

What the Bible teaches about how to

Fast



More Effectively

by Robert Curry

Jesus Said “When You Fast” — Are We?

During His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said “when you fast” (Matt. 6:16), but He didn’t say when—at that time.

Later, when the disciples of John asked Jesus why His disciples weren’t fasting, He said after He returned to heaven, “then they will fast” (9:15). Are we?

Fasting is the most powerful tool in our Christian toolbox (also prayer, Bible study and meditation.) Some things do “not go out except by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21). Fasting is our big gun for big problems, big situations and big spiritual growth. It enhances Bible study which enables us to wield the sword of the Spirit (Heb. 4:12). Do we remotely grasp the spiritual power fasting makes available?



What is fasting?

The Internet abounds with advice from gurus. We’d probably be better off listening to Yogi Bear!

We want what God in His Bible teaches about fasting.

People say they are fasting when they choose to go without one particular kind of food or drink for a period; when they limit themselves to water or juices; or the latest strategy where you limit all your eating and drinking each day to eight, 10 or 12 hours out of the 24. Sorry, 24 is not fasting!

Actually, kidding aside, I have been losing weight when I limit all eating to eight hours per day (carefully stated to cover for the times I cheat out of weakness!). A bonus is that it makes fasting for 24 hours easier if you are already used to fasting 16 hours of the day!

Fasting in the Bible means going without all food and drink for a period, usually a day. Mordecai and the Jews fasted three days for Esther (4:16). Jesus and Moses incredibly fasted 40 days, Moses twice! Hopefully nobody needs a disclaimer saying don't try this at home! The most I've ever lasted is two days.

For 50 years now, I was always taught that

Fasting about once a month

is probably the best guideline for when to fast, if a person wants to stay spiritually tuned and zealous. Growing in grace and knowledge (2 Pet. 3:18). Overcoming (Rev. 2:26). Despite best intentions to fast this regularly, be forewarned that there will be times when we get rudely awakened that the “month” was really months ago!

The fasting chapter

is Isaiah 58. Anytime I choose to fast, I start by studying this chapter anew. And I always find something fresh and instructive in it to chew on and drink in.

We are obviously striving to show God how serious we are about something. God knows how hard it is for us to go without food and drink! Fasting very quickly impresses upon us how desperately we need our Provider and Sustainer!

We must come humbly seeking God's will, not “to make your voice heard on high” (v. 4). In this marvelous chapter God describes the kind of fasting He chooses (v. 6) and how we should go about a fast so He will “reward you openly” (Matthew 6:18).

Another reason I always go right to this chapter when I fast is that my *Scofield Study Bible III* gives chain references to fasting throughout the whole Bible, and I have added to theirs. I share these references with you, in hopes that you will appreciate them for a Bible study—why not while fasting!

- Exodus 15:22—Israel found no water for three days, God said wait

- Judges 20:26—Israelites inquire of God before battle; God gives victory after a fast
- 1 Samuel 1:3-7—Hannah prepares for worship and prayer; God gives Samuel
- 1 Samuel 31:13; 1 Chronicles 10:12—David mourned death of Saul in seven days of fasting
- 2 Samuel 12:16—David tries to save his son, fasted seven days
- 1 Kings 21:27—Ahab humbles himself before God
- 2 Chronicles 20:3—Jehoshaphat knows what to do though he thought he didn't! Eyes on God!
- Ezra 8:23—Asks God for protection for loved ones and possessions
- Nehemiah 1:4—Asks God for favor with king
- Nehemiah 9:1—Israel repents
- Esther 4:16—For deliverance for Esther and the Jews
- Psalm 35:13—David fasted for sick
- Daniel 6:18—Darius' concern for Daniel in lion's den, asking God to keep lions fasting!
- Daniel 9:1—Daniel fasted for his nation and for understanding
- Joel 1:14—Day of the Lord at hand
- Jonah 3:5-10—Ninevah people and animals fast
- Zech. 7:5—Are we really fasting for God?
- Matthew 17:21—Some things come out only by prayer and fasting
- Luke 17:10-14—Fast like the tax collector not the Pharisee!
- Acts 13:3—Church in Antioch sends off Paul and Barnabus, fasting for direction of Work

These Bible examples have

Inspired me at key junctures in my life & changed the course of it

Especially in my early days as a Christian, God would usually answer a fast quickly and dramatically, so as not to discourage me. He still does but the answer is often "You're ready for more now! Keep trusting in Me, you need more patience!" Character is what we need more than anything!

