

Prayer and Fasting Study

A Groups Study on why and how to pray & fast

Study One: What is fasting?

Fasting is one pathway to living our best life!

In Hebrews 11 God tells us that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, and when we pray and fast we can't help but draw closer. We find that prayer & fasting helps us focus on God and receive supernaturally from Him. Think of it as taking the time to sharpen the axe before cutting down a tree. There is a great story about an older wiser man who was able to cut down a third more trees than the younger more vibrant man. When questioned about his success by the young man, the older man explained that whilst it may have looked like he was taking breaks, in actual fact he was sitting down to sharpen his axe which made the job faster, smoother and more successful. When we set aside time for prayer & fasting we find ourselves sharper and can't help but see greater spiritual and natural results in our lives.

Fasting is not a new practice, but something that has been practiced since almost the beginning of time. The patriarchs of old such as David, Moses, Elijah, Daniel, Paul and of course Jesus fasted so that they might draw closer to God and find supernatural strength in Him.

The early church would fast both Wednesdays and Fridays until sundown and the season of Lent, which leads into Easter, was originally 40 days of fasting until the evening meal.

What is Fasting? Let's first talk about what it's NOT which then helps shape what it IS.

Fasting is not

- Abstaining from everyday habits. For example, taking a break from social media, red wine, or x-box is all great and would be extremely helpful to eliminate during the fasting period, however, abstaining from these things is not a Biblical fast.
- Dieting. You may choose to adopt different eating patterns to lose weight or for other health reasons. Some swear by intermittent fasting as a way of regulating digestion. These diets are focused on health changes and have nothing to do with biblical fasting.
- Just another religious exercise to tick a box or to look impressive. The Bible give examples of God rebuking people who fast for selfish reasons and continue to forsake Him.

Isaiah 58:3-5

The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit.

You drive your employees much too hard.

*You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight.
You fast, but you swing a mean fist.
The kind of fasting you do won't get your prayers off the ground.
Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after: a day to show off humility?
To put on a pious long face and parade around solemnly in black?
Do you call that fasting, a fast day that I, GOD, would like?*

Fasting is

Definitions by different pastors:

John Mark Comer – founding pastor and author: “Not eating food in order to feed on the Spirit.”

John Piper - renowned author, pastor, and theologian: “The whole-body hungering for God. The absence of fasting is the measure of our contentment with the absence of Christ. If we don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because we have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because we have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Our soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great.”

Jentezen Franklin – senior pastor who has led his church through a 21 day fast at the beginning of every year for the last few decades: “Hungering for God, it's hunger that drives you and compels you!”

Fasting is a time to focus all our attention on God alone, we feed our spirit and deny our flesh by abstaining from food. The important piece to fasting is to replace the time of eating and food prep with spending time with God, passionately pursuing Him to know Him and to love Him.

Group activation

- Pray before you start the discussion that the Holy Spirit would speak to everyone in the Group.
- Take time as a Group to share any initial impressions of the key thoughts and scriptures.

Questions to think about or discuss

1. What experience have Group members had with fasting?
2. What are your thoughts on abstinence from such things as social media or alcohol NOT being a fast?
3. The statement from John Piper is strong and thought provoking. Discuss his statement in the light of current society and the busy-ness in which we live.

Study Two: The power of prayer & fasting

Fasting is starving the FLESH, not the BODY, to feed the SPIRIT. It's subtle but it's a significant difference. The word "flesh" here signifies our earthly desires that can distract us from a deeper reliance on God.

Galatians 5:16-18 (NKJV) says 'Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.'

It's normal to want to do what we know is right, but something in us is drawn to those things that are wrong. It's the battle of the flesh and the spirit. The good thing is, our spirit is in contact with the Spirit of God. As a follower of Jesus, the call is to crucify or starve the flesh so that we can feed the spirit – and scriptures tell us true freedom is found when we do that.

One of the best ways to starve the flesh is by fasting. When we fast, ideally the desire for fleshly things decreases – whilst our spirit desires are strengthened and increase.

However, the power of fasting is not in the practice - or the do's and don'ts, it's not just about growing our self-discipline muscles. Will power vs unforgiveness or will power vs disappointments or will power vs a relational wound – will not win. The power is in Jesus, fasting is the way to access a power beyond ourselves and transform who we are from the inside out. It's about drawing our energy not from self-reliance, but from reliance on God.

Prayer & Fasting

We also need to establish that the power is in BOTH prayer & fasting. The combination of prayer and fasting is right through scripture. So often we see the example of God's people fasting AND praying when they sought Him for direction or breakthrough in their lives. We can do both without each other, however, there is something extra that takes place when we combine them. There is significance in seeking God with everything. Jeremiah 29:13 says that – 'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with **all your heart**.'

Some of the types of prayer for which fasting is an ally:

Prayers of Repentance. Repentance means to rearrange our entire way of thinking and feeling in order to turn from that which is wrong. For most of us a brief sorry in our mind is the extent of our repentance, which often means we're still living with a hangover of guilt and shame. Biblically, to repent is to turn from your sin and to walk in the other direction.

Joel 2:12 Repent sincerely and return to me with fasting and weeping and mourning.

Fasting is a way to repent well, to invite the Spirit of God to help us confess and rearrange our thinking, feelings, and actions.

Prayers for Grieving. Fasting is a way to process our grief with God as we let him into our pain and heartache. God's people often fasted when grieving over their sin.

Take a look at *2 Samuel 1:12* *They wept and fasted the rest of the day, grieving the death of Saul and his son Jonathan, and also the army of God and the nation Israel, victims in a failed battle.*

Prayer for breakthrough. In May 1940, the British Army of about 375,000 soldiers were trapped at Dunkirk. One of the greatest disasters in UK military history seemed to be in the making with the British army facing annihilation.

