


THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO FASTING



WHAT IT IS,
HOW TO DO IT, AND
WHY IT MATTERS

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PREFACE

I was converted to Christ at age 17 and did not fast until I was 39 years old. During those years I read the Bible through each year—including the passages on fasting—but never once thought fasting was for me. I considered fasting to be “an Old Testament thing” and I didn’t feel the least bit concerned about not fasting until I moved to Lynchburg, Virginia, and met Jerry Falwell.

Jerry Falwell led his church to fast and it became part of our preparations in founding Liberty University. (I am called a co-founder, but Falwell was the driving force that established the university.) In Lynchburg, I found myself paying two monthly house payments, one in Virginia and another back in greater Chicago, because I couldn’t sell my previous home before moving. Two monthly payments put an enormous strain on the family budget.

I observed that when Jerry Falwell needed money for a new university building or a television project, he asked people to fast and pray with him. The money always came in.

So I asked my wife to fast and pray with me on the fifteenth day of the month, because that was the date the Chicago mortgage payment was due. We fasted and prayed that month but the house didn’t sell.

I forgot about fasting until the fifteenth day of the following month, but then again it didn't sell.

After fasting and praying the third month, the real estate agent phoned to say there was finally a nibble. In a down real estate market, only one person looked at my house but he returned several times to check out details. We finally closed the sale almost one year after we first fasted. At the closing, the buyer told me he began looking at my house on his wife's birthday, the day after Ruth and I had fasted the very first time. I learned two things from that experience: First, fasting takes prayer to a higher level of fulfillment, and second, don't quit too soon.

That experience taught us that fasting is an invaluable foundation to prayer. Of course, not everything we have fasted about has happened, but fasting has added a new dimension to our prayer lives. Since that time, we have learned that fasting is an invaluable way to get to know God.

I challenge you to read this simple book and then follow its suggestions (unless you have a medical reason not to fast). When you embark upon your first fast, you are beginning a spiritual journey that will change your life. Not only are you more likely to get your prayers answered, you will draw closer to God than ever before.

Many people have taught me much about fasting. I give them credit for all the wisdom they have given me. For all the weaknesses in this book, I take responsibility. May God teach us all to "hunger and thirst after righteousness" so that we might know Him better.

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CHAPTER ONE



Getting Ready to Fast

God created the human body as a finely tuned physical engine of enormous power, but it requires fuel to keep operating. That fuel is called food. To make sure the body gets fuel, God has created within us an appetite for food, called hunger. As part of the balance of nature to keep life going, food satisfies our appetite and gives us strength.

So why would one choose to go without food?

Americans are programmed to eat three times a day. We constantly hear the message, “A good breakfast is the foundation of the day.” Our mothers told us, “Eat so you’ll be strong,” right along with, “Come in out of the rain so you won’t catch a cold.” In school we were taught, “Eat three square meals a day” and “Exercise to be strong.” Since our childhood, we have been taught to take care of our bodies.

So why should one go without eating?

Starvation is still a worldwide threat. In 1978, I went to Haiti as part of a massive feeding program when that nation endured a famine, compounded by poverty. The swollen bellies of hungry little

children distressed me. Starving people stampeded our vehicles for food, trampling fallen children just to get a loaf of bread. With much of the world clamoring for food like this, why would one voluntarily go without eating?

The world calls not eating dieting, and usually does it to lose weight or for health reasons. But some go without eating for spiritual reasons. The Bible calls this fasting. Usually a fast is for a predetermined length of time to accomplish a spiritual purpose.

Consider an example from the Old Testament. Once a year the Jewish believers were required to fast: “On the tenth day of the seventh month of each year, you must go without eating” (Lev. 16:29 CEV). This fast was kept on the Day of Atonement, and so it is called the Yom Kippur Fast (the phrase means Day of Atonement). Conversely, there were seven other days in the Jewish calendar where believers were commanded to eat a “feast” because God realized there was great spiritual benefit in fellowship when believers eat together. But once each year on the Day of Atonement, God required His people to fast. Everyone went without eating. Why everyone? Because God wanted everyone to remember the solemn experience of his or her salvation. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest took the blood of an animal into the Holy of Holies to offer it in substitution for the sins of everyone: “And he shall wash his body with water in a holy place, put on his garments, come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people” (Lev. 16:24). Because the Day of Atonement dealt with the sins of the nation, everyone fasted to identify with the high priest, who sacrificed a lamb for the forgiveness of their sin.

