

The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting: A Biblical Study

Drawing Near to God Through Sacred Hunger

Introduction: The Forgotten Discipline

The church has historically championed the principle of "speaking where the Bible speaks and being silent where the Bible is silent"—doing Bible things in Bible ways and calling Bible things by Bible names. We are people of the Book, committed to being trained and shaped by Scripture's authority. Yet despite this commitment, we often neglect practices that appear repeatedly throughout both Testaments. Among these neglected disciplines, fasting stands as perhaps the most overlooked.

Consider this paradox: we excel at fellowship meals and potlucks, gathering around tables to break bread together. But when did we last corporately engage in prayer and fasting? We feast readily but fast reluctantly. This imbalance reveals something significant about our spiritual formation—or lack thereof. This study explores the biblical practice of fasting, its theological foundations, and its essential role in discipleship.

Biblical Foundations of Fasting

Old Testament Precedents

Fasting appears throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, though it receives only one direct command: observance on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:27-32). The Hebrew word for fasting, *צום* (*tsum*), literally means to abstain from food, often depicted as covering one's mouth with the hand—a physical gesture of voluntary restraint.

Despite minimal legislation, fasting emerges as a consistent practice among God's people:

Moses fasted forty days on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18)—not as commanded ritual, but as voluntary response to encountering the Holy One.

David fasted when his child fell ill (2 Samuel 12:16-23), demonstrating fasting as intercession and as acknowledgment of divine sovereignty over life and death.

Ezra proclaimed a fast at the Ahava River, seeking God's protection for the dangerous journey to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21-23). This wasn't superstition but recognition of absolute dependence upon God's provision.

Nehemiah fasted and prayed upon hearing of Jerusalem's devastation (Nehemiah 1:4), combining mourning, repentance, and petition.

Daniel engaged in prolonged fasting while seeking understanding of prophetic revelation (Daniel 9:3; 10:2-3), linking fasting with spiritual discernment.

The Ninevites fasted at Jonah's preaching (Jonah 3:5-9), demonstrating fasting as corporate repentance—even animals participated, signaling cosmic scope of their contrition.

New Testament Continuity

The practice continues seamlessly into the New Covenant era:

Anna the prophetess worshiped with fasting and prayer continually (Luke 2:37), embodying a life of sustained devotion.

Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness before beginning His public ministry (Matthew 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-2), establishing precedent for His disciples.

Paul and Barnabas fasted when appointing elders in every church (Acts 14:23), recognizing the gravity of spiritual leadership and seeking divine guidance.

The Antioch church fasted corporately when commissioning Paul and Barnabas for missionary work (Acts 13:2-3), surrendering their best leaders to God's broader purposes.

The Nature of Fasting: Defining the Practice

Fasting fundamentally means abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose. The practice involves:

- 1. Voluntary cessation of eating** for a defined period
- 2. Replacement of eating time with prayer** and spiritual focus
- 3. Pursuit of God's presence** rather than personal comfort

The duration and frequency remain unspecified by divine mandate. Biblical examples range from partial-day fasts (sunrise to sunset) to multi-day fasts (three days, seven days) to extended forty-day fasts. This flexibility indicates that fasting's value lies not in prescribed formulas but in heart orientation.

Why We Don't Fast: Confronting Our Resistance

Obstacle #1: We Love Food

We genuinely enjoy eating—and rightly so. God designed our taste buds, created diverse flavors, and ordained that eating be pleasurable. The existence of taste buds themselves testifies to God's generosity; He could have designed nutrient intake through some bland, utilitarian method, but instead gave us the capacity to savor and delight in food.

Fasting is not disdain for food but confession that God is better than food. The only thing superior to food is the One who created it. Fasting declares: "Food is good, but God is better. I have an appetite for food, but I have a greater appetite for God."

Obstacle #2: We Don't See the Point

Unlike prayer or Bible study, fasting's practical benefit seems unclear. However, honest self-examination reveals that we don't eat merely for nutrition—we eat for comfort. Comfort itself isn't sinful, but when it becomes an addiction, we've surrendered sovereignty to our appetites.

Many of us are addicted to:

- Physical comfort and the absence of discomfort
- Safety and predictability
- Control over our circumstances
- Ease and convenience

Fasting breaks our addiction to comfort. It forces the question: If you had to choose between God and comfort, which would you choose? Between God and safety? Between God and any good thing that competes for ultimate allegiance?

Spiritual disciplines function as rehearsals for real-world choices. We may never face a literal choice between God and comfort, but fasting trains us to choose God *before* the crisis demands it. During the fast, every hunger pang becomes a prompt: "I choose God over my comfort. I choose God over myself."

