

A Biblical Understanding of Fasting

Scripture references: Matthew 6: 16-18; Ephesians 5: 15-21; 1 Corinthians 9:27

Fasting has been a common practice in all ages and among all nations. However, as New Testament Christians and must understand New Testament fasting we will learn that fasting does not change God, that He is the same before, during and after you fast. But fasting will change you. It will help you become more sensitive to the Spirit of God. You will be encouraged to examine and follow the scriptural reasons for fasting, the length for a fast, an interesting alternative to traditional view of fasting. Fasting that pleases the Lord. Isaiah 58: 1-14

An Understanding of Old Testament Fasting

Fasting has in all ages and among all nations been an exercise much in use in times of mourning, sorrow and afflictions. Yet there is no Bible example of fasting to be seen before the time of Moses. Although the Bible doesn't say so, it is presumed that the patriarchs of old fasted until Moses' time. We know this because there was a great deal of mourning among people of the old covenant.

Moses enjoined no particular fast in his five books, except upon the solemn Day of Atonement in Leviticus 23:27, Moses talks about "*afflicting your souls*". In Hebrew this means, "*Ye shall humble yourself deeply before God inwardly by sorrow, and by judging and loathing yourselves; and outwardly by fasting and abstinence from all carnal comforts and delights*".

Since after the times of Moses, fasting became common among the Jewish people.

After Israel's defeat at Ai, Joshua and the leaders lay on their faces before God until evening. Joshua 7:6 ---- a 12 hours fast!

Judges 20:26 speaks of fasting until evening. More examples in the Old Testament are, 1 Samuel 7:6 and 2 Sam. 12:16.

Should My Goal Be A 40 Day Fast?

A mistake many people make in teaching on fasting is picking out isolated portions of scripture and misconstruing them. Any Bible subject can be pushed out of context and do more harm than good.

Example:

1. Jesus fasted for 40 days ... Matt 4:1-11
2. Elijah fasted for 40 days ... 1 Kings 19:1-8
3. Moses fasted for 40 days ... Ex. 34: 28-35

An Understanding of Fasting in the New Testament

Nowhere in the New Testament did Jesus institute any kind of fast in His commands to His disciples, Jesus never enjoined any fast to be kept.

Paul said he fasted, but in all his letters to the church, starting with Romans, there is not a single reference telling the church to fast. We are encouraged to pray but in connection with demonic activity, healing or anything else, we are not told to fast.

Fasting and Self Control

1 Cor. 7: 4-5 shows husband and wife behaviour during a fast.

We should live a fasted life:

- Control our eating habits
- Control our sleeping habits
- Control our emotions
- Control our mind sets
- Control our external and internal pleasure such as: Television, sports, sex, coffee, cigarettes, chocolates, gossip, worry and anger

Different Kinds of Fast

Daniel fasted 21 days, he ate no pleasant bread. Dan. 1:5-16

What Can I Accomplish by Fasting?

Internally:

- A quality time is set for seeking God without distractions. Isaiah 58: 1-14 speaks about keeping one's flesh (natural or carnal tendencies under and quiet).
- To enhance spiritual awareness.

Externally:

- To loose bands of wickedness
- To undo heavy burdens
- To set the oppressed free
- To break every yoke of bondage

What Can I Expect During a Fast?

- Hunger
- Expulsion of toxins will manifest many times by a headache
- A purging, repairing and rejuvenation of your physical body to bring the body into its normal level of chemical balances
- An immediate need to eat when hunger returns but eat slowly depending on the length of the fast
- Once you have settled into the fast, there will be an increased spiritual awareness and power

Biblical Fasting -- What It Is and How To Do It

by Dennis Rupert

Let's begin with a little quiz on the subject of fasting:

- Who was the first person who fasted in the Bible?
- What was the longest length of time of a fast?
- Who were the three people who fasted for 40 days each?
- Do you fast on a periodic basis?

