

FOLLOWING JESUS'

PATHWAY FASTING

Fasting is a discipline seen throughout the bible and practiced by many of the major characters, including Jesus. With deep biblical roots, and strong examples, fasting is a practice that should be incorporated into our own lives.

The purpose of fasting is not to change God, but to change our posture to see and receive more from God. Through fasting we see God move, the Spirit empower, and minds opened to the godly workings all around us.

Fasting is not easy, and thus, probably one of the more neglected practices. But anything worth having never comes easy. At Oh Be Joyful Church we are making fasting an active and viable part of the life of the church and are inviting everyone into the opportunity to work out this discipline on their own.

The purpose of this guide is to encourage you, give you a background of fasting, and hopefully answer any questions you have around this practice. Since it is not easy, we want to remove any barriers which might prohibit your from experiencing fasting to its fullest.

WHY FAST?

Fasting is a practice seen in both the Old and New Testament time periods. For example, Moses recorded at least two forty-day fasts. Esther and her cohorts fasted for 3-days before seeing the king in **Esther 4:16**. Jesus fasted 40 days (**Matthew 4:2**) and reminded His followers to fast stating “when you fast,” not “if” you fast as seen in **Matthew 6:18**.

Fasting is a biblical way to humble yourself in the sight of God (**Psalms 35:13; Ezra 8:21**). King David said, “I humble myself through fasting.”

Fasting enables the Holy Spirit to reveal your true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance, and a transformed life.

The Holy Spirit will quicken the Word of God in your heart and His truth will become more meaningful to you!

Fasting can transform your prayer life into a richer and more personal experience. Fasting can result in a dynamic personal revival in your own life—and make you a channel of revival to others.

Fasting and prayer are the only disciplines that fulfill the requirements of **II Chronicles 7:14** “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

If you fast, you will find yourself being humbled. You must accompany your fast with prayer otherwise it simply becomes a weight loss program. You will find that the Lord will lead you to recognize and repent of unconfessed sin and you will experience special blessings from God.

BACKGROUND OF FASTING

A true fast in scripture refers to an abstaining of food. During biblical times, we know that all Jews fasted at least once a year on the day of Atonement which we find in **Leviticus 23:32**. But throughout the year there were several different types of fasts that the Jewish people, if they wanted to, could participate in.

- A. **Normal Fast** – A normal fast was where a person would abstain from food, solid and liquid, but not water, and was usually for a very specific event or reason, much like the fast we see Jesus do for 40 days in the desert before his temptation. (**Matt 4:1-2, Luke 4:1-2**)

- B. **Partial Fast** – The partial fast was where they would restrict their diet but not to the point of complete abstinence. We see something similar in **Daniel 10:3**, where Daniel ate no meat, and drank no wine for three weeks.

- C. **Absolute Fast** – The absolute fast was where people would abstain from all food and water to discern God's leading. We see this type of fast in **Esther 4:16** where Esther neither ate nor drank for three days during a national crisis. We also see Paul abstain from eating and drinking after his conversion in **Acts 9:9**.

- D. **Private or Corporate Fast** – A private and corporate fast was a time where people would come together for times of fasts, like the day of Atonement, or in times of national emergency as seen in **2 Chronicles 20:1-4**; or to seek God's guidance in prayer as in **Ezra 8:21-23**.

These are the general types of fasts that would occur, or did occur in the Bible, and people could join in these fasts as dictated or necessary. But much like today's culture people would rarely do more than they needed. Many people would not fast outside of the Day of Atonement. The exception would be the Pharisees, they would fast twice a week, which would turn into a time of showing others their "holiness", not because they were bringing a petition before God.

Like with giving and prayer the Pharisees were fasting in order to impress the people with whom they would be in contact with. They would mess up their hair, put ash on their face to look pale, walk around moaning and groaning so that others could see how "religious" they were, and what good they could do. This posturing is visible in **Matthew 6** and even seen back in **Isaiah 58:5** where it states "You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord?"

