

How to fast and pray

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Fasting is a laudable practice and we have reason to lament that it is generally neglected among Christians - Matthew Henry

I wonder whether we have ever fasted? I wonder whether it has even occurred to us that we ought to be considering the question of fasting? The fact is, is it not, that this whole subject seems to have dropped right out of our lives and right out of our whole Christian thinking – D Martyn Lloyd-Jones

It was not Christ's intention to reject or despise fasting... it was His intention to restore proper fasting -Martin Luther

To fast and pray is something strange to many Christians today. But it is not strange to the Old or the New Testament. It was not something strange in the early Christian Church and it was also not something strange in the time of the Reformation and in the centuries thereafter.

Moses, Elijah, Ezekiel and Daniel fasted and prayed. Jesus fasted for 40 days. Paul and the early Christians fasted. In the early Christian Church they fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. Martin Luther was criticized because he fasted too much. John Calvin fasted and prayed until most of Geneva turned to God. John Knox fasted and prayed and the wicked Queen Mary said she feared no weapon like she feared John Knox's prayers. Jonathan Edwards who was God's instrument in the revival in New England, fasted and prayed. John Wesley fasted twice a week. Charles Finney one of the greatest spiritual leaders in history was a man who fasted and prayed. D L Moody was not unfamiliar with fasting and praying.

A. What does it mean to fast and pray?

- To fast means to put God first. There are times when we have to eat and drink and sleep and enjoy the blessings of a homely life. But there are also times when we have to turn our backs on it and seek God's face in times of fasting and praying. Fasting is an attitude of the heart in which we interrupt our normal life to pray for a specific matter or cause.
- Fasting also means perseverance in prayer. It means to be earnest with God; to pray until you have found the answer - be it yes or no or wait a while.
- Fasting is an effective way to remove obstacles and burdens to pray purposefully and with your attention.
- Fasting can also be a sign of sadness or mourning but it also contains an element of firmness.
- In the Old Testament they often fasted as a sign of humiliation (Lev.23:27) In its essence fasting means that we tear our hearts before God, confess our sins and turn to the Lord anew (Joel 2:12-13).

- The Lord also intended fasting to sometimes have an element of happiness and joy (Zech.8:19).
- In Isaiah 58:6-7 we find the attitude we should have whilst fasting and praying, which results in the blessings promised in Isaiah 58:8-14.

The Lord Jesus set only one condition to fasting and that is sincerity. He does not forbid it anywhere and neither does He say that it is unnecessary to fast and pray. In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus gives certain prescriptions for fasting. Fasting and praying is a more intense form of praying. It could be that you have been praying for a certain matter for years without an answer. There is but one alternative: fast and pray. Fasting and praying always lead to more personal sanctification and God listens to a prayer from a pure heart. Fasting and praying also stresses your seriousness about a matter before God. Some situations demand that we as intercessors should fast and pray. There is sufficient evidence of what effect fasting and prayer has had in the course of the history of many countries and many other situations.

B. What can we gain through fasting and praying?

- Help in times of need (Josh.7:6; Judges 20:26; Ezra 8:21-23) In the past fasting brought deliverance in times of crisis and for specific situations.
- To find out what is wrong. Sometimes we have to fast and pray like Joshua and the elder after they had suffered defeat at Ai to find out what went wrong.
- It can help to bring us into a position of victory over sin.
- We can obtain heavenly wisdom and revelation through fasting and prayer (Jer.33:3; Dan.9:2-3; 9:21-22; 10:2-3)
- Others often experience a blessing when we fast and pray for them (e.g. unsaved people or people in some or other crisis)
- In history revival was often given in answer to fasting and prayer.
- We find in Esther 4 that a nation was saved because of fasting and prayer.
- God saved Nineveh because the inhabitants fasted, prayed and repented (Jonah 2 and 3)
- Look at the blessings promised in Isaiah 58:8-14 that follow true fasting and prayer.
- Fasting keeps us humble (Ps.69:10)
- Fasting chastises the body and helps us to gain control over our bodies (1 Cor.9:27; 1 Cor.6:13-20)

C. Different forms of fasting.

- An ordinary fast: when you take no solids for a certain period and drink only water.
- A complete fast: to take no water or any other form of food for a certain period.
- A partial fast: to omit certain foods for a certain period (e.g. sweets) and/or to eat and drink less. During a partial fast someone might decide to eat bread and drink water only.

D. The don'ts of fasting

- Don't fast to earn God's blessings

- Don't fast as a substitute to obedience
- Don't fast to impress others
- Don't allow fasting to be only external
- Don't allow fasting to become a new law in your life.

Many people are afraid to fast but as long as there are no medical reasons why you should not fast, there is no danger. It is even good for your body. The second and third days are normally slightly difficult because of the changes the body has to make and due to the toxic substances your body secretes but things do become better after that. If you have never fasted before it would not be wise to fast and pray for more than 36 hours. You can always extend the period as you become more familiar with fasting and praying. Don't try to prove something to others by fasting or try to set a record. Fasting is a very intimate matter between you and the Lord. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you as to how long you should fast and pray. Somebody on a normal fast can fast for quite some time (up to 21 days) without risk. In recent times many thousand of people have fasted for 40 days. But the latter should only be done on commission of the Lord.

