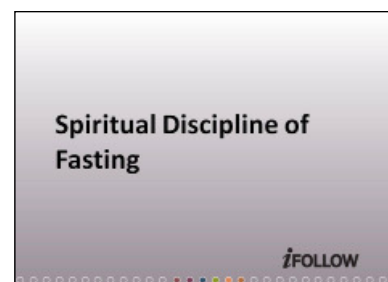
1. Understand what fasting is
2. Learn the purpose of fasting
3. Discover different ways of fasting
4. Find the results that can be expected from fasting

Content Outline

1. Old Testament stories of Esther, David, and Elijah
2. New Testament: Pharisees' customs and Jesus' comments
3. Two major passages on fasting: Jesus' fast in the wilderness and Isaiah 58
4. Various types of fasting
5. What results can we expect from fasting?
6. Fasting to raise awareness of world hunger and to do something about it

Background Material for the Presenter

It is an ancient custom among believers to engage in “fasting and prayer” on special occasions. What is fasting? How does it relate to things spiritual? Most people today probably think of it primarily as a diet designed for quick weight loss. Or, perhaps a vague idea that it is something one might do to overcome guilt from indulging too much in things that are not good for us. Our purpose here is to understand from the Bible and in practical ways the spiritual discipline of fasting.



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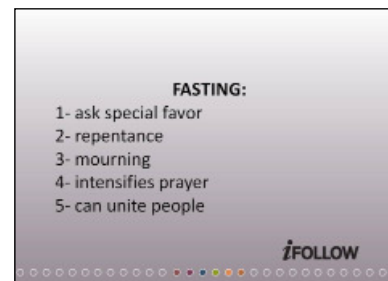
**Spiritual
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Fasting

1

What Does the Old Testament Say About Fasting?

There are several instances in the Old Testament where a fast is “proclaimed.” That is, a spiritual leader asks that everyone fast for some particular purpose. In Ezra 8:21, Ezra and the group of people he is leading back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity, fast in order “that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.” This shows that one reason for fasting was to ask God for special favor or blessing. Other times, the proclaimed fast was intended to show mass repentance, such as the one Jeremiah called for in Jer. 36:11. There are three major stories that show us, in more detail, fasting as it was practiced in the Old Testament.

The story of Esther: When Mordecai wrote asking her to stand up for her people, pointing out that if no one did anything, she would die with her people, and that perhaps God had placed her where she was just “for such a time as this,” (Esther 4:14) she replied by saying, “Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.”



This passage shows us what was involved in fasting—no eating or drinking at all—and we can also extrapolate some reasons or goals.

1. Fasting (as in many cultures) was often done for mourning, and Esther may have been asking for mourning in advance, in case she did indeed perish.
2. Fasting was seen as a way to intensify prayer, humbling oneself so that heaven might hear. Esther was in dire need of God’s attention.
3. Fasting can “clear the path,” so to speak, between the soul and God, clarifying thinking and putting a needy human in direct connection with the Divine. Therefore, it can strengthen spiritually and give courage where courage is needed, as it certainly was in this case. Esther well knew what the king had done to an earlier wife who displeased him.
4. A group fast can also unite people in one cause. The text does not actually mention prayer—in fact, Esther is the only book in the canon that never mentions the name of God at all—but it is clearly implied that prayer is the purpose of this fast. It is also clearly implied by Mordecai that it may have been God’s purpose in elevating the

Hebrew girl Hadassah to the status of queen, so that she would be able to save her people.

They fasted three days, Esther went before the king, and the rest is history. It is a history that is celebrated by the Jews to this day, with the fast of Purim, (which means lots or a kind of dice because the date to kill the Jews was chosen by lot) in which they remember the bravery of their ancestor by both fasting and feasting in her memory.

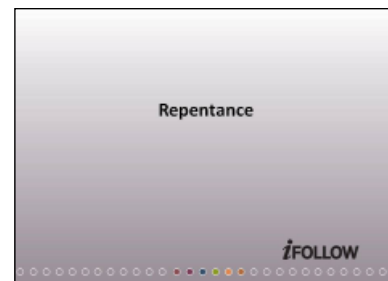
The story of David after he committed adultery and murder: After committing adultery with Bathsheba and arranging for the killing of her husband so he could marry her, Nathan lets David know in no uncertain terms what God thinks of his sin. The story is told in 2 Samuel 12:1-23. In verses 14-16, Nathan tells David that as a consequence of his sin, the child Bathsheba bore as a result of it will die.

This is a difficult passage. To the Middle Eastern mind, then as now, all things are in the hand of God, and He is given credit for causing evil as well as good. This is shown frequently in the Old Testament. Yet God is not the author of evil. There never would have been death or pain if His plan had been followed from the beginning. Sin is the cause of all such sorrow, whether directly or not. In this story, the tragic consequences of sin are indeed direct and immediate. God says the child will die.