There was only one place where the naval boats could come in and rescue soldiers due to the shallow seas. Churchill's advisors estimated that only 30,000 soldiers would get out alive.

It was a pivotal moment with many lives hanging in the balance. King George VI took the bold step of calling the entire nation to a day of prayer and fasting.

A million people queued up outside churches to pray. Millions of people at home called out for their loved ones, pleading with God to rescue them. What happened next was miraculous; the opposing German army made strategic mistakes, freak localised storms grounded enemy attack aircraft, while calm waters allowed for small British boats to reach their forces. Fog cover kept them safe. In all, 330,000 soldiers were evacuated, more than ten times the estimate.

Prayers for clarity. Fasting is an intentional choice to press into the depths of God's heart, and when we do, our spirits are more finely tuned to hear His plans and move forward in our divine purposes.

The apostles modelled this in Acts 13: after fasting and praying, God spoke to them to send out Paul & Barnabas for work He had called them to do.

It's interesting to note that all of the great ancient philosophers fasted, men like Socrates and Plato. They established that when we fast our minds are sharper, more alert and can cut through the noise, the tiredness and exhaustion of life.

Prayers for protection from evil. In Matthew 17, Jesus casts out a demon from a young boy. Jesus explained that this kind of evil does not go out *except by prayer & fasting.*

Group activation

- Pray before you start the discussion that the Holy Spirit would speak to everyone in the Group.
- Take time as a group to share any initial impressions of the key thoughts and scriptures.

Questions to think about or discuss

1. The Galatians scripture mentioned above is no doubt a reality for everyone in the room. Galatians 5:16-18 'Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.' Discuss what this looks like on an everyday level and how people have attempted to overcome the pull of the flesh.
2. Have any Group members prayed and fasted for the specific reasons listed? If so, get them to share their experiences and the outcome of their prayer & fasting.
3. Get Group members to discuss what area of their life they need a breakthrough in? Do they need an emotional wound healed? Do they need a physical miracle, are they facing an insurmountable financial challenge? If they were to pray and fast for this breakthrough, what would that look like?

Study Three: How do we pray & fast?

Key tips:

Mental & physical preparation

One of the secrets for any successful run is to make up your mind how far you're going to run, before you start. If you don't take that important step, your body and mind will quickly decide that the run is over not long after you've started. In the same way with fasting, we need to make a decision, before we start, how long we'll fast for, writing it down helps and then determining to stick to it no matter what temptations come our way.

You can't just turn up and run a marathon without any training. Preparation for marathons start months before the big day, running a little further each time to condition the body. In the same way, when we start to fast we should start small, start short – our bodies require conditioning to it. Once we've succeeded at a one day fast, the prospect of a three day fast becomes far less daunting.

What are you fasting for?

It also helps to pre-determine what we're praying and fasting for. Is it specific people, our future, big decisions or needs... If it's part of a corporate fast with church, there will be prayer points provided to focus on throughout the fasting period. So much happens in the spirit realm when we fast, seek God and believe for the miraculous and the supernatural to take place.

Type of fast

The type of fast is also an important decision. Determine what you think is right for you or what the Holy Spirit is leading you to do. It could be a full fast where you drink water only or you could eat just one meal a day. Another option is what is called a Daniel fast, based on the Old Testament hero. A Daniel Fast is where you restrict your diet to fruit, vegetables and water. Daniel 10:3 says "I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled." You can check out the links for more detail on how to do a Daniel Fast. Whatever you decide, if you have any physical concerns about fasting it would be wise to check with your doctor before you begin.

The crucial element is that when we would normally be eating, we replace that time with prayer where possible. A reminder that abstaining from eating isn't fasting, that's dieting.

Food preparation

It's also a great idea to be well prepared before the fast begins. Possibly prepare some meals in advance, particularly if we're responsible for providing meals for family. Or maybe you need to stock up on all the essential Daniel Fast foods so you can avoid the supermarkets on your fasting days. When we think about it, it's amazing the amount of time given to food in just one week with meal planning, grocery shopping, meal prep, eating and then clean up. Imagine if we eliminated 90% of that on our fasting days, how much more time would we have to dedicate to pursuing the presence of God instead.

Community

The first thing a Navy Seal is taught when starting basic underwater training is the importance of your swim buddy. He or she is your team mate and you never separate for any reason. Together there is a much higher chance of survival. Likewise, fasting with a friend is so powerful because we have someone else going through the same fasting experience. We can encourage each other in the moments we feel like quitting. We can share what God is showing us and can come out the other side together changed.

Emotions

Be aware of our emotions! Some people experience vast mood swings during a fast. One moment we are totally focused on God and the next we are wallowing in self-pity. Knowing that this could happen will help us respond properly. It's good to try to discipline ourselves to refocus on God and His goodness during this time.

Finishing well

Finishing a fast well is crucial! It's important to not overeat when breaking a fast, as much as we may be tempted. Ease back into normal eating routines with food that is light and easy to digest.

Group activation

- Pray before you start the discussion that the Holy Spirit would speak to everyone in the Group.
- Take time as a group to share any initial impressions of the key thoughts and scriptures.

Questions to think about or discuss

1. Get the group to share their fasting experiences, what has worked and what hasn't when it comes to fasting for them.
2. Emotions can play havoc on us while fasting. Discuss how these could be kept in check?
3. Fasting in community – you could discuss the idea of fasting as a Group in the future.
4. Has anyone in the Group made the mistake of 'eating large' at the end of a fast? What was the result?