Today, Christians are not required to fast; today we are not under law, but under grace. We no longer have to sacrifice the blood of a lamb for forgiveness. Jesus is the Lamb of God who died for all (see John 1:29). In the Old Testament, Jewish believers fasted to demonstrate their obedience to God. However, in the New Testament’s dispensation of grace, things are different. We are not *required* to fast, but we are *allowed* to fast for certain reasons. Jesus said to His

disciples, “When you fast . . .” (Matt. 6:16) because fasting is a discipline to build our character and faith.

When you can’t get an answer to prayer, even though you have prayed continually, try fasting with your prayer. Fasting demonstrates your sincerity to God: “If you believe with all your heart . . .” (Acts 8:37). When you give up food—that which is enjoyable and necessary—you get God’s attention.

Even then, Jesus told us not to show off our fast: “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” (Matt. 6:16). Jesus went on to explain what our attitude ought to be when we fast: “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place” (vv. 17–18).

If you have never fasted, it is probably a scary thing to think about going without food for any length of time. People have a variety of concerns because we are programmed to eat three times a day. Many wonder if they will get hungry and if the hunger pains will hurt.

Fasting to God will not hurt any more than dieting to get thinner. If you can cut back in your eating just to lose weight, you can cut back on food, in a reasonable way, to seek God’s presence and get an answer to your prayers. Just as a diabetic has to stop eating sweets and someone with high blood pressure has to stop eating foods high in salt to stay healthy, you can fast for spiritual reasons.

Other people have different questions, such as, “Can I hold out?” They don’t want to get started on a journey they can’t complete. What if you see a commercial on television that suggests that a candy bar will help you get through the afternoon? Yes, chocolates and sugar will give you an afternoon “zap,” but snacks are not always necessary. The ability to stay on your fast is not dependent upon how hard you try to stay away from food, but by how positive is the attraction of knowing God and spending time with Him.

Before I was converted, I was very religious, attending church every week. But I cursed all the time. Over the years, I tried several

“religious” things to quit cursing, but each time I slipped and began cursing again. The harder I tried, the more addictive the habit became. When I received Christ as my Savior, I instantly quit cursing—without trying and without religious tricks. Jesus made the difference. I no longer had any desire to curse; as a matter of fact, I abandoned cursing altogether. It is the same way with fasting. If you try “tricks” to keep from eating, there’s a good chance you’ll fail. But when you realize you’ll spend quality time with Jesus while you are fasting, He will help you keep your fast. Remember the Scripture: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

There’s another question people have about fasting: “Will I harm myself?” Because we’ve become so conditioned to eating three meals a day, we think we will harm ourselves when we miss those three meals. We think our bodies are like our cars: If we don’t put oil in the engine, it’ll burn up. Some think they’ll get sick if they fast. And when they think of a three-day fast, they are absolutely sure they will die. But statistics have demonstrated that fasting is actually good for us. During a fast we eliminate poisons and toxins from the body. Just as God created the Sabbath day—one day out of seven—for rest, so a fast one day out of seven would give our digestive tract an opportunity to rest and be cleansed of built-up toxins.

Still others are concerned about what their friends will think if they fast. “Will my friends think I’m weird when they learn I am fasting?” The answer is simple: You don’t fast to impress your friends, and on most occasions, you don’t even let them know. As we’ve already seen, Jesus said, “When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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” (Matt. 6:17–18).

Jesus was reminding us not to make an outward show of our religious dedication to God. Rather, fasting is a private commitment between you and God. Sometimes you fast privately and don’t tell anyone. At other times, you will enter a public fast, such as with your church or with another individual. (Ezra fasted with four thousand

people to solve a problem, and Esther asked all Jewish believers to fast for divine intervention. Christians are asked to join the National Day of Prayer and Fasting in May each year.)

