

## **Fasting 201-4**

Humans often get addicted to a lot of different things, even things that start as something good for us, like eating. Many people believe Americans are obsessed with food and eating. We have all heard of the popularity of the Food Network and how junk food is a serious staple in most Western diets.

In his book "*Salt, Sugar, Fat*," author Michael Moss describes how some of this nation's largest food producers have carefully studied how to convince us to crave junk food. Big-name producers, including Campbell Soup, General Foods, Kraft, Pepsi, and others, have hired "*crave consultants*" to help them determine how craving for food can be optimized. But Americans are not nearly as obsessed with food and eating as the Romans were.

The ancient Roman Empire celebrated 76 different feasts annually. That's averaging one and a half feasts per week. Romans were so obsessed with food that in 46 BC, Emperor Julius Caesar placed a limit on the amount of money someone could personally spend on food.

Scripture also discusses a spiritual discipline called *fasting*.

David Earley, Pastor, New Life Community Baptist Church, said, "*You should try to make **fasting** a regular discipline in your life by planning to **fast** on a weekly or monthly basis.*"

*You should also try to plan special events to pray for longer times or go to a special place for prayer and **fasting**.*”

**Fasting** is not just about going without food, but it is a spiritual **discipline** that deeply connects us with the Lord through intentional abstinence.

The Greek word translated as **fasting** is "*nestia*," which means “not to eat.” So, **fasting** is abstaining from eating food or abstaining from something else. **Fasting** as a spiritual discipline means denying the flesh for a time, so we can clearly hear from the Lord.

Some people try to **mystify** the spiritual discipline of **fasting**, but **fasting** helps us to focus on our relationship with the LORD by temporarily setting aside physical appetites and praying. By **fasting**, we also humble ourselves before the LORD, as we turn over our temptations to Him, and seek to draw closer to the LORD, experiencing spiritual strength given by His Spirit.

As we **fast**, we deliberately deny the power our flesh has over us, as we are strengthened in our relationship with the Lord by **denying** ourselves. **Fasting** is like turning the volume down of our flesh and turning it up in the spirit.

In His famous sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed **fasting**. **Fasting** has been a spiritual practice seen throughout the Bible, with examples from Moses to Jesus, showing us why and how to **fast**.

The ancient Pharisees were a strict sect during the first century of some 6,000 Jewish males. And those men prided themselves on being more spiritual than non-Pharisees. In fact, the Pharisees looked down on those who were not a part of their group. These men were legalistic, judgmental, hypercritical, self-righteous, religious snobs.

Jesus taught **against fasting** as a way to appear righteous.

*Matthew 6:16, "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.*

*Matthew 6:17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,*

*Matthew 6:18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." NKJV*

Jesus said, "*When we **fast**, we are not to be like those hypocritical Pharisees, and we are not to make a big public thing out of our **fasting**.*"

We ought to seem normal in public. It isn't wrong to admit to someone during a conversation, "*We're **fasting**.*" It's not wrong to mention that, but to purposely appear downtrodden to reveal to everybody that you are fasting, you have the heavenly reward for **fasting**.

We can tell someone if there's a legitimate reason to do that, that's fine. But it's wrong to make a big deal out of it and advertise it and call attention to ourselves.

Although fasting is not commanded, it seems to be expected as a part of someone's normal Christian experience. Jesus said, "*When you fast*," not "If you *fast*." Jesus assumed that as Christians, we would want to *fast*.

I need to emphasize that *fasting* is not mandatory for Christians. One mandatory *fast* found in scripture was addressed to the ancient nation of Israel during the annual Day of Atonement found in *Leviticus 16*. Now the Day of Atonement is the same as the Jewish holiday Yom Kippur, and at that time, the people were **commanded** to *fast* from sunrise until sunset.

Since Jesus died to be the ultimate sacrifice to end all animal sacrifices for sin, there is now no more need for a Day of Atonement. For Christians, the necessity to celebrate Yom Kippur ended at the **Cross**.

Committed Jewish people still consider Yom Kippur the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Dodger baseball fans remember the famous Jewish Hall of Fame pitcher Sandy Koufax. He made the decision not to pitch game one of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur, and he wanted to observe the holiday.

A Christian can *fast* from television, movies, the **internet**, social media, or physical intimacy with their spouse for a time.

*1 Corinthians 7:4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.*

*1 Corinthians 7:5 Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. NKJV*

One theologian said, "*The purpose of such abstinence, meaning abstinence from food and other things as we just mentioned, is to loosen to some degree the ties that bind us to our material surroundings as a whole so that we might concentrate all of our powers and energies upon the unseen and eternal things.*"

Some believers struggle to understand how to **fast**, wondering about the biblical duration of a **fast**, what to **fast** from, and how to connect with the Lord during their **fast**. There are different ways of **fasting** from food. Some people cannot do a **complete fast** for medical reasons, and others are not used to **fasting**, so they have to ease their way into it. Some people fast from solid foods while maintaining a juice **fast**. Some people fast from everything nutritional, including juices, while only drinking water or coffee.