This is what Jesus is speaking out against, not the fast itself, but participating in the fast in order to gain favor from others. Jesus is clear here by telling us that when we act in this manner, the reward we receive from others will be the only reward we receive.

ASPECTS OF FASTING

If we go to Jesus' sermon on the mount in **Matthew 6:16-18** we read these words "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (ESV) Based upon this scripture there are some aspects of fasting which will help us understand this practice better.

The first and probably most important aspect of fasting is that it is necessary. When you look at this verse in **Matthew 6:16**, the first word you see is "when." WHEN, not IF you fast! Jesus is not stating that this is something we should do if we have the times, but that this is a practice which should be incorporated in our lives. Fasting is a priority in living the life in Christ and something that we as followers need to understand better, but unless we understand that it is necessary, we will never attempt to put any effort into this discipline. The importance of fasting can also be understood in that this was the first act Christ did in his ministry, before he even started his ministry, he went out and fasted.

The next aspect of fasting is that fasting is very private, a practice between you and God. Unless you are in a public fast you should do your best to keep your fast to yourself, because it is only between you and God. Just like Jesus mentions in **Matthew 6** that a fast is not a time for you to tell everyone how holy you are, or righteous you are. A fast should be a time of looking inward, and looking inward usually generates humility, and humility will never bring about a showboat appearance of fasting. We need to be looking inward to what God is seeing during times of fasts and not what others are thinking.

This may be difficult, as you cannot control many of your circumstances. But be aware of those time where your fast might be compromised and act accordingly. This may be revealing you are on a fast, or might simply mean you pause your fast for a moment and restart after a meal. Lean into Christ during this time and let him guide your thoughts and direction.

The third aspect of fasting, is that fasting is communal. While a fast is very private, even the corporate ones, the benefits of fasting are communal. During your fast you are putting yourself in a place where you can forgo some of the indulgences of life, and possibly even hear from God. The benefits of that are going to be shown to others by who you are, and by your actions.

Fasting is also communal because even though they are private, you should have group of people around you, who do know that you are fasting so that they can pray for you, support you, and even possibly help you if you are tempted. Do your fast in private, but make sure you have the support you need in order to do a fast well.

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The last aspect of fasting is that fasting connects. It is probably not a mistake that Jesus puts fasting last when he talks about three subjects in Matthew 6. He talks about giving, prayer, and then fasting. Through fasting we learn how to give and how to pray, and we get a better understanding of both through fasting. When you fast, it connects you to different disciplines, it connects you with God, and connects you with each other. And when this happens it is very difficult for you to be pompous or self-absorbed about your life in Christ.

The connection, through fasting, gives you a tremendous gift of humility, which is how we can connect giving and praying. When you fast, you realize that food is not as important. As you prioritize, you realize that God is in control of everything that you are, and in that moment of a fast, you may have freed up some resources that can be given to another person. Think about it for a moment; if you didn't eat for three days, that is three days of food you can give someone else. This is how fasting can help you learn how to give up and to free you up in order to have more to give.

What about prayer? Again, when you fast you are brought to a place of humility. In this place of humility, you can pray from your heart, the true blessings that God wants from you. Through a fast a whole new dimension in prayer could be opened up to you. But you have to be able to put yourself in that place of fasting so that you can respond to giving and pray a true prayer to God.

WHY A FAST IS CHALLENGING?

The practice of fasting might seem foreign to you or your lifestyle, which is why it is important to get a good grasp of what the practice of fasting entails. Richard Foster stated "In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times. In fact, fasting has been in general disrepute both in and outside the Church for many years. For example, in my research I could not find a single book published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly one hundred years. More recently a renewed interest in fasting has developed, but we have far to go to recover a biblical balance." (Foster, Celebration of the Disciplines, p.47)

Foster states there are two reasons for this total disregard for a subject that is mentioned quite frequently in the scriptures. First off, "Fasting has developed a bad reputation as a result of the excessive ascetic practices of the Middle Ages." Fasting is a practice anyone can do, you don't have to be spiritual to fast, and you don't have to fast for spiritual reasons. Just as we saw in Jesus' time this discipline was abused. In **Matthew 6:16** we read "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others." (ESV) Just like in Jesus' age, this type of posturing continued on into the Middle Ages, the ascetic side of fasting was abused, with many monks and priests not eating for weeks, to show who was "holier". Even in today's society, most people would react with disdain to a "religious" person fasting and making it public. Therefore, applying a lot of baggage to this discipline.