David knows, though, that sometimes God is moved to intervene between sin and its results. He is deeply and truly sorrowful, as a reading of Psalm 51, which he wrote during this time, will show:

“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.” (Verses 3-4) ... “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation.” (Verse 14) ... “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” (Verse 17)

David here shows his clear understanding that the sacrificial system is not just a mechanical way of balancing the scales, one ritual per sin, and you're even. He knows God is more interested in his deep repentance than in any physical sacrifice he may make. Perhaps if he is willing to humble himself before God, express his sorrow, beg forgiveness, maybe, just maybe, God will intervene this time.



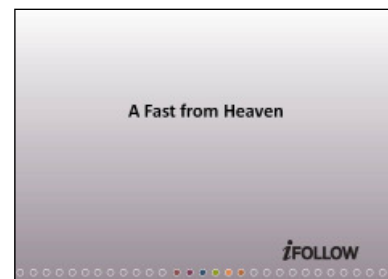
David lay on the ground, refusing food or drink, praying desperately, for seven days and nights. His household servants begged him to eat, but he wouldn't. When the baby died, they were afraid to tell him. He had been so upset already, how would he react when he learned the answer to his prayers had been No?

David heard them whispering. Haggard and pale as he must have been by then, he lifted his head and asked the dread question: "Is the child dead?"
No doubt they exchanged nervous glances. "He is dead."

To their surprise, David got up, washed himself, and went to the temple, where he worshiped God and almost certainly did make a sacrifice. Then he went home and asked for food, and ate. When his servants found the courage to ask him why, David's answer gives us some more clues to the practice and purpose of fasting. "He said, 'While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live. But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.'" (Verses 22, 23)

David clearly believed that fasting would make it clear to God (and himself) how serious he was. He had no time for food, or for considering himself or his body at all. He was, for that week, entirely devoted to prayer and repentance. Perhaps it was this sort of faithfulness, even after a serious fall, that caused God to call David "a man after My own heart."

There is an interesting sequel to this story. Verses 24 and 25 say that David went to comfort his wife. This time, the child they conceive is formed in true love rather than the lust that marred the beginning of this relationship, and the Bible says "the Lord loved him and sent word through Nathan the prophet, and he named him Jedidiah [the beloved of God] for the Lord's sake." We know this Jedidiah better by the name of Solomon, the wise high king of Israel's golden age, a king who, like his father, sinned greatly, but returned to the God of his salvation. Could we speculate that this outcome was, in part, because David (and Bathsheba as well, we can hope) came together after being truly repentant and were now spiritually united with God?



The story of Elijah the Prophet: The third great story of fasting in the Old Testament is different from either of these. We find it in 1 Kings 19:1-8. Elijah, that great prophet of God, has just had a mountaintop experience. He has proclaimed a three-year drought in God's name, to show once and for all that Baal, the supposed lord of weather, had no control at all over it. On Mount Carmel, he laid to rest all remaining

doubts. Baal and all his prophets were powerless to bring fire to burn a sacrifice, let alone rain to the thirsty land. But when Elijah quietly prayed, the offering was completely consumed, including the altar! The people all professed their belief at least, if not lasting faith, many of them, in the true God. Then the rain came, again in response to Elijah's prayer, and he outran Ahab, who was mounted, from Carmel to Jezreel, a distance of more than twenty miles.

Perhaps only those who lay themselves out in service, year after year, to God and His people, can understand why Elijah fell into depression soon after such an experience. Jezebel said he was a dead man, and he lost his nerve completely and fled. He went one day's journey into the wilderness and sat down under a juniper tree and asked God to let him die now. Then he fell into a sleep of exhaustion.

It's interesting that God didn't argue with him, in the state he was in. An angel appeared and fed him bread and water. Elijah ate, slept again, and was roused once more to eat the ordinary-seeming bread of heaven. 1 Kings 19:8 says that he "went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God." This is not a fast of repentance, or a fast of asking special things of God. It is not a fast to seek guidance; in fact, it almost appears Elijah had no intention or even recognition of fasting. He wasn't hungry, apparently. He had eaten the food of angels.

Yet God had a plan and purpose for this fast. He wanted to teach Elijah that He was present not only in the great, noisy events, like the confrontation on Mt. Carmel, but also in the quiet daily events like eating or sleeping or a soft whisper of guidance and reassurance. He wanted to assure him that he was not as alone as he felt; that there were, in fact, 7,000 who had never bowed to Baal. God also took Elijah off duty. He said, in effect, "I know you're burned out, Elijah. You don't have to do this alone anymore. Go anoint Elisha - and pretty soon you'll be coming home to Me." Elijah's fast was followed in a fairly short time by his ascension to heaven without death!