E. Practical guidelines for fasting and prayer.

- If you have never fasted before you should not fast for more than 24-36 hours initially.
 - Stop taking fluids containing caffeine the previous day. The withdrawal of caffeine normally causes headaches.
 - People used to taking a lot of sugar find fasting very difficult. Keep up your fast though and when you have completed it you should try using less sugar.
 - Don't fast without fluids for longer than three days.
 - When you break your fast start by eating something light. Don't eat a large plate of food. Get back to normal slowly. It is normally a good time to break the habit of overeating, if you have a problem with it.
- The body excretes an excessive amount of toxic waste during the first three days. Shower or bath regularly and brush your teeth more than usual because you may have foul smelling breath, especially during the first three days.
- Try to find as much time for prayer as possible. Normally you do not need to stop your normal activities. You can fast even though you work a full day. You can even indulge in light forms of sport and exercise. You can for instance use the times that you would be eating for prayer and put as much time as possible aside for fellowship with the Lord.
- When you fast and pray it is best to break with your normal routine and go aside to pray in a quiet spot.
- The normal items you would need during fasting and prayer are a Bible, pen, note book, and perhaps a spiritual book that you are reading at that point in time. Make notes about that which the Lord lays upon your heart. Write new thoughts down. Don't rely on your memory, write them down.
- Don't fast while working with a demon possessed or bound person. Fast and pray before the time. When you are working with such a case you will need physical strength.

- It is a good idea to have other believers fast and pray with you. You can encourage each other and it is encouraging to know that there are others praying for the same matter.
- If there are medical reasons why you cannot fast don't feel guilty about it and do not be wilful. Diabetics and people suffering from a heart disorder should rather not fast. Consult your doctor if you have any doubt about it.
- If you have fasted for guidance from the Lord and experience that you have received guidance do not be hasty. Wait until the fast is over, especially if you are fasting for a long period. It will give you a better perspective on the matter.
- Fasting is a matter between you and the Lord, therefore don't copy others.
- Drink plenty of water while you fast.
- When you have fasted for more than three days it is important to remember to:
 - start eating small portions of food
 - eat slowly
 - chew your food well
 - stop eating if you experience discomfort
 - wait for the feeling of discomfort to disappear before eating again
 - don't do too much too soon.

F. When should we fast?

- We should fast when the Holy Spirit lays it on our hearts (Luke 4:1-2)
- When an individual has a particular need, for instance:
 - if someone asks the Lord's Will in a particular matter
 - for your own preparation for a certain task;
 - in times of heavy attacks or temptations of the evil one
 - when the individual feels that he should make more time for the Lord to replenish his spiritual strength
 - when we are confronted with specific strongholds of the evil one.

G. Hot to go aside for a day.

Many people want to go aside and be alone with God for a day. The question is: What do I do all day? The following are a few ideas on how to schedule such a day. You can see if it will work for you for yourself. Remember these are only ideas to stimulate you. The important thing is to fill the day as it suits you.

- You can start by going aside for only a morning or an afternoon or an evening. If you can fill in half a day you can extend the period.
- Get a note book, a Bible, a pen and if you want to a good spiritual book. Pick a quiet place without telephones where you can be undisturbed. Decide for how long you want to be busy and try to stick to it.
- Start your time with the Lord with exaltation, worship and just being quiet in the presence of the Lord.

- If your mind starts wandering and you think of everything you have to do, write it down on a sheet of paper. In doing so you ensure that you will not forget and can pay attention to it later.
- Select a book from the Bible and start reading it from the beginning. For example you can start reading Psalm 1, or you can take a book like Ephesians. Don't be in a hurry. Take it verse by verse; ask the Lord what He wants to teach you from that verse, reflect on the verse, pray about it. When you have finished with that verse, carry on and do the same with the next one. Write down the important things that the Lord is saying to you in your note book.
- After 30-60 minutes of Bible study you can go into direct prayer. Take time for confession and take a hard look at your own relationship with the Lord. After this you can pray for your personal needs or for specific matters. This can be followed by intercession. It is very important not to be in a hurry. The emphasis should be on fellowship with the Lord.
- You have perhaps set this time aside to pray for certain matters specifically or to seek the Lord's guidance. In that case make time to pray specifically for that.
- Vary your time with Bible study and prayer. Also take time to read a few chapters of a spiritual book.
- You may even sleep for a while if you feel like it. At the end of the day you will be revived and ready to get to work again. If possible it is also a good idea to listen to some Christian music from time to time.
- When a whole group of people are withdrawing (going aside) for a day at the same time, you can follow the above guidelines and get together every two or three hours and share what you have experienced and also pray together.