So don't worry what others think when you don't eat with them. Haven't there been occasions when you've gone on a coffee break with friends but just drank water? Or times when you've ordered only coffee at lunch because you have already eaten? Or just a soda because your stomach was upset? Be focused on your fast and don't pay attention to what others think. Just go ahead with your fast to God and keep your actions private.

What Is Fasting?

Fasting is not the same thing as dieting. And fasting is not the same thing as eliminating food for health. Fasting is a non-required discipline (you don't have to do it) where you alter your diet (there are many kinds of fasts) for a spiritual reason (there are many reasons to fast) and accompany the experience with prayer.

Fasting is not required of Christians. You don't have to do it. As a matter of fact, some who have never fasted may be more spiritual than some who do fast. For example, there are some grandmothers who are extremely effective intercessors even though they have never once fasted. Why? Because they continually live so close to God there is no need to fast to get closer to Him.

Take the illustration of a man who goes to the gym to exercise to keep in shape physically. He can keep in shape by any means of daily exercise, whether he uses barbells, a rowing machine, a skiing machine, or simply jogs. Each form of exercise is a discipline that keeps him in good physical condition. But there is another man who keeps in great shape without ever going to the gym or jogging. He's a roofer who keeps in shape by constantly throwing around house shingles.

Like the grandmother or the roofer, you may already stay close to God and keep "spiritually fit" even without fasting. But fasting

is a biblical discipline that will help anyone get into spiritual shape and become a prayer warrior for God.

When you fast, expect resistance. Our spiritual enemy, the devil, will oppose you. As you may have already experienced when you have repented or transformed certain areas of your life, the devil does not easily give up any territory he has conquered. So it is with prayer and fasting. If you pray for others—for your church or for the salvation of people—Satan will oppose you. Fasting is not easy. Like climbing a mountain, fasting is spiritually as well as physically challenging. It can be difficult, draining, and dangerous. So embark on this adventure with full understanding of what you are doing and full knowledge that the path ahead may be tough. But the rewards will be worth it.

Principles I Learned About Getting Ready

- ▶ The one-day Yom Kippur Fast is best for my first fast.
- ▶ I should not be fearful about fasting, because many have gone without food for one day.
- ▶ I am not required to fast, but I will do so as a spiritual discipline.
- ▶ I will not worry what others think about my fast because it is a personal commitment between God and me.
- ▶ I will expect spiritual resistance to my fast because the evil one does not want me to get closer to God.

Journaling

As you ponder a decision about whether or not you should fast, write your thoughts in your journal. The following questions will help to guide your decision-making process. Expressing yourself in writing will help you think more clearly and provide a record of your fasting journey.

1. Do you have a clear reason to fast? What is it? (This is usually called a cause.)
2. List some reasons why you should not fast, or any times when you shouldn't fast.
3. Make a list of the difficulties you think you'll encounter in your fast. Why are they problems to you?
4. Do you think you can overcome them? How?

Three-Step Bible Study

The Bible studies at the end of each chapter are designed to lead you in the study of God's Word in three easy steps.

- ▶ First, read the question and focus on how the topic applies to your life.
- ▶ Second, read and analyze the related Bible verse that is given for that question. Think about what the Scripture is saying to you.
- ▶ Third, write your response to the question. Even when you think the answer is simple, writing it out makes you think more exactly and will provide a helpful record for you later.

1. God required all Israelites to fast, but this is not a requirement for the present-day church. What lessons can Israel's fasting have for you?

“On the tenth day of the seventh month of each year, you must go without eating” (Lev. 16:29 CEV).

2. What can you learn from Jesus about fasting? How will this verse influence your fasting?

“But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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” (Matt. 6:17–18).

3. You must fast with outward repentance as well as with inward sincerity. How have you prepared (or will you prepare) for your first fast?

“Now, therefore,’ says the Lord, ‘turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning” (Joel 2:12).

4. What will God do for you when you fast?

“So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him” (Joel 2:13-14).

5. What should be the prayer of your heart about unknown sin as you begin a fast?

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23–24).

6. What will it take to seek and find God? What do you have to do to find Him?

“And you will seek Me, and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).

Getting Ready to Fast
