

The Power and Purpose of Fasting

Fasting is one of the basic disciplines of the Christian life. It is not for the radical or overly committed, but it is entry level Christianity. Jesus said in Matthew 6:16 “when you fast...” not if you fast. This was in context with prayer and giving, two other elementary principles of the faith. We must get past the misconceptions, our own apathy and press in for the greater things God desires to release to our hearts and lives in this hour.

Motivation for fasting

¹⁶ “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. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ 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.** **Matthew 6:16–18**

- A. The issue is not to create another “rule” of fasting, but to glean the principle that Jesus was addressing. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees was the problem that Jesus was pointing out. They focused on the outward while neglecting the inward.

We can see from this passage that fasting is not an optional practice in the eyes of Jesus and it also carries the promise of reward if we do it with the right motivation. I want to expound on some of the benefits and rewards of fasting.

Bridegroom Fast

“¹⁴ Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?” ¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.” **Matthew 9:14–15**

In this passage regarding fasting we see a foundational principle and motivation for our fasting.

- A. In the Old Testament, fasting became more about mourning in sorrow over sin, crying out for physical deliverance or a religious routine [in the case of the Pharisees]. Jesus gives us insight into a different facet of fasting released in the New Testament.

- B. Jesus is telling the disciples of John that while He is with His disciples, they are not in a season of fasting or mourning for His presence. However, He indicates that after He is taken away [His death, resurrection and ascension] then they will fast.
- C. The premise of our fasting is a longing for the presence and nearness of Jesus, our Bridegroom. The context of Jesus as a Bridegroom calls us into active intimacy and a diligent pursuit of His heart. The strength of this paradigm is the understanding that Jesus has strong, burning desire toward us and is in pursuit of our hearts. He has given us a position of nearness and access to His heart through the Holy Spirit. [1 Cor 2:9–12, Heb 10:19–22] Our fasting is simply a response to His invitation of love and how we position our hearts to receive more of His love and affections. [John 15:9 says that Jesus loves us the way the Father loves Him. We must respond to this and position our hearts to encounter this amazing truth and outrageous love.]
- D. As we begin to receive more and more revelation and encounter the heart of our Bridegroom God, our desire towards Him increases, our appetite for carnal things and sin begins to shift and we begin to walk in a new measure of freedom and fullness in God.
- E. We do not fast to get God's attention or earn anything from God, fasting positions our hearts to receive what is already given—it is not to move His heart but to move our own heart.

Thoughts

- **Fasting is not limited as a means of humility, repentance or addressing national crisis, but it is one of the greatest avenues to experience the heart of God, allowing His burning desire to ignite burning desire in our hearts as well.**
- “A heart that does not mourn for more of Him is a heart that accepts its current state of spiritual barrenness as tolerable and livable.” **Mike Bickle**
- One value in the kingdom is the hungry and thirsty get filled. We must be those who hunger and thirst for His presence and righteousness in our lives.
- **It is simply not enough to have compassion on the broken and oppressed, we must contend for power to bring breakthrough and freedom to their lives.**
- The principle of prayer is to establish our hearts in intimacy with the heart of God. This then postures our hearts to be sustained when the answer to our prayer comes.

- Many think that prayer is convincing God to do something that He is reluctant to do. Yet the place of prayer and intercession is really our hearts becoming convinced of what He already desires to do. When we are touched with the revelation of His desire, it cultivates a wholehearted cry in our hearts that is in agreement with His heart. This then positions us to receive what we have cried out for.
- Many who are not founded in the place of intimacy and prayer become overwhelmed or overtaken when a new measure of the miraculous, supernatural etc is released. Revival history has proven this: He moves and we cannot sustain it simply because we have not grown deep in intimate prayer.
- Fasting does not earn us God's favor or gifts, but simply position us to receive what is already freely given.
- Fasting releases many rewards: internally our hearts encounter Him, externally our situations are touched by His power and even eternally we receive rewards.
- God's kingdom is governed by prayer—meaning all that will be released and established is through the avenue of prayer.
- God will give us grace to fast as we ask Him to empower us in our weakness. [James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5, 2 Peter 1:2, 3:18]

The Fasted lifestyle

- A. The fasted lifestyle is a call to embrace voluntary weakness to experience more of God's power. This was what God spoke deeply to Paul's heart concerning his dependence upon the Lord for grace and strength.
- B. What is the fasted lifestyle? There are 5 types of "fasting" described in Mt. 6:1–20. **We fast food, time, energy, money and words by giving, serving, praying (with the Word), blessing those who offend us and fasting food as we develop the 8 beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–12).** Each is a form of fasting, in that we are voluntarily embracing weakness by submitting our strengths into God's hands and trusting Him to answer us His way and in His time.
- C. In giving, we fast our money (financial strength). In serving and prayer, we are fasting our time and energy, investing it in others and in prayer. In blessing those who offend us, we fast words and reputation. Fasting from food is not primarily a call to hunger

but to physical weakness. We must embrace “the fasted lifestyle” long term. No one graduates from this lifestyle.