Fast Days and Feast Days

Of the feasts instituted by God and listed most comprehensively in Leviticus 23, only one includes a fast: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Even then, it is not named as a fast, but it has been understood throughout the millennia that "humble yourselves" in verses 27 and 29 mean a fast. For many centuries, the Jewish people have fasted from food and water, if they are able, or eaten as little as possible, on that day. They also abstain from washing themselves and from sexual relations. This is the day that one (in the Old Testament system of worship) stands before the judgment seat of God, and like David, one has no room for anything on the mind but repentance and atonement.

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However there are two other things in this chapter that can be seen as fasts. First, there is Passover and Unleavened Bread. For eight days, the people were told to eat bread without any leaven; in fact, not to have any leaven at all in their dwellings (Ex. 12:15, 19, and others). This is, then, a fast from yeast and other leavens, which are seen, in this light, as symbolizing sin, with its power to grow and spread throughout a life. Secondly, until the Wave Sheaf, or offering of the Firstfruits of the season, no new grain was to be eaten, whether as bread or roasted. (Verse 14.) The first of the harvest went to God, as a thank you to the Lord of the harvest.

It is an interesting and instructive experience, for Christians as well as Jews, to go through their houses removing all items containing leaven (pondering, all the while, the ongoing attempt to remove sin from the life) and then to go eight days eating no leavened bread. The one who tries it soon learns there is leaven in a lot of foods one would never have suspected. Just like sin.



What Does the New Testament Say About Fasting?

There seem to be only two main issues concerning fasting in the gospels. One is the complaint, recorded in Matthew 9, Mark 2, and Luke 5, that the disciples of John and of the Pharisees “fast often,” but Jesus’ disciples do not. There were apparently set times when observant Jews practiced at least partial fasting; eating only one meal, or eating very simply, or even taking only water. This was (and sometimes still is) seen as a way of gaining merit or “attaining atonement.” Jesus said when the Bridegroom is around it is a time for feasting and celebrating, not fasting.

The second passage concerning fasting is found in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6. Jesus is talking about spiritual disciplines in general. He says not to give alms in such a way as to be noticed and admired, or to pray in such a way as to try to show off how holy we are. The same holds for fasting. “When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (Matt. 6:17-18)

Jesus must be talking about other fasts than the one on Yom Kippur, when everyone is fasting together, or the ones such as those Esther and Ezra called for, where a group are fasting together for some purpose. He clearly assumes that there are times when some may fast for their own reasons. We may privately choose to fast for reasons that are between us and God. This kind of fasting should not be held up as an

example of superior spirituality. There are rewards for this kind of fasting that will be as individual as the reasons for fasting in the first place.

In the epistles, there are several interesting teachings concerning fasting. It is quite possible the 120 disciples were fasting in the Upper Room, although it is not mentioned. In Acts 13:2-3, the apostles were “serving God and fasting” when the Holy Spirit set apart Barnabas and Saul (still a new enough apostle, not yet identified as Paul) “for the work to which I have called them.” Paul received his call to the Gentile missions direct from the Holy Spirit, during a time of fasting. And he was not alone. We may not read that much about Barnabas or other disciples, but they all had their part to play. For one thing, we would likely not have the gospel of Mark had it not been for Barnabas pouring oil on troubled waters and encouraging John Mark when Paul had given up on him.

In Acts 14:23 there is a very interesting passage which reports that the early Christian churches chose elders with fasting and prayer. Today, we should choose our church officers with earnest prayer, although sometimes we are tempted to fill offices with any warm body that will accept them. But we do not fast over these decisions. What might happen if we did?

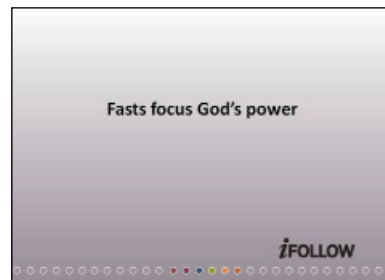
In 1 Cor. 7:5 we have the first clear indication that fasting could be about other things than food. Here Paul is counseling married couples that they may abstain from sexual relations for a period of time, “so that you may devote yourselves to prayer,” but not to let it last too long, because it would simply give the devil another tool to use to undermine their relationship. There are honest Christians who have fallen into the error that sex was somehow the original sin, or mixed up with it, and seem to feel basically that something so pleasant can’t be God’s will. This clear biblical counsel will be a safety for us against fanaticism, if we let it. God invented sex, and it is holy and undefiled (Heb. 13:4). It was the first blessing expressed to Adam and Eve, and we do well to keep it in proportion, not allowing it to be dirtied by the confused culture in which we live.

A Higher Fast

In this Bible study on fasting, there are two glaring omissions. We have left out what are probably the two main passages on fasting in the entire Bible. The most obvious, of course, is Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. (In some ways, this is a reminder of Elijah’s 40-day fast. Elijah went 40 days on the strength of angel food. Jesus went 40 days on spiritual sustenance alone.)



