



# FASTING 101: WHAT IS FASTING?

During our 21 days of Prayer and Fasting, we'd like to encourage everyone to focus on specific prayer requests for the coming year. So, what is fasting and what is the purpose?

## **HUNGER FOR GOD**

Dr. Carl Lundquist, former president of Bethel College and Seminary, would fast once a week. In a letter, he writes, "I spend my lunch break in fellowship with God and in prayer. And I have learned a very personal dimension to what Jesus declared, 'I have had meat to eat ye know not of.'"

Fasting is a spiritual discipline. Simply put, it means not eating. Instead of using mealtime for food, you use it to spend time with God. Some fasts last for one meal, one day, multiple days, or even weeks. Fasting may begin at sunrise and end at sunset or extend 24 hours per day. There are many ways and reasons to fast, but the basic idea is to set aside the time you would usually spend eating and focus that time on God instead, praying, reading the Bible, and worshiping.

When you're fasting, you're likely to feel hunger pangs. Allow those to serve as reminders that you are hungry to know Jesus and that you rely on him for every need. When you pray, ask the Holy Spirit to deepen your understanding and experience of Jesus in everyday life. You might pray something like, "Father, you are my daily bread. You are my comforter, my redeemer, my provider. My life is hidden in Christ. What more do I need?"

## **WHAT ABOUT MY MEDIUM EXTRA-HOT HALF-CAF SUGAR-FREE HAZELNUT AMERICANO WITH ROOM?**

A normal biblical fast is to avoid food, but not water. However, you have a great deal of freedom as you fast. Some people avoid everything but water. Others focus solely on not eating and instead drink whatever they want.

Whatever your plan, make sure to consult with your doctor to ensure you are medically fit enough for a fast, and get tips from your doctor on how to fast safely. There are a number of reasons a traditional fast may not be a viable option for you. These reasons range from stage of life to pregnancy to medical conditions to eating disorders and everything in between. Most people are capable of fasting without compromising their health, but if that's not the case for you, don't be discouraged! You can fast in other ways. One option is to eat less than normal rather than not at all. You could fast from coffee or give up the foods you enjoy most, eating only simple, plain foods. This type of fasting is commonly called a "Daniel Fast," referring to the story of Daniel in the Old Testament when he and his friends abstained from eating meat and consumed only vegetables and water (see Daniel 1:12).

While the majority of people are able to fast from food, if you are unable to fast from food, you could consider abstaining from certain activities instead. Though this is technically not a biblical fast, people have abstained from television, Facebook, music, sports—all sorts of things. The idea is to use the time you would normally spend on the activities you love to focus on the Lord instead, praying, reading the Bible, and worshiping God.

### **BUT WHY IS THE FOOD GONE?**

Okay, so you're told you should fast, that it's a good spiritual discipline, and that it doesn't necessarily require food. But fasting does emphasize food and it's preferable if you are physically able to abstain from eating. Why?

There is a mystery to fasting and part of the reason we do it as Christians is simply because God wants us to. Jesus expects his disciples to fast (Matt. 6:16) and obeying God, even when it seems weird, is always a good idea.

The physical implication of fasting is that it directly impacts one of our most basic needs as humans. God has built us into a physical world with physical needs, and the physical world directly impacts the spiritual. By staying away from food and focusing our attention on God, we shut our bodies up, strengthen our soul in God, and put into action our dependence on him. He provides us with life. Food is the way he chooses to do so, but he is the source and can very well sustain us without food, water, or any of the physical necessities of life.

We do not discount the value of the body or consider the physical world bad. Fasting serves many purposes, one of which is to remind our minds, spirits, and bodies who and what we worship: God himself.

### **ONE FAST, MANY FASTERS**

You can fast with other believers as well. If it will help you overcome any fear you might have of fasting, ask another believer to join you. Biblically, there are instances of corporate fasting where entire nations fasted together (Esther 4; Ezra 8). So feel free to fast together and pray for one another. Our church-wide fast will lend itself to this opportunity, because there's a good chance the people around you will be fasting at the same time.

Find out what fasting should look like for you. Be in prayer about it now as we move forward into the 21 days of prayer and fasting. Then join us in our church-wide fast to dedicate this time to the Lord as we ask him in prayer for big things at The Naz in 2023. Even if you feel intimidated to try, let us all agree together as a church to fast for at least one day, in some fashion, if not the full twenty-one days.



