

Biblical Fasting

What It Is, Why We Do It, and What Jesus Actually Said

Fasting is one of those spiritual disciplines that most Christians have heard about, many feel a vague guilt about, and very few actually understand. It can show up in digital ministry spaces — at the start of Lent, in seasons of personal crisis, when a viewer is wrestling with a hard decision, or when someone notices another believer doing a forty-day fast and wonders if they're missing something. The questions are real and they deserve real answers.

Is fasting still a thing under the new covenant? Did Jesus command it? Are we earning favor with God when we do it? Is skipping a meal even a real fast? What about people with eating disorders or medical conditions? This resource was built to help streamers, ministry leaders, and ordinary believers think through fasting biblically.. not reactively, not legalistically, and not in a way that turns a gift from God into a performance for Him.

What you'll find below is a survey of what Scripture actually says about fasting, from Moses to Jesus to the early church, along with guidance on the how, the why, the when, and the cautions. The aim is simple: to help God's people fast in a way that honors Him and draws us nearer to Christ.

What Is Biblical Fasting?

At its simplest, biblical fasting is voluntarily abstaining from food (and sometimes drink) for a spiritual purpose. It is the deliberate setting aside of a legitimate, God-given good.. sustenance.. in order to focus the body and soul on God Himself. Fasting is not skipping meals because you're busy. It is not a diet. It is not a hunger strike to get God's attention. It is an act of worship, dependence, and seeking.

The Hebrew word most often translated "fast" is *tsom* (צום), and the related verb *tsum* means literally to cover the mouth or to abstain from food. The Greek word in the New Testament is *nēsteia* (νηστεία), a compound meaning not-eating. In both languages, the word carries the idea of deliberate, purposeful abstinence.. not accidental hunger.

Throughout Scripture, fasting is consistently connected with prayer, repentance, mourning, seeking direction, and intercession. It is rarely a stand-alone practice. Fasting in the Bible is almost always fasting and prayer. The two go together like breathing in and breathing out.

Fasting in the Old Testament

Fasting was woven through Israel's life with God. It appears in moments of grief, repentance, national crisis, personal pleading, and corporate worship. A few key examples:

The Day of Atonement

The one fast actually commanded in the Mosaic Law was the Day of Atonement. God instructed Israel to "afflict your souls" on this day.. a phrase the rabbis and translators consistently understood to include fasting.

Leviticus 23:27 (ESV) — *“Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the LORD.”*

This was the only nationally mandated annual fast in the Law. Every other Old Testament fast was either voluntary, situational, or developed later in Israel's history.

Moses, David, Elijah, and Daniel

Moses fasted forty days and nights on Mount Sinai before receiving the law (Exodus 34:28). Elijah fasted forty days as he traveled to Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). Daniel fasted for understanding and mourned over the sins of his people (Daniel 9:3; 10:2–3). David fasted when his child was sick and when he wept for his enemies (2 Samuel 12:16; Psalm 35:13). The pattern is incredibly consistent.. fasting accompanies seeking, mourning, interceding, and drawing near to God in moments that demand more than ordinary prayer.

Esther and National Crisis

When Haman's decree threatened the destruction of the Jewish people, Esther called for a three-day fast which included neither eating nor drinking, before she risked her life by approaching the king. This was corporate, urgent, and life or death.

Esther 4:16 (ESV) — *“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”*

Nineveh's Repentance

When Jonah finally preached judgment over Nineveh, the entire pagan city, including the king, turned to God in fasting, sackcloth, and repentance. God relented from the disaster He had threatened (Jonah 3:5–10). The Ninevites understood instinctively what fasting was for.. it was the posture of a people throwing themselves on the mercy of God.

Joel's Call to Return

The prophet Joel issued one of the most direct calls to fasting in all of Scripture and tied it explicitly to the **heart**, not the *practice*.

Joel 2:12–13 (ESV) — *“‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not*

your garments.’ Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Notice the order here.. God first calls them to return, then to fast, then to make sure it's the heart being torn, not just the outward expression. This pattern will resurface powerfully in Jesus's teaching.

Did Jesus Fast? Did He Teach Us To?

This is the most important question in the whole conversation. If Jesus dismissed fasting, we'd have a strong case that it's an Old Testament practice we've outgrown. But that is not what we find. Jesus fasted, taught about fasting, and made clear that His followers would fast after He left. The new covenant did not abolish fasting, it transformed its purpose.

Jesus's Forty-Day Fast

Before His public ministry began, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days and forty nights. It was at the end of that fast, in His weakest physical state, that Satan came to tempt Him.

Matthew 4:2 (ESV) — *“And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”*

Jesus did not need to fast in order to draw nearer to the Father, He had perfect communion with Him. He fasted anyway though, **modeling** the practice for His disciples and setting the pattern that intense spiritual encounter is often accompanied by fasting. Forty days is also a deliberate echo of Moses on Sinai and Israel in the wilderness. Jesus is showing Himself to be the true and better Israel, succeeding where they failed.