D. Fasting includes restraints of our natural pleasures and/or strengths with the purpose of positioning ourselves to receive freely from the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 58:6–14

⁶ “Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ “If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, ¹⁰ If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. ¹² Those from among you Shall build the old waste places; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In. ¹³ “ If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, ¹⁴ then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Benefits of fasting: Isaiah 58

1. Deliverance and freedom

“to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?”

- Fasting can be a great accelerator of freedom personally and for other individuals. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:4 “our weapons are not carnal, but mighty in God for the pulling down of strongholds.” Fasting is one of the spiritual weapons of the believer to bring down the weapons and works of the enemy.
- After coming from the wilderness on an extended fast, Jesus declared the fulfillment of Isaiah 61 in His ministry. This included freedom for the captives and liberty to the oppressed.
- Jesus came and delivered a young boy from a demonic spirit after the disciples had failed to bring freedom to the boy’s life. Later He told the disciples that “this kind” only comes out through prayer and fasting. Fasting is a key in dealing with demonic spirits and issues that are long standing and not moving.

2. Illumination and revelation

“then your light shall break forth like the morning...”

- Fasting positions our hearts to receive revelation and spiritual illumination
- Lou Engle says fasting creates a landing strip for revelation
- As we purpose to deny the flesh and edify the spirit, our spirit is strengthened and “tuned in” to God’s frequency.

3. Healing

“then your healing shall spring forth speedily...”

- There are many physical benefits for fasting as well as spiritual
- This can also be breakthrough in physical healing.

4. Righteousness

“and your righteousness shall go before you...”

- Areas of our lives that are under the weight of weakness, compromise and sin can be effectively dealt with in a time of fasting. We loose every bond of wickedness that restrains and our righteousness springs forth.

5. Divine Protection

“the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard...”

- Ezra 8:21–23: Ezra proclaims a fast for divine protection
- Isaiah 52:12 also tells us that God is our rear guard

6. Answers to prayer

“then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry and He will say, ‘Here I am.’”

- Fasting and prayer can bring answers to delayed issues and circumstances.
- There is something about fasting and prayer that nothing else can do or replace. We must begin to understand the potency that God has invested in this weapon and use it to effectively see answers to situations we face.
- Like previously mentioned, fasting positions us to hear clearer, therefore because of fasting we are now positioned to hear and receive wisdom that was always available.
- We see this in Daniel 9 as well

7. Divine guidance

“the Lord will guide you continually...”

- In the place of fasting and prayer we can receive divine strategies and plans
- Psalm 23:4, 37:23, Prov 3:5–6, James 1:5–6

8. Strength

“and strengthen your bones...”

- This has implications both physically and spiritually. It is a release of strength to the core of our lives.
- Isaiah 40:31

9. Provision and fruitfulness—even in lack

“and satisfy your soul in drought... you shall be like a watered garden and a spring of water, whose waters do not fail...”

- As we allow our spiritual roots to deepen, we will tap into the never ending supply of the kingdom of God. This is not implying that we will not walk through hard times, but we will be connected to our Father, our Source.
- Fasting and prayer allow us to tap into the strength to endure hard times as well.
- Jeremiah 17:7–8, Psalm 1:1–3

10. Restoration

“Those from among you shall build the old waste places; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.”

- Fasting and prayer prepares us to be launched out in the name of the Lord to restore what has been destroyed

- This concept is connected with the apostolic mandate—we are sent out by the Lord

11.Promotion

“¹⁴ then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.”

- As we humble ourselves before the Lord, He will promote us and exalt us in due time

It is important to note that throughout this passage there are demands placed upon our heart motive and the condition of our heart. If we have a false or distorted motive while fasting [or doing anything in the kingdom] it will be ineffective. Thus, the beginning of this chapter is distinguishing between two types of fasts: the one that the Lord has chosen and backs and the fast that has been twisted by humanity [specifically the nation of Israel at the time]. Jesus also identifies the importance of motive in Matthew 6. We either receive our reward from men or God, depending on our motive.

Why do we fast?

Outside of Isaiah 58 are a few other biblical benefits and reasons for fasting

1. We fast to experience the power of God in personal ministry.

- A. When the disciples could not set a demonized boy free, Jesus told them that kind of demon does not go out except by prayer and fasting (Mt. 17:21). The power of John the Baptist’s preaching was connected to his fasted lifestyle (Mt. 11:18). The Early Church fasted twice a week (Wednesdays and Fridays) to experience more power. Fasting was a regular part of Paul’s life (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27; Acts 9:9).
- B. There are certain things that will not be moved in the realm of the spirit without the weapons or prayer and fasting. God has ordained these “foolish” weapons to overcome the work of the enemy and lead us to breakthrough.
- C. When the children of Israel were captives in Egypt they were not released until their cry came before God. The same situation occurred in Babylon concerning Daniel and Israel— God moves when we position ourselves before Him in fasting and prayer, seeking Him steadfastly.