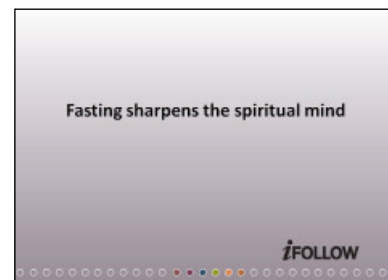
This story is told in Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13 and Luke 4:1-13. While Mark has only the barest telling—Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and was tempted there—Matthew and Luke give many details, though in reverse order, of the temptations Jesus met. We are most concerned with the first item in every telling: Jesus ate nothing for forty days and forty nights. **Then** He was hungry. It is an interesting feature of spiritual fasts that people are often not hungry, or only hungry for a few minutes at normal mealtimes, until they are over.



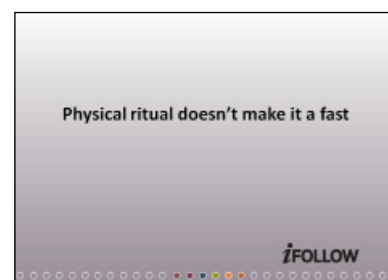
A fast should be under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. A woman was once impressed to fast, and didn't even know why. She obeyed the prompting, and spent mealtimes praying for "whatever it is You are doing, Lord." After three days she got hungry and stayed hungry, so she assumed the fast was over and ate, still mystified as to the reason. Two days later, a loved one for whom she had prayed for years told her he had surrendered to God.

Somehow, a fast can focus the power of God, perhaps especially when He is working for those who would not pray, let alone fast, for themselves.

In the case of Jesus' temptations, His long fast gave Him not only the power to face and vanquish the devil in each of the following temptations, but apparently also prepared Him to begin the great work for which He had come to earth. It could have seemed to Him that the thirty years He had already spent were preparation enough, but after His baptism He was impressed by the Spirit to go alone for an extended time. There, knowing anything at all about Jesus, we can be sure He spent his time in prayer and meditation, planning and hoping for the future and the beloved children of God whom He would try to introduce to the loving Father He knew so well, rather than the angry God their leaders pictured for them. Satan offered several shortcuts to the apparent fulfillment of His goals, but Jesus, His mind sharpened by the fast, recognized them easily for the lies they were, and turned him down flat.



A fast can sharpen the spiritual mind, focusing it on God and His will. The other important fasting passage we have not looked at yet is found in Isaiah 58. This chapter is often thought of only in the context of Sabbath-keeping, but in fact, addresses many other spiritual disciplines, particularly fasting.



The first two verses are instructions to Isaiah to tell His people some home truths:

“Cry loudly, do not hold back;
Raise your voice like a trumpet,
And declare to My people their transgression
And to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know
My ways, As a nation that has done righteousness
And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God
They ask Me for just decisions,
They delight in the nearness of God.”

What is God disappointed about here? Do the people really delight in God’s nearness or want just decisions? How can you tell? “Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?” (Verse 3)



Have you ever felt God was ignoring your prayers? In what ways can a nation, church, or individual pretend to seek God and His righteousness, yet be transgressing and sinful to the point of needing a wake-up call from God?

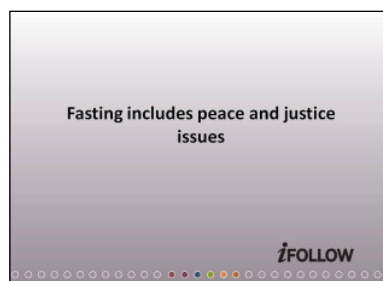
“Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire,
And drive hard all your workers.”

“Behold, you fast for contention and strife and
to strike with a wicked fist You do not fast like
you do today to make your voice heard on
high.” (Verses 3-4)

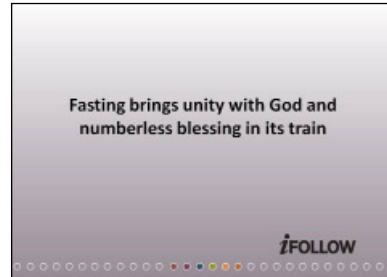
What makes it possible for a person to attend a feast day or special church holiday and still harbor wickedness and contention?

Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?

“Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed
And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a
bed?
Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to
the Lord?
Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,



And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?
Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”
(Verses 5-7)



What do these have to do with fasting? Conversely, what does a traditional fast have to do with the godly actions listed here? Is there any connection? It seems that the point God is making here is that spiritual activities that are engaged in without regard to the practical matters of living a Godly life, especially issues of social justice and compassion for the poor and suffering, are useless in His eyes. Fasting cannot make up for living an unGodly life, ignoring how you treat your family, your neighbors and issues such as world hunger, poverty, disease, etc.

Earnest spirituality must be mingled with a serious attempt to live a life that is constructive and caring, involved in the world around us for the betterment of humanity. This results in the outcome that God promises in this chapter.

“Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am ‘“
(Verses 8-9)

Godly fasting is engaged in for unselfish reasons. If we work and prayer and fast for the healing of others and for social justice, then we can expect blessings from God, promises listed here mostly in imagery. What do you think they mean, in practical terms?

“If you remove the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,
And if you give yourself to the hungry
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness
And your gloom will become like midday.
And the Lord will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;

And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.”
(Verses 10-11)

Verse 12 makes it clear that the kind of spirituality that God seeks is a spirituality that results in constructive, practical outcomes in the world. If fasting is narrowly religious in its focus, it is not godly fasting. Instead the kind of fast that God wants is one that results in concrete outcomes in the community. “Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; You will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the breach, The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.” This could be seen as a central promise to the whole chapter. In the immediate context of Isaiah, it appears to be talking about the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem. What else might it mean?

We see in this passage of Isaiah, unique among other Bible passages on fasting, that there are many, many other principles at work besides simply abstaining from food for a time. Most often, a fast is a personal, private thing between God and one person, and it would be easy to limit fasting to only that. According to this chapter in Isaiah, fasting is to be done in love and obedience, with an eye to the needs of others, rather than simply for own individual purposes. The chapter also mentions Sabbath-keeping, and in fact, Sabbath can be seen as a fast from work, from “business as usual,” as the phrases in verses three and 13, most often translated as “your own pleasure,” are best translated. Sabbath is meant to be a day in which we devote ourselves to prayer and to the work of God for justice and unity among **all** His children.

A fast is to be entered into prayerfully, with a specific plan in mind, or if, as in the story above, God impresses us with the need to fast, then we may simply pray for His will to be done. A fast may, in fact, help you lose weight or have any number of health benefits, as many people claim, but the point of a spiritual fast is to be spiritual. Any health benefits are extra bonuses.

God’s desire is for us to be united with His Spirit, and that Spirit never thinks of self, only of others. Only of you and me and the rest of God’s hungry children. When we truly unite with God in this way, then the mighty promises of this prophecy will truly come to pass in our lives.

How Shall We Fast?

When the word fast comes to mind, the first thought is of not eating, but there are as many ways to fast as there are people to do it. Here is a rundown of some.

Food—If a fast does mean abstaining from food there are several ways to do it. First,

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we must note that a person should not fast from food if they are a diabetic or for some other medical reason are on a diet under medical supervision or guidelines. In those cases, they must continue on the diet prescribed by their doctor and may use non-food methods as a means of fasting.

1. A person may fast entirely, from both food and water. This is mentioned in the Bible several times, but it can be very dangerous, and it is not recommended without checking with your doctor first, and not for longer than a day or so.

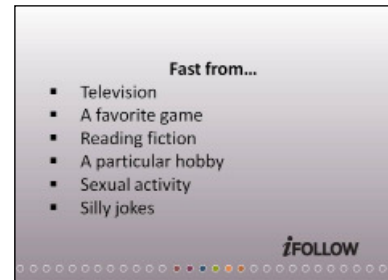
2. More commonly, one may fast from food, drinking copious amounts of water. Some people may drink juices or other clear liquids. This sort of fast should not be longer than a day or two for a beginner, but many people can fast three days or even longer if they are in good shape. Do not attempt a fast like this without checking with your health care professional.

3. A simpler way to fast, especially for people who haven't tried it before, or who are pregnant or in weakened condition but not actually ill (sick people shouldn't fast unless it's part of their treatment) is to have one small, simple meal, say of fruits, nuts, and grains, for breakfast, and then take nothing else (except water) the rest of the day. This sort of fast can be carried on much longer, if the person is in good health.

4. A Jewish and also Muslim form of fasting is to fast during the daylight hours and eat after sundown. This does not seem as healthy, since the body will be trying to digest food when it should be sleeping, but it may be tried.

5. If someone who is elderly, a child, pregnant, or in weakened condition wishes to fast, they may try choosing a food or category of food to abstain from. The famous "giving up something for Lent" fits in this category. You could abstain from sweets, dairy products, meat or rich foods in general. One generally chooses a food which is a temptation, because one of the reasons for fasting is to gain greater self-control.

One teenager, wishing to fast and pray for a six-week evangelism outreach, combined nearly all the fasts above. First, she took only water for three days. The times she would have been eating, she spent in prayer. For the rest of that week, she ate a bread, fruit, and vegetable diet, with one glass of milk at breakfast. Throughout the remainder of the six-week period, she abstained from all forms of sweets, using the desire to eat the jelly, desserts, and so forth that she saw in the school cafeteria each



day as a prompt to pray for the evangelism campaign. This forty days, or so, became a period of special spiritual growth in her life, which she never forgot.