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A second reason this discipline has been lost is “the constant propaganda fed us today convinces us that if we do not have three large meals each day, with several snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation.” How many times have we said “I’m starving”, because we either missed a meal, or our dinner was an hour later than we thought? We in America, for the most part, cannot even begin to understand what starving is. We live in a society which leans toward excessiveness and gluttony, which makes fasting seem out of place with our culture and even our values.

ROADBLOCKS TO A FAST

If you think you are just going to give up something that you are used to having every day of your life without any pain or consequences you are mistaken. Sure, it might be easier for some people, but for most people fasting is difficult. If it was easy everybody would be doing it. Even Hebrews 12:11 Says “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Fasting has its rewards but it is not easy, and something we need to understand. There are many things we can fast from television, consumerism, gossiping, but a Biblical fast revolves around food.

1. **Preparation** The first reason a food fast is hard has to do with preparation. When we fast from food there is a process, we need to go through which may take a week or two to prepare our bodies for, so if you don’t make these preparations then your fast is going to be even more difficult. If you just stop eating for three days, you have just shocked your system, and made a hard fast even more difficult. There are steps to go through, foods to take out of our diet so that when we do fast, we aren’t trying to kill ourselves. (See Fasting Preparation Guide for more details)
2. **Lifestyle** The next reason food fast is hard is lifestyle. Fasting from food is difficult because of our lifestyle here in America. Our lives revolve around food. What’s for breakfast, what’s for lunch, what’s for dinner, and we need to go to the grocery store. Let’s do lunch, let’s go out for dinner. There is this social aspect of eating, that on one hand is good, but if not used properly can really work against us. We as a society struggle with food. Over half of all adults in America are overweight, and around 60% of our children are overweight. Food is an acceptable addiction, with the diet and weight loss industry a multi-billion-dollar industry. We eat too much then we want to lose weight, so we diet. Then something happens and we start eating poorly or too much again, and we are back where we started.

With all of this baggage we already have when it comes to eating, why on earth would we want to fast, except maybe to lose weight, which again is for the wrong reasons. Before we can even begin to think about a fast, we have to come to terms with what food and eating mean to us on an individual level. There may need to be some bonds that are broken in our lives over food before we start to move to a fast.

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- 3. Life** Unless you can find time to get away from your daily life to fast, you are most likely going to fast in the midst of your life. You may not have been asked out to lunch in months, but schedule a 3-day fast and you will get asked out to lunch every day that week. The errands you run, or chores you do are going to take you by your favorite restaurant and you are just going to smell that food floating through the air, and your mouth will water. You will be tempted as you go through daily life, and this is a struggle that you have to be aware of and maybe need to do some things in order to put yourself in a better place so that you are not tempted. But just because you are fasting don't think the world is going to stop around you.
- 4. Health** The last reason a food fast is hard is because of health. Your health may not allow you to food fast, and this is something you have to be aware of. If you are diabetic or have other health issues, you need to be aware of what affects a food fast might have on you. This is where you need to first off consult your doctor on what might be viable for you. Then get creative, you might be able to do another type of food fast, or fast from another aspect of your life which might be unhealthy, or might be keeping you from Christ.

While fasting might be difficult, it is a very rewarding and necessary part of living a life in Christ. Take the time to learn all you can about fasting, about what will work best for you and your life, and then commit to spending time in prayer and meditation during your fast. The rewards can far outweigh the challenges.