A Christian Who Doesn't Fast?

As a youth desiring to be Christian, I never heard about anybody fasting, except Mahatma Gandhi, and didn't know what the Bible says about it.

So I never fasted. Oops! I didn't realize Jesus said "When you fast"—not if!

Jesus fasted

40 days to be up to His encounter with the Tempter. This was no ramadan—Jesus fasted during the 40 nights also!

Because the Bible details only Satan's no-doubt top three lures, it's easy to think He was tempted only three times, maybe three different days. But Jesus was "tempted for 40 days" (Luke 4:2).

Since Jesus was going to walk the earth 3-1/2 years unmarried, with 12 male companions—many rough and earthy fishermen—it amazes me that Satan didn't try some kind of sexual temptation.

Maybe he flashed that the other 37 days! Jesus became our High Priest because He "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Satan is the wily deceiver, but he should have known that the result of even his three best pitches would result in him striking out. Fasting helped Jesus spiritually focus with clear-headed thinking and prodded Him to rely on His Father.

It's interesting that Jesus didn't say much about fasting except that a Christian must not do it "with a sad countenance ... disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting" (Matt. 6:16). Jesus said to shower and comb. Fast in secret and the Father would reward us openly.

Jesus talked about the Pharisee who fastidiously disciplined himself twice a week but was really only praying "thus with himself" (Luke

18:11)—because he trusted in himself and despised others. Proper fasting would have helped him humble himself and repent of his horrible attitudes!

Remember how Jesus said His disciples would fast when their Bridegroom was taken away (Mark 2:20). Today Christians must fast to be ready like the five wise virgins when the Bridegroom returns!

When & how often still on the table

A Christian must continually assess when and how often to fast. A person might want to fast for lunch on a workday. You might stop a fast when an answer comes from God.

A person should consult a doctor if any risk is foreseen. For me, where I don't drink coffee which often leads to withdrawal headache, the challenge is always mental not physical.

So a Christian who doesn't fast? Plain and simple—an oxymoron.

Fasting is spiritual survival. These evil days are flying by fast. Regular fasting helps us to hunger and thirst for God's way.

When God Seems to Ignore Our Fast

In my early years as a Christian, God responded to my fasts, often the very day. He knows how hard it is for a human to fast, and I think He didn't want me to get discouraged and give up.

In recent years, many fasts it seemed like God didn't pay any attention. The person wasn't healed. The problem continued. No sign of what to do.

What's with that?

God knows what befuddles us.

“We have fasted before you!” they say. “Why aren't you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don't even notice it!” (Isa. 58:3, New Living Translation).

We must stop and consider that we have a personal relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ our Elder Brother. What's important is our spiritual condition and character rather than physical matters and “gimmes” we usually fast about.

God is not a genie who must grant “yes” just because we rub the bottle by not drinking from it. He is The Master Timer. He knows what is best for not just me—but all concerned and even those not concerned!

Jesus said if we fast to the Father, “your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matt. 6:18). That is an absolute promise I believe and claim. No matter how it seemed, God did not ignore my fasts.

After all, fasting is accompanied by prayer, and the Bible is very clear in promising that God hears and answers our prayers right away.

As Gabriel told Daniel, “The moment you began praying, a command was given. And now I am here to tell you what it was, for you are

very precious to God ... Since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your request has been heard in heaven. I have come in answer to your prayer” (Dan. 9:22, 10:12, NLT).

David concurred: “Your promises are backed by all the honor of your name. As soon as I pray, you answer me; you encourage me by giving me strength” (Psa. 138:3, NLT).