Now you probably knew that Moses was the first recorded faster in the Bible. And perhaps you also knew that the longest time of fasting was for 40 days. You may have even guessed all three of the men who fasted for 40 days. But the last question is a bit different from the first three. It may even be a little threatening, because it involves an evaluation of our life - not just head knowledge of Biblical facts. If you are like me, I would try and squirm out of it by asking what you mean by "a periodic basis." But we should not avoid the question. This fourth question is very important. Even more important than the other three.

Fasting has been out of vogue for at least 150 years. In the twentieth century church, the idea seems alien to us. God's Word assumes that fasting will be a regular part of a Christian's life. Yet for most of us, it's not. If we were to make a study of fasting in the Bible most of us would find ourselves very challenged about this neglected area of Christian discipline. I'd like to encourage you to do something about that problem. But before I make that challenge I want to talk to you about what fasting really is, some Biblical principles on fasting, and some of the appropriate occasions for fasting according to the Scripture.

A Word about God's Provision of Food

I don't know if you ever thought much about a Biblical perspective on food. 'Why did God give us food?' 'How are we to think about food?' 'Can we enjoy eating?' The Bible gives us answers to these questions. According to the Scripture, food is given to us as a gift from God for four reasons. Food is given to us for:

Enjoyment - The variety of tastes found in creation is not an accident. God gave us such a wide variety of eatable types of food and a highly developed taste system, so that man would find pleasure in eating. Sometimes Christians, especially when we have been raised in more legalistic churches, have a hard time believing that we are allowed to enjoy anything! But we are! Food is meant to be a source of joy (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25; 5:18). And so are a lot of other things in God's creation. We are allowed to enjoy our food.

Sustenance - Even in the garden of Eden, Adam needed food to sustain his life and give him energy to do the tasks God had assigned him. Plants were given to Adam and Eve for this purpose: Genesis 1:30. Later on animals were given for the same purpose: Genesis 9:3. Both plants and animals are God's provision for our nourishment.

Fellowship - Genesis 18:1-8 gives us one of the first examples of fellowship and food. All through the Old Testament the people of God came together for fellowship over food. God made food for fellowship. He even commanded that some of the sacrifices offered to Him at the temple were to be shared with others. These were communal meals -- meals in which the whole community sat down and ate together (see Deuteronomy 12:6,7,18). Families still find a resource of love, fellowship, discussion, and understanding when they come together to eat.

In fact, in my childhood home, the dining table was one of the few times that we were all together as a family. The meal became a focal point for conversation, communication, discussion and teaching in our household. That's the way God intended it. The Family of Christ still breaks bread together in the Lord's Supper and one of the purposes of the Eucharist is for fellowship (1 Corinthians 10:17). In Revelation 3:20 Jesus Christ's fellowship with believers is described as a meal. And at Christ's second coming we all get invited to a banquet (Revelation 19:9)! Food was made by God to bring us together.

Worship - Food also is a source of worship. We should be very conscious of the fact that food is a gift from God (Matthew 6:11 & 1 Timothy 4:3b-4). In fact, Paul says that every bit of food "should be received with thanksgiving" (1 Timothy 4:3). Hence, every meal becomes an occasion for thanksgiving. When we put food to our mouths at the beginning of the meal (Acts 27:35) and when we sit back in our chair with satisfaction (Deuteronomy 8:10), our natural reaction should be Godward gratitude. According to the Bible food was created to be a source of thanksgiving and worship.

The Bible tells us that food was given for four reasons. God has created food for the purpose of enjoyment, sustenance, fellowship, and worship. Yet God also has a place for fasting in our lives. But before we find out where that place is, let's see exactly what the Bible means when it talks about "fasting".

What Biblical Fasting is Not

Some people take even the most pure of religious exercises and twist it to their own ends. Fasting is one of those religious acts which people have often misunderstood and misused. So let's be sure that we are clear on what Biblical fasting is not:

1) A Physical or Psychological Discipline - God never tells people to fast as a purely physical discipline, i.e. dieting for the purpose of making the body beautiful or for some other physical benefit. I'm not saying that dieting is wrong -- only that this is not found in the Bible. Dieting may or may not be helpful to you personally, but the Bible never encourages "fasting" for that reason alone. When the Bible uses the term "fasting" it has spiritual goals in mind -- something very different than Weight Watchers or Low Carb diets.

