



# Bethel

## Discipleship Series

# FASTING

### SCRIPTURE TEXTS:

*Joel 1:14* – “Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD.”

*Daniel 9:3-4* – “And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: And I prayed unto the Lord God, and made my confession...”

## I. FASTING

- A. Fasting is an important Biblical discipline. There are over 70 references to fasting in the Bible. Both Old and New Testament leaders were moved upon to fast before the Lord. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus Christ were led by the Spirit to fast for 40 days. Fasting was also a part of the New Testament church lifestyle.
- B. In this lesson, we will look at the scriptural reasons why fasting should be a regular part of our devotion and service to the Lord.

## II. WHAT IS FASTING?

- A. To fast means to abstain from physical nourishment for a specific period of time. An individual can fast for a single meal, an entire day, for an extended period of many days, or simply refrain from pleasant food for a period of time.
- B. When we fast, we deliberately turn our attention from physical things to spiritual things. By refusing food, we are denying our carnal nature (*Matthew 16:24*) and concentrating on spiritual things (*Matthew 6:33*).
- C. Because America was founded upon the Judeo-Christian ethic, her national leaders have frequently utilized both prayer and fasting in their public devotion to God. The American historic record has numerous calls for national prayer and fasting.

### PROCLAIMED FASTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

*In 1623, William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth Colony, proclaimed a fast to entreat God to save the vital corn crops.*

*In 1636, a law was passed allowing the governor and his assistants “to command solemn days of humiliation by fasting...and also for thanksgiving as occasion shall be offered.”*

*In 1774, George Washington proclaimed a national fast day to avert a possible crisis with Great Britain.*

*In 1798, President John Adams proclaimed a day of solemn humiliation, fasting and prayer to avoid the war crisis with France.*

*In the 1860's, Abraham Lincoln called for three separate days of national humiliation, prayer and fasting to help restore national peace and unity during the Civil War.*

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## III. WHY SHOULD WE FAST?

- A. First, Jesus declared that His disciples would fast. He stated that after He ascended into heaven, fasting would become a part of His disciples' practice.
- **Mark 2:18-20** – “*And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.*”
1. In the Old Testament, fasting was part of the mourning or grieving process after the death or loss of a loved one. Fasting was also a way of mourning when tragic events occurred.
    - **1 Samuel 31:13** – “*And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.*”
    - **Nehemiah 1:4** – “*And it came to pass, when I heard these words (of the destruction of Jerusalem), that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven.*”
  2. In Mark 2:18-20, Jesus is referring to this tradition of the “grieving” or “mourning” fast. While the bridegroom is present, the children of the bridechamber feast and celebrate, but when the bridegroom is taken from them, they mourn and fast. Since we are awaiting the return of our departed bridegroom, Jesus Christ, fasting should be part of our devotion to Him.
  3. Part of our purpose in fasting as Christians is to “mourn” our departed bridegroom; to demonstrate our longing for His return. When we fast, we should experience an increased sense of yearning and desire for our bridegroom's return.
- B. Second, the first church left us an example of fasting. The Scriptures give us a clear record that the disciples and early Christians fasted often – their legacy of fasting is a pattern that we should follow.
- **Acts 14:23** – “*And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.*”
  - **2 Corinthians 6:4-5** – “*But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings.*”

## IV. FACTS ON FASTING

- A. Fasting provides spiritual benefits.
1. While there are many who acclaim of the health benefits of fasting, our main purpose in fasting is a spiritual one.
  2. Fasting is more than a physical event – it is a spiritual activity. Many of the spiritual benefits of fasting are examined later in this lesson.
- B. Fasting is a spiritual weapon.
1. Fasting is a powerful weapon that helps us win victory over ourselves, over the influence of the world, and over the attacks of Satan.
- C. Fasting should be accompanied with prayer. (1 Corinthians 7:5)

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1. Fasting is the partner of faith and should always be supplemented with prayer.
2. In most cases where fasting is mentioned in the Bible, prayer is also included.