The purpose of fasting is ultimately God himself. There are many reasons to undertake a fast, but the bottom line for them all is to align your heart directly with him. Think of that as the big picture. The small picture, the immediate purpose for a fast, can vary. So the first step for any kind of fast is to declare our immediate purpose. Fasting can't be done casually, because there isn't any spiritual benefit in simply not eating. Going through the motions just makes us hungry, but genuine, purposeful fasting is a powerful discipline for the disciple of Jesus and can play a part in literally transforming your life.

To help us define a godly purpose for fasting, Donald Whitney gives us these 10 reasons:

- To strengthen prayer
- To seek God's guidance
- To express grief
- To seek deliverance or protection
- To express repentance and return to God
- To humble oneself before God
- To express concern for the work of God
- To minister to the needs of others
- To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God
- To express love and worship to God

Throughout the Bible, we see people fast for a variety of reasons:

- To be like Jesus (Matt. 4:1–17; Luke 4:1–13)
- To obtain spiritual purity (Isa. 58:5–7)
- To repent from sins (See Jon. 3:8; Neh. 1:4, 9:1–3; 1 Sam. 14:24)
- To influence God (2 Sam. 12:16–23)
- To mourn for the dead (1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:12)
- To request God's help in times of crisis and calamity (Ezra 8:21–23; Neh. 1:4–11)
- To strengthen prayer (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:17–29; Acts 10:30; 1 Cor. 7:5)

None of these purposes amounts to twisting God's arm to do what we want. Who can do that? God is not a genie who will grant us whatever we wish. He is a good father who is working out his sovereign will. Our reasons for fasting are for our own humility. By denying ourselves for a time, we provoke ourselves to rely more on God Almighty. It isn't about changing God; it's about changing us.

In fasting:

- We pray more intently
- We become more receptive to God's guidance
- We lean more on Scripture to hear his voice
- We demonstrate our grief and honest repentance
- We physically declare that we need God to survive
- We learn to sense spiritual reality more than the physical world
- We prepare to love others better than ourselves

Lastly, fasting helps us to remember the true source of our utmost joy. Most people would agree that food is a good thing. If you're unable to fast but choose to abstain from something else, such as a hobby or technology or entertainment, those can also be good things. All good things come from God, but the human heart is inclined to worship God's gifts rather than God himself. Fasting helps our hearts to look past the good gift to the good God, who blesses us despite ourselves.

### **I DON'T REALLY FEEL LIKE IT**

Even if fasting makes sense, you may not feel like you need it right now. But think of fasting as similar to praise and worship. Oftentimes joy overflows in songs of praise, but more often singing leads us into joy. We sing first and that brings us to a place of thankfulness and joy. Likewise, when our souls overflow with godly emotions and repentance, we may be led to fasting, but far more often we need to choose to fast in order to be humbled and to fight our pride by rejecting the ways we so often cope with our feelings. It's the proactive approach.



Fasting is an awesome gift. And like all awesome gifts, it can be misconstrued in a way that leaves us bitterly disappointed. Now that we know what fasting is and why we fast, let's consider what it is not.

### **GOD DOESN'T OWE YOU**

Fasting is not a manipulation tactic or a way to earn points with God. Fasting doesn't make you more holy or acceptable to God. Christ Jesus alone has made us holy. Instead, by practicing a fast and other spiritual disciplines, we are asking for grace just like we did when we prayed for salvation. We didn't save ourselves. We received God's gift to us. So in fasting, we don't transform ourselves; we receive the grace that transforms us (1 Pet. 1:13–14).

### **THIS ISN'T TO IMPRESS YOUR FRIENDS**

Fasting is not an endurance test and, like anything else, can be done in pride for the praise of men. Self-righteousness is a signpost on the road to hell. That's the reason we must clarify our purpose for fasting—to avoid ego-tripping. Jesus warned us not to make our fasting a public service announcement in order to get attention. If you're tempted to look at your contrite spirituality and get smug about fasting, remember that even the ability to fast is yours by grace alone and without Jesus you couldn't even do that much.

### **NOT AN END IN ITSELF**

Fasting is not some religious formality to check off the list. Some believers, out of a feeling of duty, will participate in the 40 days of Lent by giving up something easy, but their sacrifice becomes a mere annoyance which they are glad to drop by the time Easter Sunday comes. Without a purpose beyond "It's Lent," a religious approach to fasting falls far, far short of the awesomeness God wove into the fabric of fasting.