As a side comment, let me add that you need to be careful of using Biblical fasting as a spiritual smoke screen for problems such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia. In the case of bulimia, fasting was never meant as a preparation (or a penance) for gluttony. Anorexia nervosa and bulimia are usually evidences of deeper emotional needs which can be met through the help of a competent Christian counselor. Don't "spiritualize" what is really a need for emotional healing. Seek help from those who care.

Of course, I am not denying that fasting can have physical and psychological benefits. At age 34 I began putting on weight around the middle. I grew 20 pounds in one year. Since I have been fasting on a regular basis the weight gain has stopped and I feel and look better. But I don't fast to keep my weight down. I fast to seek God. Additionally, many Christians testify to possessing a greater amount of discipline in their lives once they began fasting on a regular basis. The discipline of conquering the desire to eat transfers over to other areas. This is a helpful by-product of fasting, but should not be an end in itself. God never encourages fasting for solely discipline or self-denial reasons. Some of the monks and spiritual hermits of days-gone-by used fasting in this manner. But that is not a Biblical reason for fasting. God has a higher purpose in mind for fasting.

2) A Manipulative Tool - Sometimes fasting is viewed as an attempt to twist God's arm or to win His approval. But God doesn't respond to pressure. One group of people in the book of Acts tried to get God on their side by manipulative fasting: "In the morning some of the Jews made a plan to kill Paul, and they took an oath not to eat or drink anything until they had killed him. They went to the leading priests and the older Jewish leaders and said, 'We have taken an oath not to eat or drink until we have killed Paul'" (Acts 23:12,14). But God did not hear their prayer and their plan did not work.

Using fasting in a manipulative way was done by the people in Jeremiah's day too. God said, "Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burn offerings and grain offering, I will not accept them. I will destroy them with the sword, famine, and plague" (Jeremiah 14:12). Fasting didn't move God one iota.

We must never think of fasting as a hunger strike designed to force God's hand and get our own way! We don't need to strong arm God. God is good (Psalm 119:8) and eager to answer our prayers. He is generous (James 1:5) and eager to give us 'good things' (Matthew 7:11). Don't use fasting to try to push God into a corner. Maybe God would rather let you starve and join Him in heaven!

3) A Hypocritical Religious Exercise - By Jesus' time fasting had become a very important part of the Jewish life. Perhaps overly important would be a better way of saying it. Based on Luke 18:12a, we know the Pharisees fasted twice a week. The Talmud tells us that this was on the 2nd and 5th day (Monday and Thursday). Why those days? According to the Pharisees it was because Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to get the Law on the 5th day and returned on the 2nd. At least that's what they said. But if you look closely into Jewish history, you find another possible reason for the Pharisees fasting on Monday and Thursday. Market day in the city of Jerusalem was on the 2nd and 5th day! Everyone from the countryside came to town on those days. It was on these two days that the Pharisees chose to hold their fasts. They would walk through the streets with their hair disheveled; they would put on old clothes and cover themselves with dirt; they would cover their faces with white chalk in order to look pale; and they would dump ashes over their head as a sign of their humility!! Fasting had become a "look-at-how-spiritual-I-am" exercise. It was a hypocrisy. Biblical fasting is not hypocrisy. It is not a manipulative tool. It is not a physical discipline.

What Biblical Fasting Is

First of all, let's look at the root word which is used for "fasting." The Greek word for fasting is *nesteia* -- a compound of *ne* (a negative prefix) and *esthio* which means "to eat." So the basic root meaning of the word simply means "not to eat."

But what does this "not eating" food mean? Why did people in the Bible "not eat?" We find a clue in Leviticus 16:29. This verse says that fasting is synonymous with "afflicting one's soul." We gain some insight here about how the Hebrews viewed fasting. Fasting is more than just "afflicting one's body". It is "afflicting one's soul." In other words, fasting in the Hebrew mind is something my soul participates in. Fasting is denying my self. It is denying not only my own body, but also my own wants. It is a way of saying that food and my desires are secondary to something else. Fasting is "afflicting one's soul" -- an act of self-denial. But it is not only an act of self-denial and here is where the monks and hermits went wrong.