D. Fasting is a way in which we “afflict,” submit, and humble ourselves before God.

1. Humbling ourselves before God is a scriptural necessity.
  - **James 4:6** – “...God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”
  - **Matthew 23:12** – “And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”
  - **1 Peter 5:6** – “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.”
2. Ezra proclaimed a special fast that the people might afflict and humble themselves before God to seek His protection.
  - **Ezra 8:21** – “Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.”
3. Fasting humbles both the body and the spirit. Fasting is a way in which we “afflict” our carnality, keeping our body and its desires under subjection to the Spirit.
  - **1 Corinthians 9:27** – “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”
4. Fasting helps us organize our priorities – placing spirit over flesh, the will of the inward man over the will of the outward man.

E. Fasting is often undertaken in times of crisis or great need.

1. The children of Israel fasted as they sought God's help against the children of Benjamin.
  - **Judges 20:26** – “Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.”
2. The people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast after hearing Jonah prophesy of God’s extreme displeasure.
  - **Jonah 3:5** – “So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.”
  - **Jonah 3:10** – “And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.”
2. Regular periods of fasting should be routine in the life of a Christian, as this helps us keep the flesh under subjection – but there are also special times of crisis, disaster, and need that call for more intense campaigns of prayer and fasting.

F. Fasting should be a part of our ongoing life of repentance.

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1. Israel fasted when they repented of idolatry.
  - **1 Samuel 7:6** – “*And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the LORD. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh.*”
2. Ahab fasted when he repented of his wickedness after hearing Elijah prophesy his doom.
  - **1 Kings 21:27** – “*And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly.*”
3. It is important to note that fasting is never mentioned as a necessity of initial repentance. Nowhere in Scripture is it required that an individual fast before repenting, being baptized in water, or receiving the Holy Ghost.
4. However, when a Spirit-filled Christian has erred, made a mistake or fallen into sin, it can be appropriate for that individual to fast as he or she repents before God.

## G. Fasting is a way of finding the will of God more perfectly.

1. When we need to receive specific guidance and direction for our lives, fasting brings us into closer communion with God so that we may more perfectly discover His will.
2. The church leaders in Antioch fasted as they sought God's direction.
  - **Acts 13:2-3** – “*As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.*”
3. When we have important decisions and choices to make, we should seek God with prayer and fasting.

## H. Fasting is a type of worship.

1. All true worship involves sacrifice. We can praise without sacrifice – but we cannot worship without sacrifice. Sacrifice means giving up something that matters to us. When we forego eating as a discipline unto God, it is a form of worship.
  - **Romans 12:1-2** – “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”*
    - a. Our bodies are to be presented to God as an acceptable sacrifice. This involves sacrificing the desires of our flesh to fulfill the will of God.
    - b. One of the strongest desires of the body is for food and nourishment. When we deny this desire for a period of time as a sacrifice unto the Lord, it is an act of genuine worship unto God.

## I. Fasting is not a “hunger-strike.”

1. Fasting is not a stubborn temper-tantrum in which we attempt to force God to do what we want Him to do.
2. We are not coercing God to do our will, but instead, fasting helps us bring our will into conformity to His will.

## J. Fasting is an effective spiritual weapon against the enemy.

1. While fasting does not put “pressure” on God, it can put “pressure” on our adversary, the devil.
2. As Christians, we do not fight Satan with guns, swords, or spears, but we use the arsenal of spiritual weaponry provided to us by the Lord.
  - **2 Corinthians 10:3-4** – *“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds).”*
3. When the disciples encountered a particular man possessed of an evil spirit, they were unable to cast the evil spirit out. When they asked why they were unable to perform this spiritual work, Jesus responded:
  - **Matthew 17:21** – *“Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”*
4. From time to time, Christians will encounter unique difficulties and problems that require the extra spiritual power and authority that can only be obtained through the discipline of fasting.

