

REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

FASTING

for Spiritual
Breakthrough

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A Practical Guide to
NINE
BIBLICAL
FASTS

ELMER L. TOWNS



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Note: The fasts suggested in this book are not for everyone. Consult your physician before beginning. Expectant mothers, diabetics, and others with a history of medical problems can enter the spirit of fasting while remaining on essential diets. While fasting is healthful to many, the nature of God would not command a physical exercise that would harm people physically or emotionally.

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Foreword

by Jentezen Franklin

From the beginning of my ministry over thirty years ago, fasting has been a part of the fabric of my life. For me, fasting has been the secret to obtaining open doors, miraculous provision, favor, and the tender touch of God on my life. I was on a three-day fast when God called me to preach. I was on a 21-day fast when our ministry received its first million-dollar gift. When I was an evangelist, my brother and I traveled together, and we would rotate nights when we would preach. When it was his night, I would fast for him, and when it was my night, he would fast for me. We went from obscurity to doors opening all over the world through the power of fasting.

Since I've been a pastor, our church begins each year with a 21-day fast. We have seen great spiritual breakthroughs because our people united together in sacrificial prayer and fasting for great projects and moves of God. Free Chapel grew from that first building on Browns Bridge Road that held about 150 worshipers to our present 3,200-seat worship center. Not only do we fill it twice each Sunday, but we have gone on to open four additional

campuses and launch an online church as well. Fasting has become a lifestyle that unlocks heaven's door and slams shut the gates of hell.

When we were a small group of people fasting and praying to reach the world, I never expected we would have five physical auditoriums with over 15,000 worshipers each Sunday. God has given breakthroughs that we never expected, and each new year we begin with that same 21-day fast asking God for more.

Then, simultaneously, over 20 years ago God also opened the door to an international television outreach. As a small church we fasted and prayed to reach unsaved people, plus God's "other sheep" (John 10:16), those people all over the world who needed to learn more about God and His love. Today we televise our Kingdom Connection ministry to over 80 nations and are on some of the biggest television networks in the world.

I believe in fasting because I've seen what happens when my congregation joins me in fasting for 21 days every January. I've seen miraculous healing in answer to prayer and fasting. I have seen addictions fall off people and families restored . . . all during and after our annual 21-day fast. I've seen millions of dollars raised in answer to prayer and fasting. God has intervened in wonderful ways because our people have a heart for God as expressed in sacrificial fasting.

But we are not just getting things from God by fasting. We fast as a lifestyle because we know it pleases God when we meet Him in worship. Fasting is an expression of a heart of gratitude and a life lived totally dependent upon Him. We fast to demonstrate to God that we want to separate ourselves from the clutches and lusts of this world. Fasting and holiness go hand in hand.

One of my fasting mentors over the years has been Elmer Towns. This book, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*, has meant more to me than anything I have read outside the Bible. There is more here than anywhere else about fasting and the many expressions of fasting for many different reasons, and for different lengths of time and different kinds of foods, while seeking God. I know it

will broaden your understanding and motivate you to fast for your own spiritual breakthroughs.

When heaven is shut up and your prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling, fasting may be the one thing you can do to get answers from God. When the clock is ticking and you must have an answer, it's time to get serious and fast with your prayers. Fasting is for those who need a miracle, but it's also a foundational teaching of the Bible. After Jesus taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer, He continued by saying, "When you fast . . ." (Matt. 6:16). Jesus modeled and taught fasting as a discipline to be honored. I encourage you to read this book and begin your great adventure of fasting for your breakthrough.

In Christ,

Jentezen Franklin
Pastor, Free Chapel
Gainesville, Georgia

Acknowledgments

The material in this book was taught in the Pastor’s Bible Class at Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia, during the summer of 1995. Thank you, class, for listening to my lessons and sharing with me the things you have learned about fasting. I wrote each chapter as I taught a lesson. For the most part, it was not the older Christians but the younger people who most talked with me about this series and tried the things I taught. I have learned much about fasting by looking at it through the eyes of my students.

I am indebted to my pastor, the late Jerry Falwell, for the insights he gave me about fasting, especially from his book *Fasting: What the Bible Teaches*; to various individuals who typed this manuscript; and to Dr. Douglas Porter for library research for the glossary and appendices.

The late Rex Russell, MD, made a great medical contribution to this book.