You can count on it: God will quickly respond to our prayers and fasting!

But God may say “wait” or “no.”

A “no” is rare

I can think of only one case in the Bible of a “no” to somebody fasting.

God through the prophet Nathan told David that the son, born after he took Bathsheba from Uriah and then had Uriah killed, would die.

David fasted for seven days because “Who can tell whether the Lord will be gracious to me” (2 Sam. 12:22). He only stopped when the child died.

God was gracious all right but also just! David needed the punishment for the horrendous sins. And we should consider that our Master Timer was merciful to His king because David would have probably starved to death if the child lived long enough! David accepted his punishment (Psa. 51) and went on to serve God.

Thinking back, I can’t remember an out-and-out “no” to any of my fasts other than when somebody died instead of being healed. We know that we can’t live on forever in this flesh, and we wouldn’t want to! It’s interesting that when James 5:14 says anybody sick should call for an elder of the Church, God’s promise is “And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will *raise* him up” (verse 15). Those fasts will eventually be answered in the resurrection!

Examples of “wait”

Hannah persisted “year by year” (1 Sam. 1:7). She asked humbly as a “maidservant” and poured her heart out. She told God specifically what she wanted and vowed to dedicate a son to Him. God said we should reason with Him (Isa. 1:18), and at the right time He gave her Samuel.

Nehemiah was so sad to hear about the walls of Jerusalem being broken down that he fasted and prayed. It appears that Nehemiah had been asking “let Your servant prosper this day” (verse 11) “for many days” (verse 4).

Hannah and Nehemiah persisted until The Master Timer said “yes”! Jesus gave the parable of the unjust judge and taught, “And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?” (Luke 18:6). What might seem long to us might seem “speedily” to God (verse 8). That can happen when a day is like a 1,000 years!

If we are really asking for God’s will and not our own, we will, guaranteed, receive the right answer!

“For all the promises of God in Him are **Yes**, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

YES!

Fasting for Self-Examination & Victory Through Christ

“If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and *turn from their wicked ways*, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14).

This verse has become very popular during the coronavirus pandemic. Yes, God, heal our land—our earth! How many notice that God demands that we turn from our wicked ways.

Intercessory stalwarts in the Bible like the prophet Daniel included himself: “We have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and judgments” (Dan. 9:5).

Fasting enhances our prayers and Bible study to understand God’s righteous eternal law by which we see clearly what sin is (Rom. 3:20) and humble ourselves to cooperate with God in turning from it.

Paul said “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you, unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Cor. 13:5).

Seeing ourselves as God sees us is one of the objectives that especially calls for prayer and fasting. Our hearts are so deceitful (Jer. 17:9).

In Zech. 7:5-12 God corrected the people, “When you fasted ... was it really for me that you were fasting? And even now *in your holy festivals*, aren’t you eating and drinking just to please yourselves?” [New Living Translation]. It was all selfish!

Most people do not notice that fasting plays an integral role in two of God’s holy festivals: Passover and the Day of Atonement.

In 1 Corinthians 11:28-31, Paul also said Christians must examine themselves in preparation for taking the Passover in a worthy manner.

Fasting is not to wallow in self-pity. It should lead to spiritual victory! Paul said to properly examine ourselves and then take the Passover.

“Christ is our Passover” (1 Cor. 5:7), and we are justified by His death and saved by His life (Rom. 5:7)!

Points to examine

It’s interesting how Isaiah begins the fasting chapter: “Shout aloud! Don’t be timid. Tell my people Israel of their sins!” (Isa. 58:1)

Wouldn’t it be better if we humble ourselves and examine ourselves so God doesn’t have to use somebody else to do it to us!

- Do we only seem delighted to learn all about God? (verse 2)
- Do we ask God to take action on our behalf, pretending we want to be with Him? (verse 3)
- Are we only fasting to please ourselves? (verse 3)
- Are we just going through the motions of penance? (verse 5)

We’d better not because God says, “This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me” (verse 4).

We’d just be going hungry and thirsty!

We should pray as David did: “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults” (Psa. 19:12-14).

