

Prayer and Fasting

By Bill Bright (modified for length)

Being Desperate for God

Fasting is one of the most powerful spiritual disciplines of all the Christian disciplines. It is a way to align our hearts with the psalmist, "My soul thirsts for God, the living God" (Psalm 42:2). "It's a means of God's grace to strengthen and sharpen our God-ward affections," writes David Mathis in his book, Habits of Grace. Through fasting and prayer, the Holy Spirit can transform your life.

According to Scripture, personal experience and observation, fasting and prayer can also effect change on a much grander scale. I am convinced that when God's people fast with a proper biblical motive - seeking God's face not His hand - with a broken, repentant and contrite spirit, God will hear from heaven. He will heal our lives, our churches, our communities, our nation and world. Fasting and prayer can bring about a change in the direction of our nation, the nations of earth and the fulfillment of the Great Commission - this is powerful motivation in today's unsettled world.

For those who desire both inward and outward impact, humbling yourself before God through fasting is a good place to start. His power can be released in and through you by the enabling of the Holy Spirit.

Why Should I Fast?

Fasting is one of the Spirit's tools for strengthening and transforming grace in our lives. This spiritual practice is a gift from God meant to grow us and draw us deeper into relationship with Him. If you do not already know this power and the importance of fasting, here are some insights drawn from God's Word to get you started:

- Fasting was an expected practice in both the Old and New Testament eras. For example, Moses fasted at least two recorded forty-day periods. Jesus fasted 40 days and reminded His followers to fast, "when you fast," not if you fast.
- Fasting and prayer can restore the loss of your "first love" for the Lord and result in a more intimate relationship with Christ.
- Fasting is a biblical way to truly humble yourself in the sight of God (Psalm 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 imprint God's Word deeper on 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 and make you a channel of life change to others.

Fasting is not for God; it is for us to humble ourselves before the Lord. When you fast, you will discover more time to pray and seek God's face. And as He leads you to recognize and repent of un-confessed sin, you will experience God's grace to grow and mature you.

How Do I Fast Safely?

As you begin your fast, you may hear from concerned loved ones and friends who urge you to protect your health. And they are right – you should protect your health. But I assure you, if done properly, fasting will not only prove to be a spiritual blessing but a physical blessing as well.

By all means, consult your doctor before you begin your fast. But be aware that many doctors have not been trained in this area and so their understanding may be limited. Even so, it would be wise to ask your doctor for a physical exam to make sure you are in good health. You may have a physical problem that would make fasting unwise or dangerous. Also, if you are taking any type of medication, make sure to talk to your doctor before changing your regimen. Prudence and caution are in order. When you are assured that you are in good health, you are ready to begin your fast.

In spite of the safety and benefits of fasting, there are certain persons who should NEVER fast without professional supervision. For example:

- Persons who are physically underweight or emaciated.
- Persons who are prone to anorexia, bulimia or other behavioral disorders.
- Those who suffer weakness or anemia.
- Persons who have tumors, bleeding ulcers, cancer, blood diseases, or who have heart disease.
- Those who suffer chronic problems with kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, or other vital organs.
- Individuals who take insulin for diabetes or suffer any other blood sugar problem such as hyperglycemia.
- Women who are pregnant or nursing.

How Long and What Type of Fast is Right for You?

If you have never fasted before, I am so glad that you are seeking to learn more about it. Though seemingly counter-cultural today, this discipline has been a major emphasis in the lives of many of the great spiritual leaders throughout history.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist denomination, fasted every Wednesday and Friday and required all of his clergy to do the same. The apostle Paul, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr. and John Calvin all made fasting a continual part of their walks with God. And there are numerous Christian leaders today such as Tim Keller and John Piper who relish and teach of a deepening hunger for God through fasting.

Though convinced of its great value, none of these people had a formula for fasting that they considered the only “right” way. Fasting is about the condition of the heart, not the number of days.

