

## What is Fasting?

"The essence of a fast is self-denial in order to direct the thoughts to God," said Charles E. Wolfe in a published sermon. "Traditionally this has been the decision not to eat food for a certain length of time so that hunger will remind us of God."

A few render a broader definition, advocating voluntarily refraining from television, people, sleep or sexual relations.

## The Purpose of Fasting

The primary purpose for practicing the spiritual discipline of fasting is to train ourselves to hear and focus on God's voice. That is why fasting must always be combined first and foremost with extended times of prayer.

Early on in this practice, the pangs of hunger can serve as reminders to focus our attention on hearing what God has to say to us. As we develop in this practice, our hearts and minds become more spiritually sensitive to God's voice and less distracted by the complaints voiced by our own bodies.

One reason for practicing spiritual disciplines is to eliminate the things that keep us from experiencing the fullness of life in God. Through this practice of abstaining from food and/or drink, God can break our bondage to being satisfied by satisfying ourselves through our bodily desires.

The more our spiritual hearing becomes attuned to God's voice and less to our own, the more in tune we will be to

the voice of the Spirit of God as He leads us.

When Jesus fasted in the desert He was tempted to turn stones into loaves of bread, but He said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Another time, when Jesus' disciples urged Jesus to eat some food, He responded, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about...My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish the work" (John 4:32, 34). In abstaining from food and/or drink, we discover an alternative source of strength, another kind of food. By abstaining from normal food we begin to develop a taste for the divine kind of food, the bread of God's own words, and the work of fulfilling God's will.

Fasting, however, will reveal more than our dependence on food. As we focus on the presence of God and hearing His voice, instead of attending to the cravings and ravings of our bodies, the content of our character will be revealed to us. We will have a heightened spiritual awareness of being in God's presence, and being in the light of the nearness of His presence will result in the revealing of the condition of our own hearts. As Richard Foster writes, "Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting." This is a benefit to us because with these things revealed, they can now also be addressed, and the process of our transformation will excel.

As we continue the spiritual discipline of fasting, we will begin to prefer the Voice of the Master to the other voices (including our own) which lead us astray. It is this kind of follower that Jesus described:

and the sheep listen to his [the Shepherd's] voice.  
He calls his own sheep by name and leads them

out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice (John 10:5)

## How to Fast Safely

Consider Bill Bright's wise counsel regarding fasting:

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 be assured, if done properly, fasting will not only prove to be a spiritual blessing, but physical blessing as well.

Since our spirit and bodies are interconnected, the benefits go beyond the spiritual realm. Weight loss, cleansing our bodies of toxins, and a sense of physical well-being come from giving our body a temporary vacation from digestion.

"Fasting is a natural physiological process," said nutritionist Dr. Julio C. Ruibal, "From both the scriptural and the scientific point of view, we can have confidence that fasting is not harmful, but rather beneficial when properly carried out."

Fasting even renders clarity of mind. "[Fasting] imparts a degree of acuteness to the understanding," said Samuel Miller in Fasting, "of vigor to the imagination, and of activity and promptness to the memory, which are not experienced in other circumstances."

If you have questions regarding your fitness to fast, then 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 is limited. Even so, if you question your fitness, 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 under any type of medication, make sure you talk to your doctor before changing your regime. Prudence and caution are in order.

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 too thin 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 important organs
- Individuals who take insulin for diabetes, or suffer any other blood sugar problem such as hyperglycemia
- Women who are pregnant or nursing

If you are assured that you are in good health and fit -to-fast, then you are ready to begin preparing to fast.

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