Biblical fasting is "not eating" with spiritual communication in mind. How do we know this? Because Biblical fasting always occurs together with prayer in the Bible - ALWAYS. You can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast (Biblically speaking) without praying. Biblical fasting is deliberately abstaining from food for a spiritual reason: communication and relationship with the Father.

Types of Fasting

Let's take a look at the different types of fasting in the Bible, because I don't want you to feel overwhelmed by the thought of going without food for days and days. There are types of fasting that don't involve such a radical commitment. The Bible gives examples of many different kinds of fasting. (The terms "normal fast," "partial fast," and "radical fast" which appear below are not Biblical terms. They are entirely of my own making and simply a way to categorize the different fasts we see in the Bible.)

The Normal Fast: There are very few rules when it comes to fasting. What you do is really between you and the Lord. There is only one fast command in the Bible and that was the fast on the Day of Atonement. This fast was from sunset of one day to sunset of the next (Leviticus 16:29;23:32). Since, people usually don't eat during the night that makes the fast fairly easy, since you can eat again in the evening before retiring to bed. According to the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible: "The rabbis ruled that one could not eat a quantity as large as a date on this day...According to the Mishna, Yoma 8:1, on the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat, or drink, or bathe, or anoint oneself, or wear sandals, or to indulge in conjugal intercourse" (Zondervan Encyclopedia, vol 2, 502). Of course, this direction is not from the Bible, but perhaps we can look at that as a template for a "normal fast." So in this type of fast the person abstained from food and liquid for a period of one day (from sunset to sunset). This is a normal fast.

The Partial Fast: In this type of fast, the emphasis is placed on restriction of diet, rather than abstaining completely from eating. Examples are: Daniel, Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego eating only vegetables and drinking only water (Daniel 1:15) and later on when Daniel alone practiced a limited diet for three weeks (Daniel 10:3). Some people would argue that this isn't really a fast at all, but Daniel 10:3 does use the word "mourned" which is a Biblical occasion for fasting (see below) and a common synonym for fasting.

The Radical Fast: This type of fast is one in which the person refrains from both food and water OR simply food (but not water) for an extended period of time. A radical fast can be harmful to your health and in most cases should not exceed three days. An example of a radical fast can be found with Esther and her household. Esther decided to fast for three days abstaining from both "food and water" both "day and night" (Esther 4:15-16). The rabbi Ezra and the apostle Paul also went without food and water for three days (Ezra 10:6-9; Acts 9:9). David is another example of a radical fast. He went seven days without food (but probably with liquid) as a plea to God to save the life of his child (2 Samuel 12:15-20). Fasts that extend beyond three or seven days can be found in the Bible, but these exceptions were based upon direct guidance from God or a supernatural ability given by God to complete the fast. Examples of these extreme fasts are: Moses (Deuteronomy 9:9-18 and Exodus 34:28); Elijah (1 Kings 19:8); and Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11).

Why Fast?

God said, "When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you" (Jeremiah 29:13,14). When a man or woman is willing to set aside the legitimate appetites of the body to concentrate on the work of praying, they are demonstrating that they mean business, that they are seeking God with all their heart.

Fasting is an expression of wholeheartedness. This is clear from Joel's call to the nation of Israel: "Yet even now," says the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting. . ." (Joel 2:12).

Andrew Murray said, "Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything - to sacrifice ourselves - to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God."

How do you know when to pray and fast and when to just pray? That is not a question that someone else can always answer for you. But here is a principle: In God's word we always find fasting connected with a very troubled spirit or a very anxious heart before the Lord. So a reason for fasting is not something you choose on the spur of the moment. Rather the reason is a consuming one. In a sense, it's not something you choose, so much as something that chooses you, because it's that important.

So why fast? To demonstrate that we are seeking God "with all our heart." Fasting puts things in proper focus. It is a physical way of saying, "Food and the things of this life are not as important to me now as (fill in the blank) ."