So, start slowly by fasting for one meal per day, or one-day per week, or even one week per month. If you are considering doing an extended fast build up your spiritual muscles by increasing the frequency and duration of fasts over a period of weeks and months.

The Bible Recounts Primarily Two Types of Fasts

A partial fast is described in the book of Daniel. Although the water fast seemed to be the custom of the prophet, there was a three-week period in which he only abstained from “delicacies,” meat and wine (Daniel 10:3).

The two primary types mentioned in the Bible are the “**absolute**” and “**supernatural absolute**” fasts. Both of these fasts are total fasts (no food, solid or liquid, and no water). Paul went on an absolute fast for three days following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9). Moses and Elijah engaged in what must be considered a supernatural absolute fast of forty days (Deuteronomy 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8).

I strongly advise you to drink plenty of liquids as you fast. Obviously, if God leads you to undertake an absolute fast, you should obey. If so, be certain, to the best of your ability, that God is leading you.

Water-only fasts that last for more than several days need to be undertaken with complete rest and under medical supervision because of the extreme danger of over-toxicification, breakdown of vital body tissues, and loss of electrolytes.

Water and juice fasting is recommended, especially if you are going to fast for an extended period of time. This type of fasting will provide you with more energy than absolute, and water-only fasting and still lead you into the humbling experience of denying your desire for solid food that you can chew.

When it comes to making your final decision about what type of fast is right for you, the best advice is to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. He will guide your heart and mind as to what is best for you. Remember, the most important consideration in fasting is your motive. Why are you fasting - to seek something personally from God's hand, or to seek His face in worship, praise, and thanksgiving?

How to Prepare Yourself Spiritually and Physically

Spiritual Preparation

In preparation for this special time with God examine your heart through prayer, and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any un-confessed sin. Scripture records that God always requires His people to repent of their sins before He will hear their prayers. King David said:

“Come and listen, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he did for me. For I cried out to him for help, praising him as I spoke. If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But God did listen! He paid attention to my prayer. Praise God, who did not ignore my prayer, or withdraw his unfailing love from me.” (Psalm 66:16-20, New Living Translation)

In your prayers, confess not only the obvious sins that come to mind, but allow yourself to linger in His presence, giving Him time to show you the less obvious ones as well. You may want to ask God if you are experiencing any of these signs of leaving your first love: worldly-mindedness, self-centeredness, spiritual indifference, unwillingness to share your faith in Christ with others, not spending sufficient time in God's Word, and in prayer, a poor relationship with your spouse, your children, your friends, or other members of your church community.

Physical Preparation

Although fasting is primarily a spiritual discipline, it begins in the physical realm. You should not fast without specific physical preparation.

If you plan on fasting for several days, you will find it helpful to begin by eating smaller meals before you abstain altogether. Resist the urge to have that “last big feast” before the fast. Cutting down on your meals a few days before you begin the fast will signal your mind, stomach, and appetite that less food is acceptable.

Some health professionals suggest eating only raw foods for two days before starting a fast. I also recommend weaning yourself off caffeine and sugar products to ease your initial hunger, or discomfort at the early stages of your fast.

How to Manage Your Schedule While Fasting

How long you fast, the kind of fast you undertake and how you adjust your schedule depends mostly on the flexibility of your daily life. Whether you have a desk job, do manual labor, or are a stay at home mom; there are ways to manage your fast to enhance your life in God while maintaining your daily responsibilities.

Some may want to consider a limited fast of only one or two days of the week. Or you may look to weekends as the prime time to abstain from food. Fasting during major holidays is not always a good idea. Families may be inconvenienced, and temptations to eat can be overwhelming.

There are physical and spiritual reasons to consider adjusting your schedule, especially during an extended fast.

Physical

Throughout your fast, you may feel somewhat weaker than normal. During the first few days, you may feel tired and irritable. Lightening your workload and cutting down on strenuous exercise would be a very good idea to maintain your health and your morale.