Except for those who are physically unable, I require every student who takes my course on “Spiritual Factors of Church Ministry” at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary to fast. Students must discipline themselves to fast one day, keep a prayer list, attempt a faith event and write a spiritual journal. As I’ve read their papers,

Acknowledgments

these students have taught me much about how to fast and what to avoid during a fast.

I want to give credit to Pastor Jentezen Franklin of Free Chapel, Gainesville, Georgia, who calls his church to a 21-day fast every January to prepare for the new year. His worship services are televised across America and in 30 nations around the world. I've read over 20 of his sermons on fasting. They do more than instruct in fasting. They motivate the listener to make a pledge to fast . . . seek God's presence . . . and trust God for miraculous answers to prayers. He has put into action the things I explain in this book.

Every manuscript is the product of many experiences. I have listened to sermons about fasting, read many books and talked to many who have fasted. All of these have influenced me, and I give credit to every one, not the least, the Holy Spirit, who has guided me, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who has been my example. Remember, He fasted 40 days before beginning His ministry. In the final analysis, for all of the omissions and mistakes in this text, I take final responsibility. May God use this book for His intended purpose.

Elmer L. Towns

Introduction

If you seek a closer walk with God, this book is for you. At first glance you may not think so, because the discipline of *fasting* has fallen into such widespread disuse that people do not know its power. But let me tell you about an experience that occurred to my secretary, Shelly Seager, and her husband, Dave, as Shelly was typing this manuscript.

Dave had been asked to interview for a job in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Shelly described this position as “an opportunity of a lifetime.” Dave really wanted the position. So they agreed to do something they had never tried. They fasted 24 hours and spent much time in prayer. (Biblically, prayer and fasting go together.)

The morning after Dave had spent extra time in prayer, the long-distance call came.

It was from Harrisburg. They offered him the position.

Of course, I am not going to guarantee that every circumstance in your life can be “fixed” by fasting. I do, however, insist that modern Christians need to take another look at why this classic spiritual discipline has been neglected in our day.

Richard Foster, the author who has awakened so many people to the spiritual disciplines, has said that there had not been a single book on fasting published between 1861 and 1954, nearly 100 years.¹

Why?

Perhaps people are so into “feel-good religion” that we don’t want to be bothered with any thought of hunger or self-denial. Perhaps our confidence in activism, such as splashy evangelistic programs, to virtually bring in the Kingdom of God has made us forget the spiritual factors in winning people to Christ. Perhaps the widespread promise that “you can have it all” has blocked all thought of sacrifice from our minds.

As Foster also suggests, some Christians may have been turned off to fasting because of the way a few monks and ascetics in the past fasted.² They fasted in ways that fell into the old gnostic trap of declaring that matter (such as food and the body) is evil and only the spiritual is good. Thus we may think fasting is a part of the outlook that any enjoyment of God’s good earthly gifts is tantamount to sin. This trap, of course, is not an argument against the actual practice of fasting, but against its abuse.

The disciples of John the Baptist (noted for their practice of fasting) once asked Jesus why His disciples did not fast. “Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?’” (Matt. 9:15 NIV). The answer was obvious. As long as Jesus was present with His disciples, they didn’t fast. Jesus then said, “The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast” (v. 15 NIV).

Obviously, the bridegroom is no longer present in His physical body on earth; He was taken up to heaven at the ascension (see Acts 1:9). *Jesus assumed that after He ascended into heaven, those who believed in Him would fast*: “Then shall they fast in those days” (Mark 2:20 κJV). So Jesus commands us today, “Moreover when ye fast” (Matt. 6:16 κJV). Now that the bridegroom has been taken from us, we should discipline ourselves to enjoy something of the closeness to Him enjoyed by the original disciples when they walked and talked daily with their Lord.

I know fasting can not only draw us closer to the bridegroom, but it can also accomplish beneficial results in the lives of others with deep needs. While my pastor, Jerry Falwell, was alive,

he raised enormous amounts of money by calling on people to fast. My church fasts, and I have seen God intervene in a time of a national crisis. The students who fast at Liberty University have fasted for spiritual breakthroughs. In 1985 almost every one of the 5,000 students fasted for physical healing for Dean of Students Vernon Brewer from cancer, and now over 30 years later he remains alive and effectively ministering through World Help, especially through foreign missions. I know God honors prayers and fasts.

