

Fasting & Prayer

Fasting is the spiritual discipline of voluntarily abstaining from something, usually food, in order to focus more intentionally on God. Often it is tied to mourning and weeping for sin or great danger. It is also connected to prayer in times of earnestly seeking God's leading and blessing. Trace through the Bible's teaching by looking up the following texts.

Key times when fasting is mentioned in the Bible:

1. In times of intense intercession & seeking of God (for mercy or powerful intervention)
 - a. 2 Samuel 12:16, 21-23 (David seeking God's healing for son — also an expression of repentance)
 - b. 2 Chronicles 20:3 (Jehoshaphat's call in light of overwhelming foes)
 - c. Esther 4:3, 16 (Jews responding to threat of genocide; Esther's preparation before going before the king)
 - d. Daniel 9:3 (Daniel seeking God regarding end of exile)
2. In times of repentance
 - a. 1 Kings 21:27 (Ahab's repentance after confronted by Elijah)
 - b. 1 Samuel 7:6 (After attack by Philistines)
 - c. Joel 2:12 (After devastating locust plague)
 - d. Jonah 3:5 (Ninevah, after Jonah's preaching)
3. In times of worship and dedication
 - a. Leviticus 23:26-32 (called "The Fast" in Acts 27:9; tied to the Day of Atonement)
 - b. Esther 9:31 (Purim)
 - c. Nehemiah 9:1 (Consecration after building wall)
 - d. Luke 2:37 (Anna in temple)
4. In times of seeking God's direction and guidance
 - a. Judges 20:26 (Seeking God's direction after defeat)
 - b. Especially for church officers, missionaries, etc
 - i. Acts 13:2,3 (Setting apart Barnabas and Saul)
 - ii. Acts 14:23 (Appointing elders)
 - c. Nehemiah 1:4 (Tied to mourning for news about state of Jerusalem, seeking what Nehemiah's response should be)
 - d. Ezra 8:21-23 (Ezra seeking the right way to guide the people safely back to Jerusalem)
5. In times of mourning
 - a. 1 Samuel 31:13, 1 Chronicles 10:12 (Israel grieving Saul's death)
 - b. 2 Samuel 1:12 (David grieving Saul's death)

The benefits that come from fasting include:

(based on Wayne Grudem's analysis in Systematic Theology, pp. 390-391):

1. An increase in our sense of humility and dependence upon God
2. More time to focus on prayer (rather than eating)
3. Provides a reminder that we must continually sacrifice all of ourselves to the Lord
4. A good exercise in self-discipline, strengthening our ability to refrain from other desires (which are sinful) by voluntarily refraining from eating (which is needful and not sinful)
5. A heightened sense of alertness, spiritually and mentally, giving us a focused sense of God's presence
6. Giving us a way to express our earnestness and the urgency behind our prayers

The dangers of fasting include:

1. Using a fast to appear holy
 - a. 1 Kings 21:12 (Jezebel and Ahab)
 - b. Zechariah 7:5 (dealing with periodic fasts set to remember different aspects of the Fall of Jerusalem)
 - c. Matthew 6:16 (Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisee's hypocritical pretenses)
2. Seeing fasting as merely an external ritual or as a way to manipulate God
 - a. Isaiah 58:3-6 (While fasting people are seeking their own desires, driving their workers hard, allowing contention and strife to remain in their relationships, tolerating injustice and oppression)
 - b. Jeremiah 14:12 (People fast but "greatly love to wander; they do not restrain their feet" {v. 10})

Are we required to fast?

1. Jesus did not teach much about fasting and He appointed no specific fast for His disciples.
2. However, Jesus did seem to assume that we would fast
 - a. Matthew 6:16 ("And *when* you fast . . .")
 - b. Matthew 9:15 (When the bridegroom is taken away then "they *will* fast.")
3. Therefore, it seems that fasting cannot be made "mandatory" but is a tool for corporate and private times of seeking God.