Spiritual

Fasting is not just denying yourself food; it is exchanging the needs of the physical body for those of the spiritual. Long times of prayer and Bible reading will be essential if you are to enter into a more intimate communion with God, and maintain your fast to its completion. If your life is continually filled with activity and busyness during your fast, to the neglect of spending extended time with God, you will starve both physically and spiritually. You will find yourself discouraged and frustrated with your fast instead of being benefited and blessed. I don't want that to happen to you. The more time you spend with God in fellowship and worship, and the more you read and meditate upon His Word, the greater your effectiveness will be in prayer. This kind of focused attention will make for a more meaningful fast.

Dealing with the Responses of Friends and Loved Ones

Many people are reluctant to tell others that they are fasting so they will avoid the sin of the Pharisees: fasting just to gain recognition for themselves.

Often that attitude is a result of a wrong interpretation of Jesus' teaching, “that your fasting may not be seen by others” (Matthew 6:18). His point is avoiding self-praise, not total secrecy. Our misguided silence can be a trick of the enemy who does not want us to fast, nor to share with loved ones and friends the benefits of fasting.

By isolating ourselves from the support of other Christians, we will be more susceptible to doubts and negative influences. We need the prayers of our Christian

friends and family members to help us continue when we feel alone, and when the enemy tempts us to give up. Eventually, people will notice you are not eating.

However, I have found that unless you see certain people daily, they do not consider your skipped meal much of a concern. If a non-Christian friend asks, they may be satisfied by such a brief answer as, "I have other plans for lunch today." Christians should be satisfied when you answer that you are fasting.

If friends and family express concern for your health ease their fears by telling them that you will stop fasting the moment you feel you are harming your body, or if the Lord leads you to end your fast. Tell them you are fasting under your doctor's care, which is highly recommended if you have any question concerning your health.

There is usually no reason for telling strangers or casual acquaintances that you are fasting. If you do, they may subject you to a lot of questions that you may not want to answer. In any case use your best judgment, and the Lord's leading when telling people about your fast.

How to Make Your Spiritual Experience the Best it can be

Experiencing God's best from a fast requires solid commitment. Arranging special time with God each day is crucial in attaining intimate communion with the Father. You must devote yourself to seeking God's face even, and especially, during those times in which you feel weak, vulnerable, or irritable.

Read His Word and pray during what were mealtimes. Meditate on Him when you awake in the night. Sing praises to Him whenever you please. Focus on your Heavenly Father and make every act one of praise and worship. God will enable you to experience His command to "pray without ceasing" as you seek His presence. As you enter this time of heightened spiritual devotion be aware that Satan will do everything he can to pull you away from your prayer and Bible reading time. When you feel the enemy trying to discourage you go to God immediately in prayer and ask Him to strengthen your resolve in the face of difficulties and temptations.

The enemy makes you a target because he knows that fasting is a powerful Christian discipline, and that God may have something very special to show you as you wait upon Him and seek His face. Satan does not want you to grow in your faith. He will do anything he can to stop you; from making you hungry and grumpy, to bringing up trouble in your family, or at work to stop you. Make prayer your protective shield against such attacks.

The major reason for fasting is revival: personal, national and global! We want to see the fulfillment of the Great Commission. But praying for our own needs, and interceding for others are also important reasons to fast and pray. Bring your personal needs before the Lord; intercede for your loved ones and your friends. Pray for your church, your leaders and your community. Your prayers, with fasting and humility will help the Great Commission be fulfilled (1 John 5:14-15).

However, do not become so caught up in praying for yourself and others that you forget about simply reverencing and praising God. True spiritual fasting focuses on God. Center your total being: your attitudes, actions, motives, desires, and words on Him. This posture can only happen if God is at the center of our attention. Confess

your sins as the Holy Spirit brings them to mind, and then continue to focus on God and God alone so that your prayers may be powerful and effective.