Doing this fasting and self-examination should never result in feeling “overwhelmed by our sins” because, as David boldly thanked God, “you forgive them all” (Psa. 65:3, NLT). “What festivities *await us inside your holy temple.*”

Actually, today we are God’s holy temple! (1 Cor. 6:19).

Upon fasting and self-examination, victory in Christ awaits!

Lessons from Fasts That God Answered Fast

Remember that God knows our frame (Psa. 139:15). So He appreciates how hard it is for us to go without food and drink. He loves to see His children hungering and thirsting after the Spirit instead of the flesh.

It will inspire us to study the fasts in the Bible that God answered fast.

Judges 20:18-20—when asking isn't working, the power of asking in humility with fasting

During civil war between Benjamin and the other tribes of Israel, Israel asked God which of them should go up first to battle Benjamin. The Lord said “Judah” and Israel lost 22,000 men. You’d think they should have asked *whether* they should go up! Next Israel asked if they should again draw near to battle Benjamin. The Lord said “Go up against him” and they suffered another 18,000 loss!

Finally Israel came to the house of God and wept and fasted. Phinehas this time very humbly asked if they should go battle Benjamin—or should they cease. They wouldn’t be able to take much more massacre from the left-handed slingers! And the Lord said “Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.”

Lesson: We must not presume and expect God to rubber stamp what we have already decided is the solution. We must humble ourselves to seek God’s will.

2 Chron. 20:1-30—when you just don't know what to do

When Judah was invaded by a great multitude, Jehoshaphat jumped in the right direction—he feared! So he “set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.”

First Judah's king reminded God who He is and what He promised. God hadn't forgotten. We forget! The United States was settled by primarily the tribe of Manassah which means "forgetful." Today we have forgotten God and have been speedily kicking Him out of public life.

"O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do."

Lesson: Jehoshaphat really knew what to do: "but our eyes are upon You." Isa. 58:9 concurs! "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'"

The battle was God's—not theirs! They didn't need to fight in this battle! When God said to "position yourselves," they knew that the best position is on your knees fasting! That's the way to "stand still and see the salvation of the Lord." Yes, maybe a figurative anatomical challenge, but stand on your knees!

But Judah also did their part in addition to fasting. Showing 20:20 vision, they rose early and went out as God commanded.

They sent their Levitical choir out ahead of the army—ahead—and something that really should encourage any choir, it was when they began to sing and praise that the Lord set ambushes and defeated the invaders.

How reminiscent of the dedication of Solomon's temple. The moment the glory of the Lord filled the temple wasn't during Solomon's speech but when "the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord" (2 Chron. 5:13-14). A choir would hope to achieve such unity on the first note!

Obviously God would enjoy us including singing and praising in our fast—even if neighbors might not agree!

Acts 13:3—the Church in Antioch sent off Saul & Barnabus after fasting & prayer

Lesson: Fasting is vital at key junctures in doing the Work of God and taking the gospel of the Kingdom into all the world (Matt. 24:14). Individually we should fast about how we can best serve the Work of God.

Jonah 3:5-10—people of Ninevah fast & repent

Lesson: Their fast which included everybody—even the animals—changed God’s mind from the punishment He promised.

These are some of the inspiring examples in the Bible about fasts that God responded to quickly.

“He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him” (Heb. 6:10, New Living Translation).

The One Day of the Year When God Commands Us to Fast!

A big surprise to most Christians is that there is one more example in the Bible where Jesus said when!

As the YHVH of the Old Testament who interacted with His people back then, He is the One who commanded us to fast on one special day of the year. When is the Holy Day where we must “afflict our soul” (Lev. 23:27)?

The Day of Atonement

Most biblical holy days have something to do with feasting and good eating. But for this Holy Day, God took the E out! It’s FAST not FEAST! The Bible calls this holy day “the Day of Atonement.” The New Testament refers to it as “the Fast” (Acts 27:9). Some call it Yom Kippur, and sure Yom means “Day” but maybe there’s more reason it’s not Yam or Yum!

