

2. Describe what you have learned about fasting from other Christians.

3. Have you ever chosen to temporarily seek privacy for spiritual purposes? If so, describe what it was like.

FASTING . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and begin the practice of fasting. Few Disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one. Nevertheless, we dare not overlook its biblical significance. Of course, some people, for medical reasons, cannot fast. But no Christian should ignore fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christlike life.

Fasting Explained

Christian fasting is a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for *spiritual* purposes. Other types of fasting—despite the benefits they may produce for the mind and body—could not be classified as *Christian* fasting, and fasting by a non-Christian obtains no eternal value. It is for *believers* in Christ, for the Discipline must be rooted

in a relationship with Christ and practiced with the desire to become more like Christ. Believers should fast according to biblical teaching and with purposes that are God-centered. It is *voluntary* in that fasting should not be coerced. And fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body; it is *abstinence from food for spiritual purposes*. There is a broader, yet often overlooked view of fasting in which, for spiritual purposes, a person abstains from or denies himself the enjoyment of something other than food. So while it's appropriate to speak of fasting from any legitimate freedom, technically the Bible uses the term only in its primary sense, that is, abstinence from food.

To understand fasting for spiritual purposes, realize that the Bible distinguishes between several kinds of fasts.

- A *normal* fast involves abstaining from all food, but not from water. Matthew 4:2 and Luke 4:2 say that after a forty-day fast Jesus was hungry, but they say nothing about thirst. Unless this was a supernatural fast (see below), the body can't go forty days without water.
- A *partial* fast is a limitation of the diet but not abstention from all food. See Daniel 1:12.¹
- An *absolute* fast is the avoidance of all food and liquid, even water. See Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9.
- The Bible also describes a *supernatural* fast that requires God's supernatural intervention into the bodily processes. See Deuteronomy 9:9.
- A *private* fast is what Jesus meant in Matthew 6:16-18 when He said we should fast in a way not to be noticed by others.
- *Congregational* fasts are the type found in Joel 2:15-16 and Acts 13:2.
- The Bible also speaks of *national* fasts. See 2 Chronicles 20:3; Nehemiah 9:1; Esther 4:16; Jonah 3:5-8.
- God established one *regular* fast in the Old Covenant.

Every Jew was to fast on the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16:29-31).

- Finally, the Bible mentions *occasional* fasts. These occur on special occasions as the need arises. Examples of these are found in 2 Chronicles 20:3, Esther 4:16, Matthew 9:15, and Acts 14:23.

Fasting Is Expected

Notice Jesus' words at the beginning of Matthew 6:16-17: "And *when you fast* . . . But *when you fast* . . ." (emphasis added). By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we will fast. Plainer still are His words in Matthew 9:14-15: Jesus said that the time would come when His disciples "will fast." That time is now.

Until Jesus, the Bridegroom of the church, returns for His bride, He expects us to fast. He gave us no command regarding how often or how long we should fast, but like the other Spiritual Disciplines, fasting should never devolve into an empty, legalistic routine. God offers to bless us through fasting as often as we desire.

Fasting Is to Be Done for a Purpose

Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience about willpower and endurance. Scripture sets forth many purposes for fasting. I've condensed them into ten major categories. Notice that *none* of the purposes is to earn God's favor. It is useless to fast as a way to impress God and earn His acceptance. Faith in the work of Jesus Christ makes us acceptable to God, not our efforts, regardless of our intensity or sincerity.

Having a biblical purpose for your fast may be the single most important concept to take from this chapter. In real life, here's how it works: As you are fasting and your head aches or your stomach growls and you think, *I'm hungry!* your next thought is likely to be something like, *Oh, right—I'm hungry because I'm fasting today.*

Then your next thought *should* be, *And I'm fasting for this purpose:*

Although the physical discomfort is unpleasant—perhaps even painful—it is important to feel some degree of hunger during your fast.² Your hunger helps you, serving as a continual reminder of your spiritual purpose. For instance, if your purpose is to pray for your spouse, then every time your stomach growls or your head aches, your hunger reminds you that you're fasting, which in turn reminds you that you're fasting for the purpose of praying for your spouse—and then you pray. So throughout your fast, every time you feel hunger—whether you are working, driving, talking to someone, sitting at the computer, walking, or whatever—you are reminded of your purpose, in this case to pray for your spouse.