A renewed closeness with God and a greater sensitivity to spiritual things are usually the results of a fast. Do not be disappointed if you do not have a “mountaintop experience,” as some do. Many people who have completed extended fasts tell of feeling a nearness to God that they have never before known, but some who have honestly sought His face, report no particular outward results at all. For others, their fast was physically, emotionally, and spiritually grueling but they knew they had been called by God to fast. They completed the fast as an act of worship, and God honored that commitment.

Your motive in fasting must be to glorify God, not to have an emotional experience, and not to attain personal happiness. When your motives are right God will honor your seeking heart, and bless your time with Him.

How to Maintain Nutritional Balance and Health from Beginning to End

The prospect of going without food for an extended period of time may be of concern to some, but there are ways to ensure that your body is getting the nutrients it needs so that you can remain safe, and healthy during your fast.

For an extended fast fruit and vegetable juices are recommended. The natural sugars in juices provide energy. The taste, and strength can help motivate you to continue your fast. Try to drink fresh juices if possible. Off-the-shelf juice products are OK as long as they are 100% juice with no sugar, or other additives.

If you are beginning a juice fast, there are certain juices you may wish to avoid, and certain ones that are especially beneficial. Most nutritionists do not advise orange or tomato juice because of their high acid content. These juices are better tolerated if mixed with equal portions of water. The best juices are fresh carrot, grape, celery, apple, cabbage, or beet. Green drinks made from green leafy vegetables are often recommended because they are excellent detoxifiers.

Fruit juices are cleansers and are best taken in the morning. Since vegetable juices are restorers and builders, they are best taken in the afternoon.

Some nutritionists recommend warm vegetable broth, especially if you live in a colder climate.

You may find the following daily schedule helpful...

- 5 a.m. - 8 a.m.
 - Freshly squeezed or blended fruit juices, diluted in 50 percent distilled water if the fruit is acidic. Orange, apple, pear, grapefruit, papaya, grape, peach or other fruits are good.
- 10:30 a.m. - Noon
 - Green vegetable juice made from equal parts lettuce, celery, and carrots.
- 2:30 p.m. - 4 p.m.
 - Herbal tea (decaffeinated) with a drop of honey. Make sure that it is not black tea or tea with a stimulant.

- 6 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
 - Broth from boiled potatoes, celery and carrots (no salt).

Any products containing protein or fat, such as milk or soy-based drinks, should be avoided. These products will restart the digestion cycle, and you will again feel hunger pangs. Caffeine is a stimulant and therefore has a more powerful effect on your nervous system when you abstain from food. This stimulant works both against the physical and spiritual aspects of the fast so, avoid coffee, soda and caffeinated teas.

Another key factor in maintaining optimum health during a fast is to limit your physical activity. Exercise only moderately, and rest as much as your schedule will permit (this especially applies to extended fasts). Short naps are helpful as well. Walking a mile or two each day at a moderate pace is acceptable for a person in good health and on a juice fast. However, anyone on water-only fast should not exercise without the supervision of a physician.

What Physical Effects to Expect

Fasting can be an indescribable blessing, but it is not always easy for everyone. During this time of discipline, self-sacrifice and reflection, we should not be surprised if we experience mental and physical discomforts.

You may experience some inner conflict when you deny yourself the pleasure of eating food. Any sort of fast may leave you feeling impatient and irritable. During a 3-day fast this struggle can intensify toward the end of the second day. That seems to be a favorite time for the “self” to rise up and say, “This is as far as I want to go. I have done enough.”

Following are some physical effects that you might experience and some suggested ways to find relief:

Physical Effect

Hunger pangs are usually the greatest during the first three days of the fast. Your body is adjusting from using the food in your digestive tract (which remains about three days) to consuming stored fats.

Suggested Relief

- Psyllium bulk will help eliminate hunger pangs and also aid in cleansing the body. Several capsules can be taken throughout the day with plenty of water.
- Silymarin tablets may also be helpful, for they are believed to protect and enhance the cleansing of the liver.