## V. HOW SHOULD WE FAST?

### A. Fasting should be a personal, private devotion to God.

1. Fasting should not be a public display to draw attention to oneself – in our personal devotion, we should try to make fasting as unobtrusive and unnoticed as possible.
  - **Matthew 6:16-18** – *(Jesus said) “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”*
2. To use fasting as a “spiritual status symbol” violates its purpose – fasting is supposed to humble us, not lift us up with pride. It is against the command of Jesus Christ to be proud or smug because we fast more or longer than other people. Pride, especially spiritual pride, is an offence unto God.
3. Fasting is the inseparable partner of prayer, and accordingly, it is to be utilized in many of the same ways as prayer.
  - a. Prayer can be private and personal (*as in praying in a secret closet of prayer: Matthew 6:6*).
  - b. Prayer can be public and corporate (*as in praying in public worship services: Acts 3:1*).
3. Likewise, fasting can also be private or corporate. When a public, corporate fasting campaign is undertaken, it is impossible to keep the fast totally “secret.” The point of Jesus’ words to us is not that no one should ever know when we are fasting, but rather that we should not do things to make others notice our fasting.

### B. Fasting can be undertaken by an individual or by a group of people.

1. Most of our fasting should be done on a personal, private basis.

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- **II Samuel 12:15-16, 22-23** – “...and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.”
  - **I Kings 21:27-29** – “When Ahab heard those words, he... fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly.”
  - **Daniel 9:3** – “And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer ... with fasting ...”
  - **Luke 2:36-37** – “And there was one Anna, a prophetess ... a widow of about 44 years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.”
  - **Acts 9:9** – (Saul of Tarsus) “... neither did eat nor drink.”
2. However, there are also times when specific periods of prayer and fasting can be proclaimed by a spiritual leader.
- **I Samuel 7:5-6** – “And Samuel said, Gather all Israel ... and they gathered ... and fasted...”
  - **Ezra 8:21-23** – “Then I proclaimed a fast ... So we fasted and besought our God...”
  - **Nehemiah 9:1-3** – “... the children of Israel were assembled with fasting...”
  - **Joel 2:15-16** – “...sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly; gather the people”
  - **Jonah 3:5-10** – “he people ... proclaimed a fast ... from the greatest of them even to the least”
- C. Fasting should be undertaken with the right spirit and right behavior.
1. At certain times in Scripture, God was highly displeased with the fasting of His people, Israel, because it was not done in sincerity and obedience.
- **Jeremiah 14:10-12** – “Thus saith the Lord unto this people, Thus have they loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the Lord doth not accept them; he will now remember their iniquity, . . . When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them...”
2. Anything we offer unto God must be heartfelt and sincere. Worship, Christian service, prayer, or fasting can never be offered as just a repetitious ritual or mindless routine.
3. Jesus warned us that inattentive repetitions are pointless and vain.
- **Matthew 6:7** – “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.”
4. The same is true of fasting. Jesus condemned the Pharisee who prayed aloud in arrogance and proudly announced his repetitious fasting schedule.
- **Luke 18:12** – “I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.”
5. Fasting, to be effective, must be undertaken with a sincere heart and an obedient attitude.
- D. Fasting may be absolute (total, complete) or partial.
1. Most fasts in Scripture were “absolute,” meaning that there is absolutely no food consumed during the time of the fast.
- **Deuteronomy 9:9, 18** – “... 40 nights, I neither did eat bread nor drink water.”
  - **Ezra 10:6** – “Ezra...did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned ...”
  - **Esther 4:16** – “Go, gather together all the Jews ... and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day . . .”
  - **Acts 9:9** – “... and neither did eat nor drink.”
  - **Acts 27:33** – “... This is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having