Of course, denying yourself food to focus on God and His program shows humility. That is why fasting is also the equivalent of the phrase "to humble oneself before the Lord" (Psalm 35:13; 1 Kings 21:29; Ezra 8:21). When a person is really concerned about the things of God, he will humble himself. There will be times when he will abstain from the enjoyment of food to continue concentration and focus on that which is important to God.

Some Biblical Principles on Fasting

Fasting is Assumed by the New Testament: When Jesus spoke about fasting, he didn't say if you fast, but "when you fast" (Matthew 6:16). Our Lord assumes that Christians will fast. And from the rest of the books in the New Testament we know that they did.

There once was an inappropriate time for fasting though: when our Lord was here on earth. During that time Jesus' disciples never fasted and that seemed unusual to the religious leaders and John the Baptist's friends. "Then the followers of John came to Jesus and said, 'Why do we and the Pharisees often fast for a certain time, but your followers don't?' Jesus answered, 'The friends of the bridegroom are not sad while he is with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast.'" (Matthew 9:14-15).

Now Jesus is no longer physically present with us. He will not be until His second coming. So until the rapture, our Lord knows there will be times when fasting is an appropriate response. He is not here and because of that there will be spiritual struggle, and tribulation, and a need to fast.

The Occasion for a Fast is Voluntary: Fasting was looked upon as a very great virtue in the early church. In fact, they thought so highly of fasting that they inserted the term "fasting" into the Biblical text even though it wasn't in the original manuscripts (check various translations or margin notes for Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29; Acts 10:30; 1 Corinthians 7:5)! This emphasis upon fasting also caused them to do the very thing the Pharisees had done, which was to prescribe certain set times for fasting: twice a week on Wednesday and Friday!

We need to be careful to avoid pitfalls of legalism like this. Surprisingly, a particular day for fasting was commanded in Scripture only once -- on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The fast on the Day of Atonement was connected with a deep mournful spirit in confessing sin. Now in the New Covenant, Jesus Christ has become our atonement offering, so we no longer even need to observe the Leviticus 16 Day of Atonement! In all the rest of the Bible there are no other Scriptures which command fasting at a specific time or on a specific occasion! None!

So when should a Christian fast? When he or she feels the Spirit of God leading them to fast. The occasion for fasting is a totally voluntary decision. Some of the specific times when people in the Bible fasted are listed in the next section. But basically we can say a Christian may decide to fast whenever there is a spiritual concern or struggle in his or her life. Of course, there may be times when those in authority over us proclaim a fast, as was done by King Saul (1 Samuel 14:24) or Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:3). But normally and ultimately that decision is solely between us and the Lord.

The Length of a Fast is Voluntary: When we were looking at a "normal fast" (see above) we noted that a fast was usually for one day. In addition to the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:32) you can see examples of one day fasts in Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 14:24; 2 Samuel 1:12; and 2 Samuel 3:35. The Jewish day was counted from sunset to sunset, so this meant that the fast would be broken (that is, food could be eaten) after sundown. However, some fasts were longer. The fast of Esther continued 3 days, both day and night. At the burial of Saul the fast was seven days (1 Samuel 31:13) and David also fasted seven days when his child was ill (2 Samuel 12:16-18). The longest fasts we find in the Bible are for forty days: Moses (3 times -- Deuteronomy 9:9,18; Exodus 34:28), Elijah (once -- 1 Kings 19:8), and Jesus (once -- Matthew 4:2). The Biblical principle here is that the length of time you fast is determined by your own desires and the occasion or purpose of the fast. The duration can be that which the individual or group feels led to set. There is a great deal of freedom in the Lord here. However, the more common practice of a "normal fast" appears to be one day.

How You Spend Your Time While Fasting is a Personal Decision Too: My ideas about fasting were shaped more by the world and what I saw in the media than by God's Word. So I grew up with the idea that fasting was something done by cloistered monks in prayer cells, hermits in caves, and very spiritual people on sacred retreats. But that's not the way the Bible thinks about fasting. In the Bible, fasting often occurs as something you do while carrying on your everyday activities!