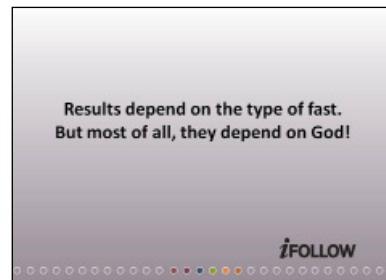
Non-food Fasting—There may be a medical or other reasons why someone cannot fast in the traditional fashion. Or one may simply desire a different kind of blessing. The truth is, a fast can have a lot to do with self-control and there are many ways we could use more self-control in our lives. We can fast from television, a favorite game or recreation, reading fiction, a particular hobby, telling jokes, pointless conversation, sarcasm, criticism, video games, taking naps, the comics page or reading the newspaper. A married couple might choose to fast from sexual activity, but only with the whole-hearted agreement of both partners. This is best done as a two-person fast for the same spiritual goal.

Group Fasting—As we have seen, there were many times in the Bible when a whole community or group, or even the whole nation were called to fast together. Churches have declared days of fasting and prayer, remaining in the building and praying and singing together all Sabbath afternoon, or even all night. If this is done, it is advisable to offer a simple, light soup supper or something similar, for those who cannot fast all day. Church leaders must do their best to see no one is pressured or shamed into joining the fast. It will be of less benefit if some are there just because they think they have to be.

In many nations there is a yearly declared National Day of Prayer that may be used as the occasion for this type of fast. There are many other reasons; an upcoming event, a need for spiritual growth or unity in the congregation, healing, etc. Alternatively, especially in larger churches, one group can decide to fast for a set period of time, praying together (in spirit if not in physical proximity) for some desired goal.

One small church in the State of Washington, which normally has potluck every week, decided to have vegan-style potlucks, without dessert of any kind, for two weeks. Those who chose would also eat this way at home for the same period. In addition each one would choose a secular activity that was a normal part of their day, such as television, sports page, hanging out in a coffee house, etc., and abstain from that as well. Their stated purpose was to pray for their local community. Some did prayer walks through the neighborhood.

There were more visitors following this fast, and some families that attended regularly for at least awhile. Perhaps more importantly, the congregation felt there was definitely spiritual growth within the church family. “It is hard,” one member says, “to see



visible progress sometimes.” But they know God is working, and He sees results we may not see until heaven.

Results From Fasting

First, it is important to remember that fasting, like any other form of prayer, is not **a way to control God!** The results may not be what we expect, and we must resist the temptation to think, “Well, that didn’t ‘work’! I’m not going to do it anymore!” There may be results, particularly if we are praying for others, that we will not see until the Kingdom.

That said, the results of fasting will depend, first, on the purpose of the fast. We saw that in the Bible, fasting might be for repentance. If one reads the rest of those stories noted, or others like them, it will be evident that they were followed by a period of repentance and renewal of their covenant with God. The nations of Israel and Judah experienced many of these turnings. Individually speaking, David was renewed in his relationship with the Lord. God “renewed a right spirit within him,” as he asked. When we fast because we are truly repentant, or even because we know we ought to be, and want to be made repentant, we can know God will always answer that prayer.

Other times, the fasts were for a special answer to prayer. This is a little trickier. Today, people tend to think of God in a different way than they ever used to in older societies. We think of God more like a vending machine or Santa Clause, and if we don’t get what we thought, when we thought, in the way we expected, we say God “didn’t answer.” Once upon a time in the world, when the cult of the individual that we have today had not been thought of, people knew God was bigger than they were, and might have purposes they could not understand. Esther was surely praying for deliverance when she fasted, but her expectation included the possibility of her death. Many Christians today might think their prayer had not been answered, if they saw it was, in fact, about to end in death. Daniel’s three friends told Nebuchadnezzar in no uncertain terms, “Our God is able to deliver us from the fire, and He will deliver us from you! But if He doesn’t choose to deliver us, we still will not bow down to your idol.” (From Daniel 3:17-18, paraphrased.) So if we pray for a special answer, the main objective of the fast is to make us willing to accept whatever answer we receive, without losing faith.

If we fast for an evangelistic outreach, there are two objectives. One, perhaps the most important from God’s point of view, is again to unite us with His will. But the main one in our mind when we pray will be that His Word will draw people to Himself, and we can be sure God will honor such prayers, whether or not we see answers we recognize and understand. Isaiah 55:11 says God’s Word never returns to Him void. When we fast and pray, we can claim that promise.

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A couple might fast and pray for the strengthening of their marriage and family. Again, this may mean confronting attitudes and expectations they didn't even realize they had. God may impress them that they need help, perhaps professional Christian counseling. But His will **will** be done, and their marriage will be strengthened, if they unite together with each other and with Him.

A church might come together to fast for greater unity in their congregation. Then we may know God will work for unity and develop it in His will, but we may not expect what forms that work will take. Those participating in the fast may find themselves confronted by God with attitudes they must then fast to break! They may need to ask for or offer forgiveness. They may need to confess sins they thought were secret. It may even happen, God forbid, that someone will end up leaving the church, if God knows that person cannot or will not work for unity where he or she is. But a congregation can know God will always answer a prayer for unity.