Because so many people are unfamiliar with the variety of ways to fast, you will find suggestions at the end of each chapter about how to undertake each of the nine fasts suggested in this book. These sections should be considered as general guidelines only. Fasting is not a legalistic discipline, but should be adapted to each worshiper's individual purpose. Ultimately, you yourself must determine the length of your fast, what if anything you should eat or drink and other aspects related to your particular fast. Primarily, however, this book is intended to describe the *purposes* and show you the *results* of fasting. It is written to show how fasting can enable you to become an overcomer, to increase your faith and to accomplish great things in the lives of others. But most of all, fast to touch God and be touched by Him.

Although I do not think fasting is mandatory for believers today, I do believe the discipline is available to strengthen you spiritually and to give you the breakthrough that might keep you living the victorious Christian life.

At such a time as this, a major book on the spiritual discipline of fasting is needed. Why?

- Because more than ever before, believers are in bondage to demonic powers and need deliverance to stand against sin (see The Disciple's Fast).
- Because believers throughout the world need to solve complex problems and threatening situations they are facing (see The Ezra Fast).

- Because the Church is in desperate need of revival, and every tribe and tongue and nation is in desperate need of evangelization (see The Samuel Fast).
- Because the world in general and the Church in particular are crying out for people of character and integrity—people who have found in Christ the emotional healing and strength to overcome sinful and destructive habits (see The Elijah Fast).
- Because the abundance of food has insulated North American believers from the realities of starvation and malnutrition in the two-thirds world (see The Widow’s Fast).
- Because the media has so captured the national attention that even believers are operating according to principles completely alien to God’s will for their lives (see The Saint Paul Fast).
- Because even with the abundance of food and medical technology in North America, people are not necessarily healthier (see The Daniel Fast).
- Because a great many believers have become so entangled in economic and social pursuits that they need to be set free to establish their testimonies and to influence others for Christ (see The John the Baptist Fast).
- Because of the growing influence of demonic forces and the waning influence of biblical Christianity in North America, believers need protection from the evil one (see The Esther Fast).

In addition to this last point, the time is long past when Christians could bask in the warmth of an evangelical Protestant consensus in North America. Our culture has become post-Christian and militantly pluralistic. Our culture is little by little losing the influence of the Bridegroom. We need to fast to reestablish contact with Him.

Are you serious enough about the personal and social tasks before you as a Christian to take up the discipline of fasting? If so,

you can expect resistance, interference and opposition. Plan for it. Do not be caught unawares. Remember that you are attempting to advance in your spiritual journey and to gain ground for the Kingdom. This means taking ground away from the enemy—and no great movement of the Holy Spirit goes unchallenged by the enemy.

I encourage you to find a prayer partner who will stand with you when you fast—to offer intercession for you as you endeavor to seek the Lord through this spiritual discipline (Matt. 18:19).

It is important to remember that fasting is a physical discipline. Consult your physician before beginning to fast. Not everyone should fast. Not everyone should fast for more than one day at a time. Not everyone should attempt all nine fasts suggested in this book. The fast is simply a tool that may be used to glorify God and realize answers to prayer. You can get the same results without fasting if your heart is perfectly prepared. If not, and you are physically healthy, a fast may be God's answer.

My Hope for You

I have great visions for this book. Like a parent giving birth to a new baby, every author sees his new volume as something so special that it will change the world. I want every Christian in the world to learn to fast—to fast properly—and to fast for results.

If every Christian fasted, the results could shake our society like a windstorm bending a sapling. Christians would demonstrate that they live differently, that their faith is imperative, that the Almighty works in their daily lives.

If all our churches fasted, they would move forward in evangelism and reach out in feeding and helping others. God would then pour His presence upon His people.

1

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The Fasts God Chooses

From the beginning, people have pursued God. They wrongly built the Ziggurat (tower) of Babel to reach Him (Gen. 11:1–9). They rebelliously carved images to please God. They arrogantly conceived and lived by legalistic laws to impress God. They constructed monasteries and isolated themselves to please God. As we shall see, they even fasted wrongly in an attempt to divert His attention from things they were doing and shouldn't have been doing.

It's important to note that religious practices such as fasting are less important than doing God's will. As Micah 6:8 points out, what the Lord truly requires of us is devotion to Himself: "To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." Fasting is not an end in itself; it is a means by which we can worship the Lord and submit ourselves in humility to Him. We don't make God love us any more than He already does if we fast, or if we fast longer. As Galatians states, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage" (5:1). The goal of any discipline is freedom. If the result is not greater freedom, something is wrong.