Obstacle #3: We're Not Commanded to Fast

This reveals our minimalist approach to relationship—doing only what's required, negotiating the bare minimum. But love doesn't function this way. In any meaningful relationship—marriage, friendship, parenthood—we gladly go beyond requirement to deepen connection.

If we knew something would enhance our marriage or strengthen our friendship, we wouldn't ask, "Do I have to do this?" We'd embrace it eagerly. The same principle applies to our relationship with God. Fasting isn't about obligation but about intimacy.

Jesus's Teaching: Matthew 6:16-18

The Hypocrites' Fast (v. 16)

"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."

The *hypocrites* (ὑποκριταί, *hypokritai*)—literally "actors"—performed spiritual disciplines as theater. They disfigured their faces, adopted mournful expressions, and ensured their fasting was conspicuous. The Pharisees fasted twice weekly (Mondays and Thursdays), but their motivation was public recognition rather than divine encounter.

Notice what Jesus *doesn't* criticize:

- **Not their frequency** (twice weekly)

- **Not their duration** (full days)
- **Not the practice itself**

He criticizes their **motivation**. The issue isn't *how* they fasted but *why* they fasted. They pursued admiration rather than God. They craved the praise of people rather than the presence of their Father. **It's not about the practice; it's about the pursuit.**

The hypocrites received exactly what they sought—human approval—and that exhausted their reward. Their fasting accomplished nothing spiritually because their pursuit was misdirected.

The Disciples' Fast (vv. 17-18)

"But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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."

Three crucial observations:

1. "When you fast" not "if you fast"

Jesus assumes His disciples will fast. It's not commanded, but it's expected as natural expression of devotion. Just as breathing happens naturally in healthy physical life, fasting happens naturally in healthy spiritual life.

2. "Hide your fasting"

As with almsgiving (6:1-4) and prayer (6:5-8), fasting must be concealed from others. Anoint your head, wash your face—present yourself normally. Don't advertise your spiritual discipline. The secrecy protects against performative religion and ensures proper motivation.

3. "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you"

God sees what others cannot. He knows your hidden disciplines, your secret devotions, your private sacrifices. And He rewards—not with transactional payment for services rendered, but with deepened intimacy, increased sensitivity to His presence, and the pleasure of knowing you've pleased Him.

The reward isn't salvation (which comes through grace by faith) but **relationship**. Fasting doesn't earn God's attention—we already have it. Fasting cultivates our awareness of the attention we already possess.

Theological Foundations: Why Fasting Matters

1. Fasting Declares Proper Priorities

Every fast proclaims: "God is more valuable than this good thing I'm surrendering." It's practical theology—embodied confession that the Creator outweighs creation, that the Giver transcends the gifts.

Idolatry occurs when a good thing becomes an ultimate thing—when we say "I can't live without that" about anything other than God. Fasting prevents good things from becoming ultimate things. It reminds us that we can live without food for a season, but we cannot live without God for a moment.

2. Fasting Cultivates Humility

Physical hunger humbles us. It strips away pretense and self-sufficiency. When your stomach growls, you're reminded of your creatureliness, your dependence, your limitations. You're not self-sustaining; you're radically contingent upon provision from outside yourself.

This bodily humility becomes spiritual humility: "I am dependent upon God for everything—physical sustenance, spiritual vitality, eternal life. I contribute nothing to my salvation; I receive everything from His grace."

3. Fasting Sharpens Spiritual Focus

Trading eating time for praying time creates space for God. The typical person spends significant time daily on meals—planning, preparing, consuming, cleaning up. Fasting reallocates this time to prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, worship. The hunger becomes a call to prayer; every pang redirects attention Godward.

4. Fasting Trains Desire

We're not merely thinking beings or even primarily thinking beings—we're desiring beings. Our loves shape us more than our thoughts. James K.A. Smith writes that we become what we worship because we become what we love. Fasting trains our desires, reordering our loves, teaching our hearts to hunger for God more than comfort.

5. Fasting Practices Obedience

Following Christ sometimes requires choosing Him over legitimate goods—even over family (Matthew 10:37-39), security (Matthew 8:18-22), or life itself (Matthew 16:24-26). Fasting rehearses this radical obedience in low-stakes ways. If I can say "no" to a meal for God's sake, perhaps I can say "no" to greater temptations when the stakes are higher.

The Prophet's Rebuke: Isaiah 58 and True Fasting

Isaiah 58 provides the Old Testament's most extensive treatment of fasting, exposing Israel's superficial practice and revealing God's vision for authentic fasting.

The People's Complaint (v. 3a)

"Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?"

The people perform religious duties but perceive no divine response. Their fasts seem futile, their humility unnoticed. They've done everything "right" ritually—so why isn't God impressed?

God's Indictment (vv. 3b-5)

"Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high."