Another important purpose of fasting, not touched on here so far, is to break the power of a particular sin. If we fast for that reason, we can always know God is nearby, waiting to give us the victory. He will change our attitudes and make our desires mesh with His, **as far as we will allow Him to**. This may take some strong fasting and prayer, not because God is not stronger than any sin we could face, but because our will may be stronger than our fast, at first. If we persevere, we will grow more like Jesus, and will learn to hate the sin more than we love it. Then we know its power is broken.

Fasting for the World

There is one final purpose for fasting and it is one we in developed nations do not think of as often as we should. Fasting even from one meal can remind us of what the children of God are suffering in far too many parts of the world. Here is a note taken from the World Hunger Education Service:

“No one really knows how many people are malnourished. The statistic most frequently cited is that of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization ... The most recent estimate (2006) of the FAO says that 854 million people worldwide are undernourished. This is 12.6 percent of the estimated world population of 6.6 billion. Most of the undernourished—820 million—are in developing countries. The FAO estimate is based on statistical aggregates. It looks at a country's income level and income distribution and uses this information to estimate how many people receive such a low level of income that they are malnourished. It is not an estimate based on seeing to what extent actual people are malnourished and projecting from there (as would be done by survey sampling). ... In July 2008, FAO said that an additional 50 million people became undernourished in 2007 due to higher food prices.”

It is all very well to talk about the problem and say somebody ought to do something. A fast will bring the reality home without any preaching at all. Best of all, it can help in two ways, both by raising the consciousness of the one doing the fasting, and by providing money—the money one would have used to purchase the food eaten during the time of the fast—to donate to Christian organizations who are working to combat world hunger, such as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

Our God says: “Is not this the fast which I choose? ... Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ Then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 58)

Handouts in this Package

1. Methods of Fasting
2. Isaiah 58 on Fasting



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Discussion
Questions

**Spiritual
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Additional Resources

- Augsburger, David (2006). *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God and Love of Neighbor*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Baab, Lynne M. (2006). *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Chittister, Joan O.S.B. (1990). *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Foster, Richard J. (1978). *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Johnson, Jan, Keith Matthews and Dallas Willard (2001). *Study Guide to The Divine Conspiracy*. New York, NY: HarperOne.
- Jones, Tony (2005). *The Sacred Way*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Kuhlman, Delcy (1998). *Experiencing God through Spiritual Mentoring*. Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry.
- McKnight, Scot (2009). *Fasting*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- McLaren, Brian D. (2008). *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Ortberg, John (1997). *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Smith, James Bryan (1993). *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*. New York, NY: HarperOne.
- Stassen, Glen H., and David P. Gushee (2003). *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Whitney, Donald S. (1991). *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group.
- Willard, Dallas (1990). *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. New York, NY: HarperOne.
- Willard, Dallas (1998). *The Divine Conspiracy: Discovering Our Hidden Life in God*. New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Willard, Dallas (2002). *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

White, Ellen G. (1898). *The Desire of Ages*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association. [The chapter titled “Levi Matthew” has quite a bit of commentary on true fasting.]

Wright, N.T. (1994). *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Websites

Everything2 is a major on-line encyclopedia. It has an interesting article with useful information on fasting on line at: everything2.com/index.pl?node=Fasting

Renovare is a Christian parachurch organization devoted to teaching spiritual disciplines. More information at: www.renovare.org/

Plans for a fasting event focused on world hunger can be obtained from the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) at: www.adra.org

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Discussion Questions

1. Have you had experiences like Esther's (praying for a miracle), David's (praying in repentance), or Elijah's (unintentional "fasts" due to burnout or depression), that you are willing to share?
2. Have you ever tried to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread? Why? What happened?
3. Have you ever fasted? Why? How long? What were the results?
4. Tell stories of fasts you know about and what God did.
5. Do you have other ideas of creative ways of fasting that can be added to those in listed in Handout 1?

Group Activity

Purpose: To discover more about the deeper purposes of fasting.

Preparation: Make enough copies of Handouts 1 and 2 so that each participant can have both. You will need room for several small groups, and writing materials or a board or flipchart for each.

Assignment: This activity is in two parts. First, have each group discuss the first twelve verses of Isaiah 58, with the questions found on Handout 2, as well as any questions or ideas they have. In each group, have a scribe keep a record of the insights of the group, which will then share with the whole. Second, have the group as a whole decide on a group fast to embark on, reporting at the next meeting what insights or growth took place. Those who cannot or do not wish to fast from the same thing the group chooses as a whole may choose a fast of their own. A service project concerning hunger would be particularly appropriate as an adjunct to the fast.

