

HABIT FIVE

Fast Systematically

“... and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Matthew 6:18

My freshman year of Bible college, I received some of the best advice regarding fasting from one of my teachers. She advised me to begin with regular short fasts rather than trying something long or heroic without adequate practice, discipline, and preparation. I followed her advice. During the following summer, I began the discipline of regular prayer and Bible reading. I was then ready to begin a more advanced level of regularly seeking God through fasting and prayer.

Some people joke about fasting. Others brag about it. Both of those attitudes cheapen fasting and negatively influence people who might consider it. Once in awhile, you will find someone who understands the power of fasting and prayer. When the subject comes up, their interest in the conversation increases, and they share their experience with strong conviction. They know the power of this marvelous tool.

The best book I ever read about fasting is *God's Chosen Fast* by Arthur Wallis. It is balanced, spiritual, and practical. The book was foundational in my own formation of a positive attitude toward fasting and prayer. I heartily recommend it. Some of the following ideas are from Wallis' book.

Fasting is like any skill or task requiring development. If you are new to fasting, you may want to begin with short, regular fasts to improve your ability and confidence. With experience, you will be able lengthen your fasts gradually. Through the discipline of fasting, we gain spiritual power, ability to focus in prayer, and increased insight into God’s Word. Many are afraid of fasting or have heard horror stories. Others don’t realize that their regular eating patterns have programmed their bodies to reject fasting. Some simply have not heard positive testimonies on the advantages or the feasibility of fasting. Many just don’t think it is doable — but it is. I conclude this chapter by recounting my 40-day fast in which I learned many valuable, practical, and spiritual lessons. My experience was a customized and highly personal tutorial designed by the Holy Spirit just for me in my situation at that time.

Fasting In the Bible

As good as fasting is for us, it is contrary to instinctive bodily desires. The Bible says, “No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it”

(Ephesians 5:29). We must make choices based on priorities. If you want food more than you want answers to prayer, then eat. While fasting goes against bodily appetites, it certainly does not go against spiritual appetites.

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Fasting is favorably presented in the Bible by both example and instruction. Part of the greatness of Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, Hannah, Anna, Jesus, and the Apostles is attributed to fasting.

The “normal” fast consists of abstaining from both solid and liquid foods, but continuing to drink water. Throughout this chapter, we will refer to the normal fast. The Bible tells us that during Jesus’ fast, he “ate nothing,” and that “he was hungry,” (Luke 4:2). It does not indicate that He drank nothing (as with Moses and Paul) or was thirsty. Drinking lots of water while eating nothing helps cleanse the body during the fast. The normal fast is the type Scripture most frequently mentions and most often invites us to experience.

The “absolute” fast is illustrated by Paul, of whom it is said, “for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything” (Acts 9:9).

In some desperate states, some would be willing to pay such a cost. Paul and Moses both had extenuating circumstances that may have provided a special motive.

The “partial” fast involves eating only certain foods and not others, or drinking juices but not eating solid foods. This is illustrated by Daniel as recorded in Daniel 10:3: “I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.” Elijah and John the Baptist each did partial fasts. The partial fast was popularized recently by the late Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ. It allows certain conveniences, and more people seem willing to try it. The degree of fasting is, of course, your choice.

Jesus instructed his disciples regarding giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. He used the word “when,” not “if”: “*when* you give to the needy,” “and *when* you pray,” and “*when* you fast” (italics mine). The obvious implication is that Jesus expected us to do these things. Furthermore, these instructions conclude with the promise that “your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:18). Jesus said that the time to fast is now, in our day, after the Bridegroom has been taken. During Jesus’ day, the Bridegroom was present, and fasting was not appropriate. It is likely that Jesus and His disciples observed the usual annual fasts, along with other Jewish people, but did not do the regular twice-a-week fasts as the Pharisees did. At any rate, Jesus said, “The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; *then they will fast*” (Matthew 9:15, italics mine).

In circles where fasting is accepted, fasting is usually done for health benefits and for receiving spiritual insight and power. These are good results of a good practice, but it is possible that even in our spiritual desire and aspiration, self may still be enthroned. We must ask ourselves if our fasts are Christ-ward or self-ward. A wrong motive can ruin the whole thing. Jesus taught often about motives including motives for fasting. He spoke of the praying Pharisee: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (Luke 18:11 and 12). The Bible says the Pharisee prayed either “about” himself or “to” himself. If it were “to” himself, that would mean that he was praying in secret, but even then his motive was wrong. He was proud. There is the remote possibility it meant the Pharisee set himself up as God which would be even more wrong. At any rate, fasting in secret can help rid us of the desire for praise from men and women as our

motive, but doing it in secret is still not enough. Even then we must do it for Him.

If our life goal is to glorify God in all we do, our prayers and fasts should not be efforts to impose our will. Instead, they should be a means of laying hold of His wisdom, power, and will in every situation. Fasting is a strong tool, and such a force should remain submitted to the will of God, just as in the case of prayer. Fasting is not a magical way to manipulate the spirit world. It is a vehicle wherein believers arouse God to work in their behalf. Fasting is openness to God and requesting — not commanding. In this biblical study on the efficacy of fasting, we should not, at will, initiate fasts indiscriminately for just any purpose at any time. We can initiate a fast as we submit it to God, or God may initiate it as He calls us to a fast. In either case, the use of this mighty spiritual force must be submitted to God's will. We may think we want something badly enough to fast and pray for it, but God may even direct us not to fast. Obedience is still better than sacrifice.

Advantages of Fasting

Some people fast for non-spiritual reasons. Even in secular circles, many materials are available on the physical benefits of fasting. While fasting seems to conflict with bodily appetites, it is good for our health. Though I am writing about fasting because the discipline aids our spiritual life, it may encourage you to know that some fast primarily for their health.

Usually, we fast to facilitate prayer and intercession, but sometimes we could fast simply “unto God” — just because we love Him and want to glorify Him. If you fast systematically, such as one time a week, you will have weeks when you have no particular “problem” you are seeking to solve. In these cases, we fast as unto Him just to seek Him, know Him, and experience intimate time with Him.

An empty stomach stimulates humility, awareness of dependency on God, and sensitivity to human weakness.