The devastating answer: their fasting pursued self-interest, not God's will. While abstaining from food, they:

- Exploited their workers
- Engaged in disputes and violence
- Maintained oppressive systems
- Continued business as usual in every way except eating

They observed the outward form while violating the inner spirit. Their fasting was mechanically correct but spiritually bankrupt. They bowed their heads "like a reed" and used sackcloth and ashes—all the proper ritual elements—but their hearts remained unchanged.

God doesn't want empty ritual. He wants transformed lives.

God's Alternative: The Fast He Chooses (vv. 6-7)

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

God redefines fasting entirely. The fast He honors involves:

1. **Justice:** Loosing bonds of wickedness, undoing yokes of oppression, liberating the oppressed
2. **Generosity:** Sharing bread with the hungry (ironic—the fast includes *feeding* others)
3. **Hospitality:** Housing the homeless poor
4. **Compassion:** Clothing the naked
5. **Family responsibility:** Not hiding from your own relatives in need

True fasting extends beyond personal piety to social transformation. It cannot be divorced from justice and mercy. **You cannot pursue God's presence while ignoring His priorities.** Your relationship with God and your relationships with others—especially the vulnerable—are inseparably linked.

The Promise for True Fasting (vv. 8-12)

When God's people engage in this holistic fasting—both personal devotion and social action—God promises:

- Light breaking forth like the dawn (spiritual illumination)
- Healing springing up speedily (restoration)
- Righteousness going before them (vindication)
- God's glory as their rear guard (protection)
- Answered prayer: "Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer"
- Divine presence: "You shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am'"
- Light in darkness
- Continual guidance from the LORD
- Satisfaction in parched places
- Strength in their bones
- Becoming like a watered garden, a spring whose waters do not fail

These promises aren't prosperity gospel guarantees of material blessing but assurances of God's presence, guidance, and power for His people who genuinely seek Him in both devotion and obedience.

Integration: Fasting and the Full Spiritual Life

The spiritual disciplines form an integrated whole. You cannot isolate fasting from:

- **Prayer:** Fasting without prayer is dieting. The heart of fasting is extended communion with God.
- **Justice:** Fasting while oppressing others is hypocrisy. Isaiah 58 makes this connection explicit.
- **Generosity:** Fasting should increase—not decrease—our awareness of and compassion for the hungry.
- **Community:** While fasting happens privately, its effects manifest publicly in transformed relationships.

When people who have food choose not to eat, it should cultivate empathy for those who lack food involuntarily. The growling stomach becomes a teacher: "This is what hunger feels like. Now imagine feeling this every day with no end in sight." Fasting bridges the experiential gap between the privileged and the poor, creating compassion that motivates action.

Practical Application: How to Fast

Determining Duration and Frequency

Scripture prescribes neither. Consider:

- **Partial-day fasts:** Sunrise to sunset (the most common pattern)
- **24-hour fasts:** One full day
- **Multi-day fasts:** Extended periods (with caution regarding health)
- **Regular practice:** Weekly, monthly, or situational (before major decisions, during crisis, for intercession)

Always consult a physician if you have medical conditions (diabetes, blood sugar disorders, eating disorders, pregnancy) that make fasting dangerous.

What About Non-Food Fasts?

Technically, "fasting" refers specifically to abstaining from food. However, the principle of voluntary abstinence from legitimate goods to pursue God applies broadly. Consider periodic abstinence from:

- Digital devices and smartphones
- Television and entertainment
- Social media
- News consumption
- Shopping or spending
- Any habit that consumes time and attention

While not "fasting" in the technical sense, these practices embody the same spirit: surrendering good things to pursue the better thing—intimacy with God.

Maintaining Secrecy

Jesus commands that fasting remain hidden:

- Don't announce your fast
- Don't complain about hunger
- Don't draw attention to your sacrifice
- Present yourself normally (anointed head, washed face)
- When hunger prompts prayer, pray silently or in private

The secrecy serves two purposes:

1. **Protects motivation:** Prevents pride and the temptation to seek human approval
2. **Directs focus:** Keeps the relationship between you and God, free from social dynamics

Combining Fasting with Prayer

Replace eating time with:

- **Scripture reading:** Let God's Word nourish you spiritually as food nourishes physically
- **Intercession:** Pray for others—their burdens become yours as you share their hunger
- **Confession:** Hunger strips away pretense, making honest self-examination easier
- **Worship:** Express devotion through song, journaling, or meditation on God's character
- **Listening:** In the emptiness and quiet, become attentive to God's still, small voice

Corporate Fasting: The Church Together

While Jesus emphasizes private fasting, Scripture records corporate fasts:

- **Joel 2:12-17:** National fast called for repentance
- **Jonah 3:** Nineveh's city-wide fast
- **Ezra 8:21-23:** Community fast for journey protection
- **Acts 13:2-3:** Church fasting before missionary commissioning

Corporate fasting demonstrates:

- **Unity in dependence on God**
- **Shared burden-bearing** (Galatians 6:2)
- **Collective repentance** or intercession
- **Serious approach to major decisions** affecting the body

Imagine a church where members regularly fasted and prayed together during crises. Imagine calling the congregation to fast and pray when a family faces devastating illness, when church leaders must make weighty decisions, when missionaries enter dangerous territories, when the church must confront sin or pursue reconciliation.