### **IT DOESN'T IMPRESS GOD**

Fasting doesn't force God to be more attentive or give us quicker answers. We don't tell God, "We're fasting now. That's our part; now you do your part" (Isa. 58). No matter what we do, God will perform all his holy will. So fasting isn't our effort to twist God's arm. It's our response of pressing into him like it says in Joel: "rend your hearts and not your garments." Fasting is one way that we express our surrender and honest petition before God.

Finally, be careful to differentiate between aligning your heart with God (what fasting does) and getting closer to God (what fasting does not). Jesus alone brings you, spotless, into God's presence. If you belong to Jesus, fasting basically makes you more aware of where you already are.



### **NOT ONE FAST TO RULE THEM ALL**

Once you have your purpose, plan out your fast. People have been fasting for thousands of years in all different ways.

Once you know your purposes for fasting (the ultimate purpose and immediate purposes), consider your health. Consult your doctor, and if it's time for a checkup, get in there. Fasting can aggravate medical conditions, and you don't want to find that out the hard way. A few reasons you may not be able to fast safely include a myriad of health concerns from anemia to anorexia to heart disease to pregnancy to nursing—there are many legitimate reasons to not fast.

If fasting from food is not a reality for you, pray about what God wants you to do. He knows your limitations and won't be disappointed. If you are unable to fast, you might consider partaking in another form of spiritual discipline, abstaining from technology, entertainment, music, a hobby—the list is endless. But the important part is your motive! Use the time you would normally spend eating/hobby's/facebooking/whatever, and spend it with Jesus.

### **THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF FASTING COULD TEACH US SOMETHING**

Dr. Bill Bright has a very thorough article on fasting that presents and expands on many of the ideas in this article.

There isn't one particular formula for fasting. It's a personal decision. How you fast, how long you fast, and what you fast from are all individual choices, none of which are as important as your reason for fasting. God doesn't command everyone to go 21 days without food. Ask him what he would have you do and start slowly. Avoid jumping into an extended fast without building up to it first.

In the Bible, we find several types of fasts. The partial fast is illustrated by Daniel, who abstained from the best foods and chose to eat vegetables and drink water instead. You could opt for a similar plan

An absolute fast means not eating or drinking anything at all. Paul fasted absolutely for three days. Moses did the same for 40 days, but following suit would be so extreme that you should not copy Moses unless you are absolutely sure God has called you to do so. Don't worry! If God wants you to do something this extreme, he knows how to make it so clear to you that there is no room for uncertainty.

The most common fast involves not eating any sort of food, but drinking plenty of water and juice. Ideally, juice your own fruits and vegetables or drink 100% juice. Beware of caffeine and sugar, as they will have stronger effects without any solid food in your system

Ultimately, pray, pick the one that seems best, and think about your motives. God won't be impressed if your fast is more difficult. He's already fully pleased with you because of Jesus, so fast in whichever way you choose and praise God that you don't have to earn his favor through misery!

### **PLAN AHEAD**

It's tempting to have your own personal Mardi Gras, eating every one of your favorite foods just before starting your fast. While culturally popular, this makes fasting more difficult. It's better to wean yourself off of food slowly. So plan ahead, as this will mean changing your diet during the days leading up to your fast.

Also consider the point of fasting: spending time with Jesus. If you're running a million errands, you won't have the time to sit and commune with God in isolation. Remember, the point of fasting isn't just to be hungry; it's to take the time you would normally spend eating and use it to focus on God.

### **BREAKFAST VS. BREAKING YOUR FAST**

When your fast ends, it's very important to reintroduce food slowly. Avoid the six-course dinner or the all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast. Your body will have responded and adjusted to life without food fairly quickly. Suddenly shoveling in normal food will not end well. Start simply, with plain vegetables or broth. Take your time and eat small quantities. Just like you led into the fast slowly, come out of it slowly.

### **EYE ON THE PRIZE**

Fasting isn't a burden or a requirement for belonging to God. It's a gift that helps you to know and run alongside your Heavenly Father. Going without food is a reminder that cuts straight to one of our most basic needs.

If you've never fasted before, be courageous, give it a go, and expect great things. Fasting is an act of faith, and faith pleases God.

### **FASTING DURING THE 21 DAYS OF FASTING**

During our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting, we are asking people to be fasting and praying everyday for 21 days. We will begin our 21 days of fasting, beginning at sundown on January 8, calling the family at The Naz to abstain from food or use one of the alternative fasts. We will then, as a gathered family celebrate by breaking our fasts on Sunday, January 29 with a soup potluck. We would encourage you to make plans to join us in this celebratory meal of thanksgiving and rejoicing.

We'll be posting more helpful tips during our 21 days of fasting