Even if we wanted to, we could not manipulate God. We fast and pray for results, but the results are in God's hands. One of the greatest spiritual benefits of fasting is becoming more attentive to God—becoming more aware of our own inadequacies and His adequacy, our own contingencies and His self-sufficiency—and listening to what He wants us to be and do.

Christian fasting, therefore, is totally antithetical to, say, Hindu fasting. Both seek results; however, Hindu fasting focuses on the self and tries to get something for a perceived sacrifice. Christian fasting focuses on God. The results are spiritual results that glorify God—both in the person who fasts and in others for whom we fast and pray.

God's Purpose for Fasting

In this book I have focused on the well-known and often quoted passage of Scripture in Isaiah 58:6–8, which gives a veritable laundry list of warnings as well as positive results that can occur when we submit ourselves to the discipline of fasting.

It is as important to learn from this passage the kinds of fasts that do *not* please God as it is to understand those fasts He desires. God's people in Isaiah's day had been fasting, but without results. The reason, God says, is that *they ignored the way fasting should change their lives*, treating it as an empty ritual:

On the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

Isa. 58:3–4 NIV

Like so many Christians today, God's people considered worship to be merely a private, inward act. All of the focus on fasting was on the personal dimension. Listen to God's rebuke of this concept:

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

v. 5 NIV

Obviously, God's answer was "No!" These were not acceptable fasts to God. The purpose of all worship, including fasting, is to change the worshiper in ways that have social and interpersonal impact. We worship not just to gratify ourselves, but also to please the Father (Heb. 11:6). We fast to change ourselves and the world! God goes on to specify the kind of fast He chooses:

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

Isa. 58:6–8 KJV

We must not interpret the earlier verses in this passage as a call to a "social gospel" in the sense that would deny the importance of personal, heartfelt worship. God was not asking His people to stop fasting. Far from it—He wanted His people to continue fasting, but to fast from the heart in a way that influenced their everyday lives. Through the prophet Joel, God called His people to "Turn to Me with all your heart, *with fasting*" (Joel 2:12, emphasis mine). Then to make sure they understood, God said, "Don't tear your clothing . . . tear your hearts instead" (Joel 2:13 NLT).

Isaiah 58 gives us a model for the way we can gain genuine faith and devotion. Rightly used, fasting can help us present those fruits to the Lord. Thus, the passage prompts us to find these nine kinds

of fasts in other places in Scripture. Christians should rediscover today—not just for their own sake, but for the sake of others as well as the total benefits of fasting. Let’s look at the passage again, listing the nine aspects that will be the basis for the rest of this book.

In Isaiah 58, God says He has chosen fasts that (1) loosen the bonds of wickedness, (2) undo heavy burdens, (3) let the oppressed go free, (4) break every yoke, (5) give bread to the hungry, clothe the naked and provide the poor with housing, (6) allow God’s light to break forth like the morning, (7) to cause healing and health to spring forth speedily, (8) cause their righteous testimony to go before them and (9) make the glory of the Lord to be their rereward (or “protection”).

Four Kinds of Fasting

The nine fasts described in this book are merely suggestive of a variety of ways to practice this helpful discipline. There are probably as many ways to fast as there are ways to pray—obviously, there is no set number in either case. The following four kinds of fasts, however, taken from Dr. Rex Russell’s book *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, are good guidelines for you to follow or modify as God directs.

1. The *normal fast* is going without food for a definite period during which you ingest only liquids (water and/or juice). The duration can be one day, three days, one week, one month or 40 days. Extreme care should be taken with longer fasts, which should only be attempted after medical advice from your physician.
2. The *absolute fast* allows no food or water at all, and should be short. Moses fasted for 40 days; but this would kill anyone without supernatural intervention, and should never be attempted today. Be sure to test the spirit that tries to talk you into a 40-day fast, even if it includes liquids.

3. The *partial fast* is one that omits certain foods or is on a schedule that includes limited eating. It may consist of omitting one meal a day. Eating only fresh vegetables for several days is also a good partial fast. John Wesley ate only bread (whole grain) and drank only water for many days. Elijah practiced partial fasts at least twice. John the Baptist and Daniel with his three friends are other examples of those who participated in partial fasts. People who have hypoglycemia or other diseases might consider this kind of fast.
4. A *rotational fast* consists of eating or omitting certain families of foods for designated periods. For example, grains may be eaten only every fourth day. The various food families are rotated so that some food is available each day.