As a Christian then, whenever you fast, you should do so for at least one of these biblical purposes.

To strengthen prayer. There's something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and deepens the passion of our supplications. The people of God have frequently utilized fasting when they have felt a special urgency about the concerns they lift before the Father. The Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying. To see some of the places in Scripture where fasting is connected with prayer, read Ezra 8:23, Nehemiah 1:4, Daniel 9:3, and Acts 13:3.

To seek God's guidance. A second purpose for fasting is to more clearly discern the will of God. (See Judges 20:26-28 and Acts 14:23.) Fasting does not *ensure* the certainty of receiving such clear guidance from God. Rightly practiced, however, it does make us more receptive to the One who loves to guide us.

To express grief. As mentioned in Judges 20:26, one of the reasons the Israelites wept and fasted before the Lord was not only to seek His guidance, but to express grief for the forty thousand

brothers they had lost in battle. Grief caused by events other than a death also can be expressed through fasting. Christians have fasted because of grief for their sins and as a means of expressing grief for the sins of others.

To seek deliverance or protection. One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances. (Examples of this are found in 2 Chronicles 20:3-4; Ezra 8:21-23; Esther 4:16; and Psalm 109:20-24.) Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against "persecution" because of our faith.

To express repentance and the return to God. Fasting for this purpose is similar to fasting for the purpose of expressing grief for sin. See, for instance, 1 Samuel 7:6, Joel 2:12, and Jonah 3:5-8. But as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can represent more than just grief over sin. It also can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.

To humble oneself before God. Fasting, when practiced with the right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him. Wicked King Ahab eventually humbled himself before the Lord by means of fasting in 1 Kings 21:27-29 and King David did the same in Psalm 35:13.

To express concern for the work of God. This is illustrated in Nehemiah 1:3-4 and Daniel 9:3. Just as a parent might fast and pray out of concern for the work of God in the life of a child, so Christians may fast and pray because they feel a burden for the work of God on a relatively broad scale. For example, Christians might feel compelled to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experienced tragedy, disappointment, or apparent defeat.

To minister to the needs of others. Those who think the Spiritual Disciplines foster tendencies of introspection or independence should consider Isaiah 58. In the most extensive passage in Scripture dealing exclusively with fasting, God emphasizes fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others.

To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God. Ask Christians to name a fast by a biblical character and most will probably think first of the lengthy fast of Jesus prior to His temptation in Matthew 4:1-11. Sometimes when we struggle with temptation, or when we anticipate grappling with it, we know that we need extra spiritual strength to overcome it. In times of exceptional temptation, exceptional measures are required. One such exceptional measure in your situation might be a Christlike fast for the purpose of overcoming the temptation and of renewing your dedication to God.

To express love and worship to God. Fasting can be a testimony—even one directed to yourself—that you find your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God. It's a way of demonstrating to yourself that you love God more than food, that seeking Him is more important to you than eating, that Jesus—the bread of heaven (see John 6:51)—is more satisfying to you than earthly bread. A woman named Anna expressed her devotion to God in this way according to Luke 2:37.

Fasting is when we hunger for God—for a fresh encounter with God, for God to answer a prayer, for God to save someone, for God to work powerfully in our church, for God to guide us or protect us—more than we hunger for the food God made us to live on.

There is no doubt that God has often crowned fasting with extraordinary blessings. But we should be careful not to develop what Martyn Lloyd-Jones called a mechanical view of fasting. We cannot manipulate God to do our bidding by fasting any more than we can by any other means. As with prayer, we fast in hope that by His *grace* God will bless us as we desire. When our fast is rightly motivated, we can be sure God *will* bless us and do so in the way infinite wisdom knows is best, even if it is not in the way we wanted. Whether or not you receive the specific blessing you seek, one thing is sure: If you knew what God knew, you would give yourself the identical blessing that He does. And none of His rewards are worthless. (Taken from chapter 9 of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.)