This is biblical Christianity—the body of Christ functioning as family, bearing one another's burdens, pursuing God together through both feast and fast.

Contemporary Challenges: Fasting in Modern Context

The Comfort Addiction

Western Christianity struggles uniquely with fasting because we're immersed in comfort culture. We expect:

- Climate control in every season
- Unlimited food availability
- Entertainment on demand
- Pain relief for every discomfort
- Convenience in every transaction

Fasting confronts this comfort addiction directly, declaring: "I can choose discomfort for God's sake. My ultimate allegiance isn't to ease but to Christ."

The Productivity Idol

We measure value by output and efficiency. Fasting seems counterproductive—you're less energetic, potentially irritable, certainly less productive. But spiritual disciplines aren't about productivity; they're about formation. You're becoming someone, not just accomplishing something.

The Individualism Problem

We privatize faith, compartmentalize spirituality, and resist accountability. Biblical fasting, however, occurs within community—people fast *for* each other, fast *with* each other, and let their fasting bear fruit in *relationships* with each other.

Theological Synthesis: The Ultimate Fast

Jesus Himself becomes the ultimate theological commentary on fasting. His forty-day wilderness fast preceded His public ministry, but His entire incarnation represents a kind of extended fast—the voluntary surrender of divine privileges for redemptive purposes.

Philippians 2:6-8 describes Christ's self-emptying:

"Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Jesus "fasted" from divine glory, from heavenly comfort, from angelic worship—surrendering the legitimate goods of heaven to accomplish the Father's redemptive will. His entire earthly life was a fast from His rightful privileges.

When we fast, we participate in Christ's pattern of self-denial for higher purposes. We don't fast to earn God's favor—Christ has secured that. We fast to conform ourselves to Christ's image, to practice His self-giving love, to prepare ourselves for sacrificial obedience.

Conclusion: Pursuing the Father

Fasting matters not because of some magical formula but because of **what we pursue through fasting**:

We pursue the Father's PRESENCE: Fasting says, "I want more of You, God. I want to experience Your presence more fully. I'm willing to surrender comfort to gain closeness."

We pursue the Father's PLEASURE: Fasting says, "I want to please You, Father. I want to know that You delight in me, that my life honors You, that my choices reflect Your priorities."

We pursue the Father's PROMISES: Fasting says, "I trust Your promises, Father. You promised to see secret devotion, to reward hidden disciplines, to draw near to those who draw near to You."

These pursuits transcend fasting's mechanics. Whether you fast from food for an afternoon or abstain from social media for a season, whether you fast weekly or only in crisis, whether you fast alone or with your church family—**it's not about the practice; it's about the pursuit.**

Final Exhortation

God's people have always fasted. For thousands of years, from Moses to David, from Ezra to Nehemiah, from Jesus to Paul, God's covenant people have voluntarily abstained from food to pursue their Father. Not because they had to. Not because of command or compulsion. But because they recognized that **food is good, but God is better.**

The Father sees your secret disciplines. He knows your hidden devotions. He rewards—not transactionally but relationally, drawing you closer, making His presence more real, intensifying your awareness of His pleasure.

In a world addicted to comfort, fasting declares radical allegiance to God. In a culture of constant consumption, fasting practices contentment and sufficiency in God alone. In an age of self-indulgence, fasting embodies self-denial for redemptive purposes.

Fast in pursuit of your Father's presence. Fast in pursuit of your Father's pleasure. Fast in pursuit of your Father's promises.

And discover what God's people have known for millennia: when you hunger for God more than food, He satisfies in ways that food never could.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."
(Matthew 5:6)

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think fasting has become such a neglected discipline in contemporary Christianity?
2. How does Isaiah 58 challenge individualistic approaches to fasting and spirituality?
3. What's the difference between fasting as ritual performance and fasting as genuine pursuit of God?
4. How might regular fasting break addictions to comfort, security, or control in your life?
5. What would corporate fasting look like in your local church? What circumstances might call for it?
6. How does Christ's self-emptying (Philippians 2:6-8) inform our understanding of fasting?
7. Why is it crucial that fasting remain hidden rather than public?
8. How does fasting from food create empathy for those who experience involuntary hunger?
9. What non-food "fasts" might be spiritually beneficial in contemporary culture?
10. How can the church recover fasting as normal spiritual practice without falling into legalism?