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*taken nothing.”*

2. It is very important to note here that reason and judgment should be exercised when undertaking any fast.
  - a. Health concerns should always be addressed and regarded when fasting. Each person must fast in a way that is compatible with his or her specific health situations.
  - b. Lengthy and extended fasts should only be undertaken with extreme care and should be monitored diligently. The body can exist without water for only a very short time.
  - c. The 40-day fasts of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were most certainly supernatural events and we should not attempt to copy them. We have no record of the apostles or other disciples fasting for 40 days.
  - d. We must remember that our body is the temple of the Holy Ghost; and we are instructed to properly take care of our bodies and not to neglect or abuse them. To damage the body through fasting is not God’s will for us.
    - **1 Corinthians 3:16-17** – *“Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile (spoil, destroy) the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.”*
3. A fast may also be partial, meaning that restrictions are placed upon the diet for a specific period of time. Certain foods are avoided in this type of fast.
  - **Daniel 10:3** – *“I ate no pleasant bread (foodstuff, provisions), neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.”*
    - a. This type of fast, commonly known as “Daniel’s Fast,” afflicts and humbles the flesh by avoiding all pleasant or enjoyable food and drink.
    - b. When fasting in this manner, individuals drink only water, eat no meat, and consume only plain foods that do not gratify the senses (e.g. plain bread, unsweetened grain cereals, oatmeal, unseasoned vegetables, etc.). In this manner the nourishment needs of the body are supplied, but eating is not an enjoyable experience.
    - c. Following Daniel’s example, this type of partial fast is usually undertaken for an extended period of time, most typically three weeks (21 days).
- E. *Fasting can also be coupled with separating ourselves from other physical comforts, pleasures, and distractions in order to be “alone” with God.*
  - **1 Corinthians 7:5** – *(Husbands and wives) Defraud (deprive) ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency (self-restraint).*
  - When Jesus fasted for 40 days, he separated himself into the wilderness. (Mark 1:12-13)
  - When Moses fasted for 40 days, he separated himself up to Mt. Sinai. (Exodus 34:28; Deut. 9:9)
  - Elijah fasted for 40 days and separated himself unto Mt. Horeb (Sinai). (1 Kings 19:8)
- F. *Fasts may be undertaken for various periods of time.*
  - One night – *Daniel 6:18*
  - One day – *1 Samuel 7:6, 2 Samuel 1:12; 3:35, Judges 20:26*

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- Three days – *Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9*
  - Seven days – *1 Samuel 31:13, 2 Samuel 12:16-23*
  - Fourteen days – *Acts 27:33-34*
  - Twenty-one days – *Daniel 10:3*
  - Forty days – *Exodus 24:18; 34:28, Deuteronomy 9:9, 18, 25-29; 10:10, 1 Kings 19:8, Matthew 4:2, Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2*
1. There is no required length of fasting recorded in Scripture. Each of us should make fasting a regular part of our devotional lives as we feel led of the Spirit to do so.

## VI. WHAT ARE THE RESULTS OF FASTING?

- A. After Moses' fast, He received the commandments of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 9:11)
- B. After Elijah's fast, he heard the Word of the Lord. (1 Kings 19:8-9)
- C. After the city of Nineveh's fast, deliverance came and they were spared destruction. (Jonah 3:10)
- D. After Jesus' fast, He returned in "the power of the Spirit." (Luke 4:14)
- E. After Cornelius' fast, he received a message from God through an angel and through the apostle Peter. (Acts 10:30)
- F. After the apostles gave themselves to prayer, fasting, and the Word, they turned their world upside down. (2 Corinthians 6:4-5; Acts 17:6)

Fasting is a powerful spiritual tool ordained by God to help us bring ourselves into subjection to His Spirit, to defeat the devil, and to win victories over troubling situations in our lives. In fasting, we worship God, draw closer to Him and express our desire for His soon return. Until our bridegroom returns for us, we, the children of the bridechamber, should fast unto the Lord. When He returns, we will celebrate and feast with Him at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Additional reading material (available through the Pentecostal Publishing House):

*Teach Us to Fast And Pray*, Kim Johnson  
*The Way of the Eagle*, John Arcovio  
*When Ye Fast*, Joy Haney  
*God's Chosen Fast*, Shirley Engelhardt

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