An absolute **fast** means to abstain from all food and liquids.

A partial **fast** might involve abstaining from just certain foods. Meaning, not abstaining from all food, but abstaining from just some foods.

*Daniel 1* describes how Daniel and his three Hebrew friends were asked to eat from Nebuchadnezzar's table and how those men **refused**. Those Hebrew men did not want to defile themselves by eating food that was off limits to them, food that was prohibited according to ancient Jewish dietary standards. It wasn't kosher food, so Daniel and his friends said they didn't want to eat the Babylonian food, and instead, they asked to participate in a ten-day case study.

During the ten-day case study, Daniel and his friends only drank water and ate only a type of vegetable called pulse. Those four men refused to eat the meat and wine from Nebuchadnezzar's table, so that essentially constituted a partial *fast*. After those ten days, Daniel and his friends ended up in better condition than those men who ate the king's diet.

If a partial *fast* is practiced today, people abstain from eating parts of a meal or certain foods. Methodism's founder, John Wesley, sometimes ate only bread when he *fasted*, so he practiced a partial fast.

Al Henson, Pastor of Lighthouse Baptist Church, said, “*You can make a difference by **fasting**, because when you make a **vow** to seek God and pray, you can turn around circumstances.*”

*You need a clear burden from God, a determination to know God, a rock-solid choice to hunger and thirst after God's answer while you **fast** from food.*

*You will receive power to **fast** and pray after you decide to **fast** and pray.”*

*1 Samuel 31:13* mentions a 7-day fast.

*Daniel 10:3* mentions a 3-week *fast*.

Moses *fasted* on at least two recorded 40-day periods.

In *Matthew 4:2*, we read how **Jesus** Himself fasted for forty consecutive days just before Satan tempted Him.

Since the lengths of biblical fasting differ, there is no standardized, required length of time for a fast. Scripture doesn't specify how long we should *fast* or how **often** we should *fast*, so it is up to us as individuals to make those determinations as the Lord leads us.

Earnest prayer should be made often during *fasting*, while we intensify our focus on our petitions.

Read *1 Samuel 1:1-11*

1. Hannah fasted for a **specific** purpose (*vs. 11*).

Hannah wanted a son, and so she *fasted* as she called on the Lord.

2. Hannah spent authentic time **praying** while *fasting* (*vs. 10*).

You must seek the Lord and intercede. Hannah prayed unto the Lord and wept.

Dr. Jerry Falwell said, “*On April 25, 1985 (12 years ago), over 5,000 students on Liberty Mountain fasted for one day and prayed for the healing of Vernon Brewer, the Dean of Students.*

*He was loved by the students, so they **fasted** and prayed. Vernon had cancer and was given 6 months to live. He’s alive and well 12 years later because of prayer and **fasting**.”*

3. Hannah knew the **God** to whom she ***fasted*** (vs. 3).

When you call on the Lord, you must realize He is “***The Lord of Hosts***,” the God of Angel Armies, who is all-powerful and nothing is too difficult for Him.

***Jeremiah 32:17 'Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You. NKJV***

The size of your God determines the size of your belief in whether He can answer your request.

4. Hannah knew the **motives** of her ***fast***.

Hannah wanted a child for two reasons. First, she wanted to please her husband, yet she was barren. Second, her husband had another wife, Peninnah, who taunted her and made fun of her daily. It drove Hannah to tears.

Because of these two reasons, she agonized while seeking the Lord. Sometimes the Lord allows things in our lives that cause us to pray more fervently.

While *fasting*, we disconnect from material things, even necessities, for a short time so we can focus on the eternal.

Let me mention some other biblical characters who *fasted*. We have already mentioned Moses, Hannah, and Jesus. Other biblical characters are Elijah, Ahab, Nehemiah, David, Jeremiah, Jehoshaphat, Daniel, Samson, Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, Ezra, Esther, Anna, Barnabas, Cornelius, and Paul.

In addition to those miscellaneous characters, though, there are a number of famous personalities outside of the biblical record that have also participated and *fasted*.

In 1994, Bill Bright completed a 40-day *fast*. Bill Bright was the founder of the largest parachurch organization at the time, known as Campus Crusade for Christ, on the UCLA campus in 1951. Before Mr. Bright died from cancer in 2003, in the last months of his life, he completed another 40-day *fast*.

I believe many people dislike the feeling that *fasting* brings because hunger is an unpleasant sensation. It isn't necessarily wrong to want to feel good, but the desire to feel good shouldn't control what we do and what we don't do. So, there is a **time** for *fasting*. Food is good, and food is from God, but there are times when it is better to abstain from eating food to seek the Lord and to grow closer to Him.

Some people *fast* to find penitence for their sins.

There has to be a biblical or spiritual reason for *fasting*, or else it isn't considered biblical *fasting*. Our motive for *fasting* determines the reward we get from our fasting. Our motive and reasoning for *fasting* determine the reward we get.