Time: Allow 15-20 minutes for group discussion, then 10 for sharing. It should only take a few minutes to decide, either on a group fast to undertake, or that each will choose for him/herself. At the next meeting, give 20 minutes or more for sharing what visible results came about in hearts and lives because of the fasting.

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Group
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Handout 1

Methods of Fasting

The first thing that comes to mind when the word “fasting” is used is not eating, but there many other ways to fast. It is important that if a person is diabetic or has some other health condition where a physician has recommended a certain diet or dietary guidelines, they should not fast from food without medical supervision. It could be dangerous. And, even when it comes to food, there are a number of different ways to do it.

Fasting from Food

1. One may fast entirely, from both food and water. This is mentioned in the Bible several times. It should not be done more than a day or two.
2. More commonly, one may fast from food, while drinking copious amounts of water. Some people may drink juices or other clear liquids. This sort of fast should not be longer than a day or two for a beginner, but many people can fast three days or even longer if they are in good shape. Do not attempt a fast like this without checking with your health care professional.
3. A simpler way to fast, especially for people who haven't tried it before, or who are pregnant or in weakened condition but not actually ill, is to have one small, simple meal (for example fruit, nuts, and grains) for breakfast and then take nothing else (except water) the rest of the day. This sort of fast can be carried on much longer, if a person is in good health.
4. A Jewish and also Muslim form of fasting is to fast during the daylight hours and eat after sundown. Muslims do this for an entire month each year.
5. You could choose a food or category of food to abstain from: sweets, dairy products, meat or other rich foods. One generally chooses a food which is a temptation, because one of the reasons for fasting is to gain greater self-control.

A teenager, wishing to fast and pray for a six-week evangelism outreach, combined nearly all the fasts above. First, she took only water for three days. The times she would have been eating meals, she spent in prayer. For the rest of that week, she ate a bread, fruit and vegetable diet, with one glass of milk at breakfast. Throughout the remainder of the six-week period, she abstained from all forms of sweets, using the desire to eat the jelly, desserts, etc., that she saw in the school cafeteria each day as a

prompt to pray for the evangelism campaign. This forty days, or so, became a period of special spiritual growth in her life, which she never forgot.

Fasting from Other Things

There may be a medical or other reason why someone cannot fast in the traditional fashion. Or one may simply desire a different kind of blessing. The truth is, a fast can have a lot to do with self-control, and there are an infinite number of ways we could all use more self-control in our lives.

1. Stay away from television.
2. Do not watch or participate in a favorite sports event.
3. Don't read fiction or story books.
4. Spend time not doing or thinking about a particular hobby.
5. Don't tell jokes.
6. Do not engage in casual conversations.
7. Do not make sarcastic remarks.
8. Do not make any statements of criticism of anyone or any thing.
9. Do not engage in video games.
10. Do not take naps during the day.
11. Do not read the comics page or read the newspaper at all.

A couple might agree to abstain from sexual activity for a period of time, but only if both partners are participating in the fast. This is best done if the two are fasting and praying for the same spiritual goal.

Group Fasting

Many times in the Bible when a whole community or group was called to fast together. Local churches sometimes have a day of fasting and prayer, remaining in the church building and praying and singing together all Sabbath afternoon, or even all night. If this is done, it is advisable to offer a simple, light soup supper or something similar, for those who cannot fast all day. Church leaders must do their best to see no one is pressured or shamed into joining the fast. It will be of less benefit if some are there just because they think they have to be.

1. During a national day of prayer
2. A special Sabbath or other event requested by church leaders
3. A group within a larger congregation praying for a special goal
4. A fast from television or some other secular activity for a week

Handout 2

Isaiah 58 on Fasting

This chapter is often thought of only in the context of Sabbath-keeping, but in fact, it addresses many other spiritual disciplines, particularly fasting.

Verses 1-3—“Declare to My people their transgression ... their sins. They seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways ... They delight in the nearness of God. They say, ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’”

1Why is God not listening to their prayers?

What is God disappointed about here?

Do the people really delight in God’s nearness or want just decisions?

How can you tell?

Verses 3-5—“Behold, on the day of your fast you find your selfish desire, And drive hard all your workers. Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. ... Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to bow down? Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord?”

Have you ever felt God was ignoring your prayers?

Is it possible for a person to attend church and still harbor sin and selfishness?

What about prayer meeting?

Verses 6-7, 9-10—“Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free, And break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into a house, When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ... If you remove the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, And if you give yourself to the hungry, And satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then ...”

What do these things have to do with fasting?

What kind of fasting and prayer does God want?

Verses 8-11—“Then your light will break out like the dawn ... Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ Then your light will rise in darkness, And your gloom will become like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you, And satisfy your desire in scorched places, And give strength to your

bones; And you will be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water that does not fail.”

What is the promised result of true fasting?

Why does God insisted on social justice and practical compassion?

Is God asking us to “fast” (cease) from our prejudices against the poor and oppressed?

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