Physical Effect

Coldness, bad breath and heightened body odor are possible. You may also experience changes in elimination (constipation or diarrhea), light-headedness, changes in sleep and dream patterns, aches and pains are likely. A white-coated tongue at the beginning of a fast may be a part of the body's pattern of detoxifying. Expect to go to the bathroom often (you will be drinking lots of water).

Suggested Relief

- After the first two weeks of an extended fast, many of these symptoms subside. Persistent aches in a certain area of the body usually means elimination of fatty tissue is going on in that area, which is not harmful. However, any acute pain should be examined immediately.

YOU SHOULD STOP FASTING IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING SEVERE PAIN OR SWELLING.

Physical Effect

Headaches or stomachaches may be a result of salt, sugar or caffeine withdrawal.

Suggested Relief

- Eliminating those items from your diet prior to fasting is the best way to avoid these pains.

Physical Effect

Lower back pain may indicate that you are dehydrating.

Suggested Relief:

- Drink more fluids.

Physical Effect

Dizziness may be caused by a sudden change in position, such as rising suddenly from a chair.

Suggested Relief

- Stop for a second or two, and then recover. Move slowly. (A word of caution: these conditions may be symptoms of other problems requiring medical attention.)

Physical Effect

Minor fasting discomfort.

Suggested Relief

- Take one teaspoon of psyllium seed powder morning and evening. Mixed in lukewarm water, it becomes like Jell-O. This powder will hasten the elimination of toxins from your colon and help to prevent headaches and dizziness for most healthy people. Alfalfa tablets can help control bad breath and cleanse the system. Two tablets at a time can be taken several times a day.

Although some will feel led to stop taking vitamins and herbal supplements during a fast, it is recommended to maintain your regular regime during the fast.

During your fast you may have your struggles, discomforts, spiritual victories and failures. In the morning you may feel like you are on top of the world, but by evening you may be wrestling with the flesh sorely tempted to raid the refrigerator, or count how many more days are left in your fast.

This is especially true if you are new at fasting. To counteract temptations like these spend extra time with the Lord. Step outside for some fresh air, and talk to Him as you walk along. Throughout this process keep sipping water, or juice frequently during your waking hours.

How to Finish Your Fast in a Healthy Way

All the experts agree that breaking the fast is the critical phase of fasting.

While your body is in the resting mode your stomach shrinks and your intestines become idle. So, solid food must be re-introduced very slowly to avoid kidney failure or digestive distress. In fact, after a 40-day fast, you should make a careful transition for at least three days before returning to eating meats, fats, or normal foods.

Further, if you end your fast gradually the beneficial physical and spiritual effects will linger for days. But if you rush into solid foods, you may lose much of your deep sense of peace and experience physical problems such as diarrhea, sickness, fainting, and frankly even death in some cases, due to shock.

Dr. Paul Bragg and his daughter Patricia have conducted fasting clinics for many years. Their book, The Miracle of Fasting, gives a specific daily food plan for breaking a 7-day fast that could be adapted and stretched out over several more days for a 40-day fast.

Most experts agree that breaking a fast with vegetables, either steamed or raw, is best. Your stomach is smaller now, so eat lightly. Stop before you feel full. Stay away from starches like pastas, potatoes, rice, or bread (except for Melba toast) for at least a week. Also avoid meats, dairy products, and any fats or oils for a week or more. Introduce them very slowly, and in small amounts.

Extended fasts are not the only fasts that need to be ended with caution. Even a 3-day fast requires reasonable precautions. It is wise to start with a little soup, or something thin, and nourishing such as vegetable broth made from onion, celery, potatoes and carrots. Fresh fruits such as watermelon and cantaloupe can also be introduced back into your diet.

In terms of resuming any sort of exercise routine, the advice is the same. Start out slowly, allowing time for your body to re-adjust to its usual regime.