Because it involves 24 hours of fasting with no food or water. We are to “afflict” ourselves to humble ourselves in submission to God. To feel on a gut level how utterly dependent we are on our Creator and Sustainer for our very life. And we want to reconcile now to God so we’ll be ready to serve all of humanity when Christ returns and sets His hand to restore the earth. This a day of CLOSENESS and POWER AWAITING!

The Day of Atonement pictures God facilitating the whole world becoming at-one-ment with Him by removing satan the devil, his demons and his influence for the 1,000 years of Christ’s glorious reign on earth.

The big news is there is a new sheriff in town!

The whole world will feast then! On abundance and joy!

For now we hunger and thirst after righteousness—the foundation of God’s throne (Psalm 89:14).

Satan & his demons are removed from rulership & influence

“cast into the bottomless pit ... so that [they] should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished” (Rev. 20:3). You’d have to *expect* this to occur on the first Day of Atonement of Christ’s administration [apparently nine days after Jesus rides. The Bible doesn’t say how long it takes to dispense the Seven Last Bowl Plagues]. This pivotal event was acted out on this annual Holy Day sending the “goat-of-departure” alive into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable man (Lev. 16:21)—likely Michael the archangel.

A Jubilee year begins on a Day of Atonement (25:9). This being my 50th year as a Christian feels in a way like a Jubilee year!

What irony that God commands His people to do this just five days before heading off to the Feast!—the Feast of Tabernacles. There is no better way to humble ourselves and to help us feel the misery of this world and its sin. Then five days later we start celebrating the return of Jesus to rid the world of sin and misery and bring the restoration of all things!

Yes, it “afflicts your soul” and that’s good! God afflicts the comfortable so that we can comfort the afflicted (attributed to Finley Peter Dunne)!

Besides the obvious physical benefit of emptying and cleansing the digestive system a few days before we will be eating and drinking “whatever our heart desires” at the Feast of Tabernacles which pictures the bounty of the Millennium, we need to humble ourselves to be spiritually ready to serve under Christ in His Kingdom. And we need to sigh and cry for this suffering world (Ezk. 9:4).

When Atonement comes, as it will on Sept. 28, 2020, it would prick my conscience—stab, actually—if I hadn’t fasted since Atonement last year. I would be neglecting so great a salvation (Heb. 2:3).

When fasting throughout the year, we should be including the key points of the Lord's Prayer outline, asking God to bring His Kingdom and to deliver us from the Evil One!

Yes, It's Time to Pray, But Better Yet, Fast!

Uncertainty. Lonely. Don't know who to trust. What's next?

With each passing day of coronavirus quarantine, many are seeing the need to pause Instagram and Netflix and spend more time in prayer. They are seeing firsthand the importance of talking live to loved ones, and realizing that they have been shortchanging God, which is actually their loss. That's great!

But the Bible teaches that when we really want to draw closer to God, it's time to fast.

Fasting is powerful when we do it individually. But is it ever

Powerful when God's people do it together!

Like when the spiritual Church of God prepares for Passover. Like when we keep the Day of Atonement.

Today we have the obvious connections with needing God's deliverance from the coronavirus for the whole world.

On Facebook we are seeing regular notices of groups announcing worldwide fasts. Even more important than praying and fasting for deliverance from the coronavirus will be to humbly seek God's will for how to finish His spiritual Work on this earth to pave the way for the soon-coming of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of God on this earth (Matthew 24:14, 28:18-20). We will ask God to open doors for reaching people while the threat of this virus has stirred up renewed interest in God and His will.

We will humbly ask God to prepare us and use us despite all our shortcomings.

His next Holy Day coming is Pentecost

on May 31, 2020. In A.D. 31, Jesus Christ started His Church on that Holy Day and provided His Holy Spirit to power them!

We can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). Not by our power or might, but by His Spirit (Zechariah 4:6).

It's time to pray more. Time to fast. The Bible teaches us how. God the Father and Jesus Christ will be with us in Spirit!

Who else wants to reap the blessings of fasting!



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unless otherwise noted

robertcurry6@hotmail.com

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