Physical Benefits of Fasting

The spirit and the body are so interrelated in God's creative design that fasting has both spiritual and physical benefits. Russell's book describes several tangible benefits to fasting that are good to know before we begin.

Russell notes that just as the seventh day was designated as a day of rest at Creation, so the very cells of our bodies may need a rest from food. One of the main benefit of a night's sleep is rest for our digestive systems. We call, appropriately enough, the first meal of the day *breakfast*.

Dr. Russell notes that our bodies were designed to respond to sickness by fasting and fever! When we are sick we usually don't want to think about eating but to snuggle down in the covers and be left alone. We work hard to lower a high temperature because it causes us to ache, motivating us to seek the bed rather than the table. Rest, fever and fasting are parts of God's design to fight infection.

God designed our bodies to heal themselves at the level of the cells, Dr. Russell observes. These healing processes use proteins,

carbohydrates and fats to gain calories and nutrients, yet each of the ways these substances are utilized produces waste products. The cells have built-in ways to clear this waste, and apparently they can be overloaded. Fasting helps unclog the system and eliminate poisons. It is encouraging to know that the same God who designed the discipline of fasting designed our bodies to be benefited by periods of abstinence from food (see appendix 1).¹

A Brief History of Fasting

Christians who accept the invitation to fast have the unique privilege of identifying with some of the great heroes of faith throughout the ages. Fasting has a varied and interesting past.

Fasting in the Old Testament

The word *fast* is derived from the Hebrew term *tsom*, which refers to the practice of self-denial. The New Testament uses the Greek word *nesteia* to describe fasting, also referring to self-denial.

Most scholars believe that the practice of fasting began with the loss of appetite during times of great distress and duress. Hannah, who would later become the mother of Samuel, was so distressed about her barrenness that “she wept and did not eat” (1 Sam. 1:7). Also, when King Ahab failed in his attempt to purchase Naboth’s vineyard, he “would eat no food” (1 Kings 21:4).

Fasting apparently began as a natural expression of grief; however, after time it became customary to reflect or prove one’s grief to others by abstaining from food and/or showing sorrow. David fasted to demonstrate his grief at Abner’s death (see 2 Sam. 3:35). Many references in Scripture describe fasting as “afflicting” one’s soul or body (see Isa. 58:3, 5). Fasting came to be practiced as an external means of demonstrating and later encouraging an internal feeling of remorse for sin.

Fasting was a perfectly natural human expression of human grief; therefore, it became a religious custom to placate the anger of God. People began fasting to turn away God's anger from destroying them. Eventually, fasting became a basis for making one's petition effective to God. David defended his fasting before the death of his son by Bathsheba, indicating his hope that while the child lived David's prayer might be answered. When the child died, David promptly ended his fast, denoting that he knew then that neither fasting nor praying could any longer avail (see 2 Sam. 12:15–23).

When God vented His wrath against a nation for its wickedness, fasting became a national mode of seeking divine favor and protection. Therefore, it was only natural that a group of people should associate themselves in confession, fasting, sorrow for sin and intercession to God.

Fasting in the New Testament

In the New Testament, fasting was a widely practiced discipline, especially among the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus began His public ministry with an extended fast of 40 days (Matt. 4:1–2). As we have noted, when the apostles of Jesus were criticized by both the Pharisees and John the Baptist's disciples for not fasting, Jesus defended their not fasting while He was present, but implied that they would fast after He was taken from them (Matt. 9:14–15).

Jesus gave His disciples no specific guidelines concerning the frequency of fasting. He taught that their fasting should differ from that of the Pharisees in that they should fast to God rather than to impress others with their supposed spirituality (Matt. 6:16–18).

Fasting was later practiced in the New Testament Church, especially when ordaining elders and/or designating people for special ministry projects (Acts 13:1–3). Fasting was apparently practiced by Paul and other Christian leaders fairly regularly (1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 6:5).

Fasting in the Early Church

Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, born in AD 315, asked, “Who does not know that the fast of the fourth and sixth days of the week are observed by the Christians throughout the world?” Early in the history of the Church, Christians began fasting twice weekly, choosing Wednesdays and Fridays to prevent being confused with the Pharisees, who fasted Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The practice of fasting for several days (40) before Easter to prepare spiritually for the celebration of Christ’s resurrection was also commonly practiced, called Lent. Later, this fast took the form of a series of one-day fasts each week for several weeks prior to Easter. Remnants of these Early Church fasts are seen in the Catholic traditions of shunning meats other than fish on Fridays, and the observation of Lent during the 40-day period prior to Easter. It was also customary for Christians in the post-apostolic period to fast in preparation for their baptisms.