- D. God really hears, really sees and really acts on behalf of His people when they walk by faith filled obedience to His Word. [see Isaiah 58 as the people questioned whether God saw or heard them]
- E. Many who led the great revivals practiced regular fasting. Examples include John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, and Charles Finney. John Lake (1870–1935) sought God with much prayer and fasting. God released powerful miracles through him. In South Africa, within a five-year period, he witnessed 500,000 healings, led many thousands to Jesus and started hundreds of churches.

2. We fast for the fulfillment of God's promises to our city or nation.

- A. The Lord has prophetic plans and promises for each city and nation. We must actively seek the Lord for their fulfillment. Daniel prayed and fasted for the fulfillment of God's promise to release Israel from captivity to return to their land (Dan. 9:1–3; 10:1–4).
- B. God answered Nehemiah after he fasted and prayed for God's promises to his generation (Neh. 1:3–11; 9:32–38). After Cornelius fasted and prayed, his whole house was saved and a door of grace was opened for the Gentiles to be saved (Acts 10:1–4, 30–31). Paul fasted for the release God's purposes (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27; Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17–18).

3. We fast to stop a crisis (individual or national).

- A. Fasting to seek God for mercy during a personal crisis is seen throughout Scripture. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, being distressed by her barrenness, prayed with fasting. God answered her by giving her a son who grew up to become a prophet (1 Sam. 1:7).
- B. On many occasions, God reversed Israel's desperate situation after they turned to Him in corporate prayer and fasting. Joel prophesied that God would judge Israel using locusts, and then later by an invasion by the Babylonian army (Joel 1:2–18; 2:1–9). On both occasions, Joel called Israel to turn to God in prayer and fasting (Joel 1:13–14; 2:12–15).

C. Jonah warned the wicked city of Nineveh that God was going to destroy them. When Nineveh repented with fasting, the Lord showed mercy and spared the city (Jon. 3:3–9).

3. We fast for protection.

- A. Before Ezra led a group of Jews from Babylon back to Israel to help rebuild their nation, he fasted and prayed to God for protection on the journey because it was so dangerous (Ezra 8:21–23). Travel was dangerous in the ancient world because bands of thieves often attacked groups to take money and supplies.
- B. Esther called the Jews in Persia to fast for three days after Haman set into motion a plan to kill all the Jews (Esth. 3:13; 4:7). Esther first needed protection because she was going to approach King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) without a royal summons (the penalty was death). Many cried out in prayer and fasting (Esth. 4:3, 16; 5:1–6). The Lord spared Esther’s life and then reversed the situation among the Jews concerning Haman’s evil plans (Esth 9:1).

4. We fast for direction.

- A. Throughout the NT, the church fasted for supernatural wisdom and direction.
- B. Paul and others fasted and prayed for direction for their ministry (Acts 13:1–2) and before selecting and commissioning elders of the new churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.

² As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2)

Types of Fasts

Four different types of fasts:

1. A regular fast is going without food and drinking only water or that which has no calories.
2. A liquid fast is going without solid food and drinking only light liquids (like fruit juices).
3. A partial fast, or Daniel fast, abstains from tasty foods and eats only vegetables or nuts, etc.

4. An absolute fast or Esther fast, abstains from food and water (Esth. 4:16). Exercise caution!

The “How To” of fasting

1. Purpose to seek God concerning establishing a consistent fasting time. Purpose to set aside some extra time to seek God through this avenue.
2. During your fast, make sure you are spending time before the Lord in worship, prayer and the Word. The purpose of the fast is to encounter God, not simply refrain from eating. Shut yourself off from other distractions [such as media, entertainment, etc] and position yourself to be deeply impacted.
3. Stay hydrated. It is important that you take in a good amount of fluids to help your body during this time of consecration.
4. It is good to have a purpose or target for your fasting. For example: seeing a friend/ family member saved, breakthrough in a certain area of your heart etc. This gives you something to be consistent in.

Conclusion

There is a tension in fasting and living the fasted lifestyle. While God does reward fasting, the rewards He gives are not earned or deserved by us because of our fasting. We are weak people who can never earn God’s favor or rewards, but can only receive them. We give ourselves to the grace of fasting by positioning ourselves before His infinite goodness. He wants to flood our lives with many rewards—rewards that are:

- A. Internal as our hearts encounter Him
- B. External as our circumstances are touched by His power
- C. Eternal as fasting impacts even our eternal rewards.

Recommended resources

The Rewards of Fasting by Mike Bickle and Dana Candler

Shaping History through Prayer and Fasting by Derek Prince

The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting by Mahesh Chavda

A hunger for God: desiring God through prayer and fasting by John Piper