Matthew 6:16-18 demonstrates this, since Jesus pictures a situation in which Christians are among other people going about their normal duties and activities. In fact, soldiers involved in the activity of warfare sometimes fasted (1 Samuel 14:24) as well as the sailors on the ship with Paul (Acts 27:33). There is a certain sense in which fasting, even in the midst of your daily activities, becomes a constant prayer to the Lord. And in the actual experience of fasting, a periodic pang of hunger can become a good reminder to send up a short "arrow prayer" for the particular thing about which you are fasting.

What a marvelous freedom God gives us in the area of fasting. Jesus assumes that we will fast, yet he leaves the choice of when to fast, the length of our fast, and the decision of how we will spend our time while fasting completely up to us!

Fasting Does Not Negate Our Responsibility to be Obedient to God: We cannot fast and pray expecting God to bless when there is known sin in our lives. Fasting does not impress God with our spirituality to the point that he ignores our disobedience. On the contrary, genuine fasting will always cause us to examine our hearts to make sure everything is right with Him.

The people of Isaiah's day thought that they could fast in disobedience and God would hear them. But God said, "on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high". (Isaiah 58:3b-4).

Occasions for Fasting

'When is it appropriate to fast?' 'What types of situations should induce a fast?' 'What is a good Biblical reason for going without food?' The Bible has answers to those questions. We find seven occasions when the people of God fasted. God's people fasted in these situations:

Mourning someone's death: We see fasting and mourning connected in 1 Samuel 31:13; 1 Chronicles 10:12; 2 Samuel 1:12; and 2 Samuel 3:35. In these situations fasting showed the sorrow that the people felt over the loss of someone God used in their lives. In fact, the custom of fasting in mourning was considered normal behavior among the Israelites. That's why the servants of David were so astonished when David got up and ate following the death of his son: "David's servants said to him, 'Why are you doing this? When the baby was still alive, you refused to eat and you cried. Now that the baby is dead, you get up and eat food?!'" (2 Samuel 12:21). When someone experiences the loss of a close friend or relative, they usually don't feel like eating. This is a normal, natural reaction in the initial stages of grief. It is a perfectly good reason to fast.

Mourning sin, i.e. in repentance and confession: Examples of this are found in Deuteronomy 9:18; 1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 21:27; Ezra 10:6; Jonah 3:5; and Acts 9:3-9. When people wished to demonstrate that they were serious about repenting from their sin, they fasted. Our willingness to sacrifice shows the depth of our commitment and in this case fasting is a pictorial way of saying to the Lord, "I care more about getting right with You, God, than I do about even my own life." So a good occasion for fasting is when we are truly grieving over our sins.

A situation of impending danger; for protection: There are occasions when death or danger threaten us. We see from the Scripture that it is certainly appropriate to employ fasting as a means of receiving God's protection during these times. When Ezra was carrying a large consignment of gold and silver to the temple in Jerusalem along a route infested with bandits, he records: "I proclaimed a fast...that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a straight way for ourselves, our children, and all our goods" (Ezra 8:21,23,31). Other examples of fasting for protection are found in Jeremiah 36:9 and Esther 4:3.

Direction: Fasting helps us find God's will. If we expect God to reveal his direction for our lives, we must put Him first. Often this means putting aside the fulfillment of our physical appetites, so that we can focus our attention on Him. We find an example of fasting for direction in 2 Chronicles 20:1-30. Three nations were coming against Judah to destroy them. King Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, proclaimed a fast for the whole nation and they asked the Lord what they should do. God heard their prayer and their fast and gave the people prophetic direction through one of the choir members! God told them what to do.

Acts 13:2 is another example of direction being given by God during a fast. Here we find the leaders of the church of Antioch worshipping and fasting. The Holy Spirit used this occasion to tell the church leaders to choose Paul and Barnabas from among their group and send them out to spread the gospel among the Gentiles. So fasting is one of the ways we seek God's guidance and direction in our lives.

