

## What is fasting?

In a sense, everyone fasts. When we are in bed asleep, we go without any food or drink. That is fasting. That is why the first meal of the day is called *breakfast*. However, when people speak of fasting, they usually mean a longer period of time of deliberately *choosing* not to eat and drink. It can be for a whole day, part of a day or more than a day.

A health fast is any temporary restricted diet that is supposed to have certain health benefits. But we are addressing fasting for one's *spiritual* health, which involves **abstaining from food and drink while spending a lot of extra time in prayer, meditation and Bible study** (Exodus 34:28; Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9).

Ideally, we should spend most of the fast period praying, studying and reflecting. If this is not possible, at the very least we can do that during the extra time when we ordinarily would be eating.

## Important Reasons for Fasting

Fasting is an important part of building a right and strong relationship with God (Luke 2:36-37; Acts 13:2).

Godly fasting is poles apart from hunger strikes used to gain political power or draw attention to a personal cause. Fasting is an exercise in self-discipline over our fleshly cravings while keeping God first in our thoughts. It liberates us from slavery to our appetites while we focus on the true "Bread of Life," Jesus Christ (John 6:48-51, John 6:63). When fasting, we make a small self-sacrifice to focus on our Savior's awesome sacrifice and plan for us.

By nature, we are egocentric (self-centered), and must work at becoming *God*-centered. A major purpose of fasting is to learn humility—to better understand how great God is and how weak, sinful and needy we are. King David understood this when he wrote, "I humbled myself with fasting" (Psalms 35:13).

God delights in humble hearts. He said in Isaiah 66:2, "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (NIV). In Matthew 5:3 Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit [humble and dependent], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus made it clear that if we fast to show off—to "appear to men to be fasting"—we are hypocrites and will have no reward from God (Matthew 6:16-18). Jesus did not mean that it's always wrong to tell someone you're fasting. Often there's a practical need to tell someone, like your spouse. Jesus was talking about the necessity of right *motives and attitudes*.

Jesus spoke a parable in which a proud Pharisee bragged to God, "I fast twice a week" (Luke 18:9; Luke 18:12). The man imagined himself to be humble and was proud of it! Fasting with such a conceited attitude is worthless.

God wants us to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). When we fast, we increasingly feel hungry and physically weak. In addition to reinforcing the fact that God is the One who sustains us and supplies all our needs, an important lesson of this is that we rapidly

become weaker spiritually when we neglect the nourishment of prayer, Bible study and all other efforts to be God's spiritually transformed sons and daughters.

The Bible has only one command regarding when to fast. God's people are commanded in Leviticus 23 to fast on the Day of Atonement for 24 hours—from sundown to sundown (Leviticus 23:27-32). This fast day is listed here among God's annual appointed times or spiritual feast days.