Fasting in Revival Movements

The discipline of fasting has long been associated with reform and revivalistic movements in Christianity. The founders of the monastic movement practiced fasting as a regular discipline in their spiritual lives. Although later monasticism grew to practice fasting and other forms of asceticism in a vain attempt to achieve salvation, it is probable that the earliest monks fasted in their desire for the Church to experience revival and reform.

Each of the sixteenth-century reformers also practiced fasting, as did the leaders of the evangelical revivals in the centuries to follow. Jonathan Edwards fasted for 22 hours prior to preaching his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” During the Laymen’s Prayer Revival in America in 1859, Christians fasted during their lunch hours and attended prayer meetings in churches near their places of employment. This prayer revival broke out in the large industrial cities of the northeastern United States.

Prayer was often accompanied by fasting as people sought the Lord for spiritual blessing during the worldwide awakening in 1906. Billy Graham reports fasting and praying during his voyage to England to conduct his first British crusades in the early 1950s. The response in his meetings at that time has been described as one of the greatest revivals of our time. Many revival movements have advocated a return to the early Christian practice of fasting two days each week.

Fasting for Divine Intervention

Periodically, political leaders have declared a national day of prayer and fasting for divine intervention in crisis situations. In 1588, the churches in England fasted and prayed before the victory of Sir Francis Drake over the Spanish Armada. It was widely recognized by the English as an act of divine intervention.

The pilgrims fasted the day before disembarking from the Mayflower in 1620, as they prepared to establish a mission colony to reach the native peoples of North America. It was common for political leaders in many New England villages to call for a fast when they faced a crisis.

Friday, February 6, 1756, was designated a day of solemn fasting and prayer in England over war with France. Lincoln also called for a national day of prayer and fasting during the Civil War. On both occasions, military victories by England and the northern states of the United States were viewed as divine interventions by those who fasted and prayed for those successes.

Similar days of prayer and fasting have been proclaimed by political leaders as recently as World War II. In the midst of the Battle of Britain, George VI designated Sunday, September 8, 1940, as a day of prayer and fasting. In a radio broadcast made days after the day of prayer, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill compared Britain's state with the earlier threats of the Spanish Armada and Napoleon. In his memoirs, Churchill identified September 15 (the Sunday following the day of prayer) as "the crux

of the Battle of Britain.” After the war, it was learned that Hitler decided to postpone his planned invasion of Britain for two days (September 17). Similar calls for a day of prayer also accompanied the D-Day invasion of Europe by the allies on June 6, 1944.

In short, fasting has a long and impressive history as a discipline adopted by believers for a variety of reasons, but all of them are connected by the principle of self-denial and prayer. We may deny the self to emphasize the needs of the nation, or others who need God’s blessing. But it is never just the act of prohibiting food that God honors; He honors prayer offered in Jesus’ name by faith. I invite you to find, in the chapters that follow, an approach to fasting that will accomplish such holy purposes in your own life and in the lives of those you love.

Discussion Questions

1. The key Scripture passage on fasting is Isaiah 58. Reread Isaiah 58:1–5. According to these verses, what was wrong with the fasting of Israel?
2. According to Isaiah 58:6–8, what are the benefits God promises when fasting is practiced correctly?
3. As you prepare for your personal odyssey into the discipline of fasting, what do you see as your largest barrier to fasting successfully?
4. What are the nine different fasts identified in this chapter? How can God use each in your life?
5. In his book *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, Dr. Rex Russell has identified four kinds of fasting. How would you describe these approaches to fasting?

6. Which of the many benefits mentioned by Dr. Russell would you like to realize in your own life?
7. How was fasting practiced in the Old Testament?
8. What did Jesus teach His disciples concerning fasting?
9. What types of fasting do you sense God calling you to practice?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I have become comfortable in the abundance with which You have blessed me. In the security of my comfort zone, I have insulated myself from my problems and the problems of others around me. Now I sense You are calling me out of that comfort zone to deal with issues I have been avoiding. Lord, help me grow in this grace as I learn about and begin practicing the discipline of fasting in my life. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.