There are probably more strategic biblical reasons to *fast* than we can count. And we only have enough time to mention some of them.

Legitimate sadness and grief are causes to *fast*, especially if the things that break God's heart are breaking ours.

Remorse and repentance for some sin is a cause for a *fast*.

Desiring specific direction from God is a cause for a *fast*.

Resolving interpersonal conflict is a cause for a *fast*. And the list goes on and on and on.

But if we stop eating just to stop eating for no biblical reason, there's no spiritual content; there will be no direct spiritual benefit derived from that *fast*.

*Fasting* is not a criterion for being spiritual because *fasting* has no spiritual value in and of itself. Someone is not more spiritual during the times he does not eat, as opposed to the times he eats.

*Romans 14:17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. NKJV*

***Romans 14:17*** teaches us that the kingdom of God is not food and drink, meaning that what we put into our bodies or don't put into our bodies is not the subject or substance of spirituality.

Again, ***fasting*** is optional, non-compulsory, and voluntary; it is not evidence of someone's spiritual state at a given moment. But if we are interested in ***fasting*** for the right reasons, then there are some practical steps to take.

Before ***fasting***, we should spiritually and **physically** prepare ourselves.

We spiritually prepare to ***fast*** with prayer and Bible study, to align our hearts with the Lord and His purposes. Set aside some time to pray, asking the Lord for guidance and strength.

Read ***Isaiah 58*** to help prepare your heart, while asking ourselves about the motivation for ***fasting***. We should examine our hearts and seek the Lord.

It is also helpful to **journal** your thoughts and prayers before and during your ***fast***.

We can also seek **accountability** from a spiritual mentor who understands biblical ***fasting***.

As for physical preparation, we should hydrate correctly and ask a medical doctor about our limitations while ***fasting***.

We should also be careful with our caffeine consumption to avoid withdrawals that can distract from spiritual focus.

***Fasting*** is an intentional act of **worship**, a way to humble ourselves before the Lord, and it helps a person to know and focus on His will for our lives.

Preparing our hearts, minds, and bodies is crucial before ***fasting***.

We must understand that ***fasting*** is not about performing for the Lord but about seeking His presence. If we seek the Lord and ***fast*** with the correct motivation, we will naturally surrender to Him and His will. As we ***fast***, we will be taught lessons from him and learn to abide in His love.

***John 15:4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.***

***John 15:5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. NKJV***

In conclusion, before we ***fast***, we should understand the purpose of Biblical fasting, as well as our personal motivation to ***fast***. Remember, there are different types of ***fasts*** in the Bible, and we should choose one that aligns with our spiritual goal and physical ability. Again, we should prepare spiritually, physically, and mentally.

Before ***fasting***, pray and ask God to reveal areas we need to deal with spiritually, and ***fast*** with an expectation that the Lord will direct and answer us.

When we **fast**, we should eliminate distractions, such as social media, TV, and unnecessary noise. We desire **fasting** to replace distractions with God's presence.

**Fasting** without prayer is unprofitable.

Jesus said in *Matthew 4:4*, "***It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'***" NKJV

**Fasting** quiets the **flesh** and allows us to hear the Lord more clearly, so, if possible, separate yourself from worldly things while **fasting**. Even Jesus withdrew to pray, to be alone with the Father.

And finally, trust the Lord for the results while **fasting**, but we do not **fast** to earn God's favor or as a **work** of salvation. Read this excerpt that was taken from the book, *A Hunger for God, Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer*. (John Piper)

*What's new about Christian fasting is that it rests on all this finished work of the Bridegroom. It assumes that. It believes that. It enjoys that.*

*The aching and yearning and longing for Christ and His power that drive us to **fasting** are not the expression of emptiness.*

*Need, yes. Pain, yes. Hunger for God, yes. But not emptiness.*

*The firstfruits of what we long for have already come. The down payment of what we yearn for is already paid.*

*The fullness that we are longing for and **fasting** for has appeared in history, and we have beheld his glory. It is not merely the future.*

*We do not **fast** out of emptiness. Christ is already in us, the hope of glory (**Colossians 1:27**).*

*We have been “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is [now!] the **guarantee** of our inheritance” (**Ephesians 1:13–14**; see also **2 Corinthians 1:22**; **5:5**).*

*We have tasted the powers of the age to come, and our **fasting** is not because we are hungry for something we have not experienced, but because the new wine of Christ’s presence is so real and so satisfying.*

*We must have all that is possible to have. The newness of our **fasting** is this: its intensity comes not because we have never tasted the wine of Christ’s presence, but because we have tasted it so wonderfully by his Spirit and cannot now be satisfied until the consummation of joy arrives.*

*The new **fasting**, the Christian **fasting**, is a **hunger** for all the fullness of God (**Ephesians 3:19**), aroused by the aroma of Jesus’ love and by the taste of God’s goodness in the gospel of Christ (**1 Peter 2:2–3**).*