

Fasting in the Christian Life: Purpose, Practice, and Perspective

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Fasting is a spiritual discipline woven throughout Scripture, practiced by believers as a way to humble themselves before God, seek His will, and deepen their dependence on Him. While often misunderstood or misapplied, biblical fasting is not a tool to manipulate God, but a means of aligning the heart with His purposes. This paper explores the purpose of fasting, various ways it can be practiced, appropriate durations, and a concluding summary.

A. The Purpose of Fasting

Fasting in Scripture is always God-centered, not self-centered. It is less about abstaining from food and more about pursuing God with greater intensity.

1. To Humble Oneself Before God

- *Ezra 8:21* – “We humbled ourselves before our God.”
- Fasting expresses dependence, acknowledging our need for God.

2. To Seek God’s Guidance

- *Acts 13:2–3* – The church fasted before sending out missionaries.
- Fasting sharpens spiritual focus when direction is needed.

3. To Express Repentance

- *Jonah 3:5–10* – Nineveh fasted in response to God’s warning.
- It reflects genuine sorrow over sin and a desire to turn back to God.

4. To Intensify Prayer

- *Daniel 9:3* – Daniel fasted alongside earnest prayer.
- Fasting removes distractions and deepens prayer life.

5. To Prepare for Spiritual Ministry or Battle

- *Matthew 4:1–2* – Jesus fasted before facing temptation.
- It strengthens spiritual readiness and dependence on God.

6. To Seek Deliverance or Intervention

- *Esther 4:16* – Esther called for a fast before approaching the king.
- Fasting accompanies urgent appeals for God’s intervention.

7. To Worship and Draw Near to God

- *Luke 2:37* – Anna worshiped with fasting and prayer.
- Fasting can be an act of devotion and love toward God.

B. Seven Ways to Fast

The Bible shows flexibility in how fasting is practiced. Here are seven common forms:

1. Normal Fast

- Abstaining from all food, drinking only water.
- Example: Jesus (*Matthew 4:2*).

2. Absolute Fast

- No food or water (short duration only).
- Example: Esther (*Esther 4:16*).

3. Partial Fast

- Limiting diet rather than eliminating food.
- Example: Daniel (*Daniel 1:12; 10:3*).

4. Intermittent Fast

- Fasting during certain hours of the day.
- Example implied in Jewish fasting patterns (*Luke 18:12*).

5. Corporate Fast

- A group fasting together for a shared purpose.
- Example: Early church (*Acts 13:2–3*).

6. Private Fast

- Done individually and discreetly.

- *Matthew 6:16–18* – Jesus emphasizes sincerity over display.

7. Non-Food Fast (Practical Application)

- Abstaining from something significant (media, comforts, etc.) to focus on God.
- While not explicitly labeled in Scripture, it reflects the principle of self-denial (*1 Corinthians 9:27*).

C. How Long Should a Fast Be?

Scripture does not prescribe a single required length for fasting. Instead, duration varies depending on purpose, calling, and physical ability.

1. Short Fasts (1 Day or Less)

- Common in Scripture (*Judges 20:26*).
- Accessible and practical for most believers.

2. Medium-Length Fasts (3 Days)

- Example: Esther (*Esther 4:16*).
- Often connected to urgent needs.

3. Extended Fasts (7–21 Days)

- Example: Daniel’s 21-day fast (*Daniel 10:2–3*).
- Typically partial fasts.

4. Supernatural Fasts (40 Days)

- Example: Moses, Elijah, Jesus (*Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Matthew 4:2*).
- Not normative; requires divine enablement.

Guiding Principles

- Fasting should be **intentional**, not mechanical.
- It should be **guided by purpose**, not pressure.
- It must consider **health and wisdom**.
- The goal is **spiritual focus, not endurance**.

D. Summary

Fasting is a powerful but often misunderstood spiritual discipline designed to draw believers closer to God. Its purpose is not to earn favor or force outcomes, but to humble the heart, intensify prayer, and align one's will with God's purposes. Scripture demonstrates a variety of fasting methods, from complete abstinence to partial and corporate fasts, allowing flexibility for different circumstances. The length of a fast is not rigidly defined but should be guided by spiritual intent, wisdom, and physical ability. Ultimately, fasting is about replacing physical dependence with spiritual dependence—shifting attention from earthly needs to eternal priorities and deepening one's relationship with God.

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