Sickness: There are two examples in Scripture of fasting on behalf of those who are sick: 2 Samuel 12:15-23; Psalm 35:13. Both of these examples come from the life of David. In Psalm 35:13 David says, "Yet when they were sick, I put on clothes of sadness and showed my sorrow by going without food." David saw fasting as a way to ask God for physical healing in the lives of other people.

The ordination of missionaries or church leaders: Fasting appears to have been a regular part of the ordination of church leaders and missionaries. We have already looked at Acts 13, the calling of Paul and Barnabas for missionary service. Verse 3 tells us that after they received this direction from the Lord, then they ordained them for missionary service by prayer, fasting and laying their hands upon them. We find the same thing later on in the book of Acts -- Paul and Barnabas fasted at the selection of the first elders for the new churches they planted (Acts 14:23). It would appear that fasting in these cases is a way of seriously seeking God's blessing, anointing, and power upon the leaders of the church.

Special revelation: The final occasion for fasting is for special revelation. Exceptional insights from God were sometimes given to the prophets and others during periods of fasting. Daniel sought God with fasting to ask God to fulfill His promise to restore Jerusalem (see Daniel 9:9,18 and compare with Jeremiah 29:10-13). He received through the angel Gabriel a wonderful unfolding of God's plan for Israel. If we have sought God in vain for the fulfillment of some promise, it could be that He is waiting for us to humble ourselves by fasting and seek Him as Daniel did.

Other examples of prophetic revelation during times of fasting are found in Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9,18; and Daniel 10:1-3. God decided to speak to these men while they were in the midst of a fast. For those seeking prophetic guidance or revelation today, God may also use the occasion of fasting to speak to them in a very unique way.

What Will Be Your Response?

As we look at the Bible it becomes evident that fasting was practiced more often than Christians usually practice it today. In fact, among most American Christians fasting is entirely neglected. I want to challenge you today to begin the practice of fasting. If you accept the challenge of God's Word to fast, I would like to provide some guidelines for you as you begin to make this a more regular part of your Christian life. The Lord will reward your efforts at fasting. Here are some individual guidelines for fasting:

1. Reach a personal conviction on the subject through careful Bible study. -- Get into the Word on your own. See what the Bible really says about fasting. Check the things that have been said here, read the Scripture references listed in this article and the ones listed below, and go deeper.
2. A physician's note: Make sure you are medically able to fast before attempting it. Some brothers and sisters that I know can only do a one-day partial fast. They drink different types of juice, but take no food or other liquid. God knows and understands their medical condition and does not expect them to harm their "temple" (1 Corinthians 6:19) in order to be spiritual. There are no rigid standards about fasting in the Bible that say you must do this or that.
3. Begin with short fasts and gradually move to larger periods of time if you desire. If you've never fasted before, you need to start slow. Don't start with a three day fast!
4. Be prepared for some dizziness, headache, or nausea in the early going. Most of our bodies have never gone without food for longer than a few hours.
5. Break a prolonged fast gradually with meals that are light and easy to digest. Trying to gorge yourself following a fast will only make you sick and will leave you with an unpleasant memory of fasting.
6. Enter with a positive faith that God will reward those who fast with the right motives. - Jesus gave this promise: "When you fast, your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:18).
7. Sometime during your fast, mix your fast with prayer, time in Scripture reading, singing, or devotional reading. Remember: fasting is not an end in itself. Seek the Lord, not the experience of fasting.
8. Keep checking your motives concerning your fasts. Hypocrisy and spiritual pride can easily creep in. There is a reward for fasting, but only fasting done with the right motives (Matthew 23:28).

Some Biblical References on Fasting to Get You Started:

- Ezra 8:21-23, 10:6
- Nehemiah 1:4
- Esther 4:16
- Job 33:19-20
- Psalm 69:10 & 102:4
- Isaiah 58:6
- Daniel 9:3, 20-23 & 10:3
- Joel 2:15
- Exodus 34:28
- Deuteronomy 9:9-18
- 2 Samuel 12:16-17
- Matthew 4:2, 6:16 & 9:15
- Acts 13:3 & 14:23
- 1 Corinthians 7:5
- 2 Corinthians 11:27-28
- Jonah 3:5-10