“When You Fast” — Not “If You Fast”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about three core disciplines: giving, praying, and fasting. In all three cases, He assumed His disciples would do them. He did not say “if you give” or “if you pray” or “if you fast.” He said “when.”

Matthew 6:16–18 (ESV) — *“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

Two things are happening here. First, Jesus **expects** His disciples to fast. The word “when” is not a casual choice. Second, He is reforming the practice. Fasting had become, in some circles of His day, a performance. It had become a way to show everyone how spiritual you were. Jesus says no. Fasting is between you and the Father. Don't make a

show of it. Don't disfigure your face for sympathy points. Look normal. Let it be hidden. And the Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The Bridegroom Passage

If anyone is going to argue that fasting is no longer for us under the new covenant, this is the passage they have to deal with and it actually points the opposite way.

Matthew 9:14–15 (ESV) — *“Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’”*

Jesus is teaching something profound here. During His earthly ministry, His disciples did not fast because the Bridegroom was right there with them. Fasting is the response of people who are longing.. longing for God's presence, for His kingdom to come in fullness, for what is not yet. While Jesus walked with them, that longing was satisfied in His physical presence.

But then Jesus says it plainly: “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” That is now. We live in the days when the Bridegroom has ascended. We wait for His return. We long for the wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19). According to Jesus Himself, this is exactly the season when His people fast.

Christian fasting under the new covenant is not earning. It is not bargaining. It is longing.. a physical, embodied groaning for the return of the King.

Fasting in the Early Church

The book of Acts and the New Testament letters show that the apostles and the early church took Jesus at His word. Fasting continued.. not as an Old Testament ritual, but as new covenant practice tied to seeking God, sending missionaries, and appointing leaders.

Acts 13:2–3 (ESV) — *“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”*

Acts 14:23 (ESV) — *“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*

The pattern is unmistakable. Major decisions, missional commissioning, and the appointment of elders were saturated in prayer and fasting. The early church didn't fast as a religious requirement, they fasted because they were **seeking** God.

Paul also references his own fasting in passing, as something that simply was part of his apostolic life: 2 Corinthians 6:5 and 11:27 both mention fasting alongside other marks of his ministry. He doesn't make a production of it. He just lived it.

So Is Fasting Commanded in the New Covenant?

This is where careful thinking matters. There is no explicit command in the New Testament that says “You must fast on these days.” The new covenant does not give us a calendar of required fasts. The Day of Atonement, the one mandatory fast in the Old Testament, finds its fulfillment in Christ which is the once-for-all atonement (Hebrews 9–10). We don't need to fast to atone for sin. Jesus already did that.

So fasting is not a salvation issue. It is not earning. It is not required for righteousness. A Christian who never fasts is not less saved than one who fasts weekly.

Yet, Jesus said “when you fast,” not “if.” He said His disciples would fast after He was taken away. The early church fasted as a normal part of seeking God. The honest answer is this:

Fasting is not commanded as a ritual in the new covenant, but it is expected as a normal expression of Christian discipleship. It is one of the historic spiritual disciplines that Jesus assumed His followers would practice. To ignore it entirely is to step outside the rhythm of what the Bridegroom Himself said His people would do until He returns.

Why We Fast — The Heart Behind the Practice

There is no single reason to fast. Scripture gives us several and they tend to overlap. A faithful fast often weaves more than one of these together.

- **To humble ourselves before God.** Fasting is an embodied way of saying “I am not in control. I need You.” It puts the body in a posture of dependence (Psalm 35:13; Ezra 8:21).
- **To seek God's direction.** Before major decisions like a job, a marriage, a ministry commitment, a hard conversation, etc. Fasting clears the noise and sharpens the soul's attention (Acts 13:2–3).
- **To repent.** Fasting accompanies genuine sorrow over sin. It is not how we earn forgiveness, Christ already secured that. It is how we let our bodies join what our hearts are already feeling (Joel 2:12–13; Jonah 3:5–10).
- **To mourn and grieve.** In the face of loss, suffering, or tragedy, fasting is a biblical response. David fasted in grief. The disciples fasted when the Bridegroom was taken away (2 Samuel 1:12; 12:16).
- **To intercede for others.** Esther fasted for her people. Daniel fasted for his people. Fasting joins our prayers for others with our own bodily participation (Esther 4:16; Daniel 9:3).
- **To long for Christ's return.** This is the new covenant heart of fasting. We fast because the Bridegroom is not yet here in fullness. Our hunger becomes a prayer: come, Lord Jesus (Matthew 9:15; Revelation 22:20).

- **To break the grip of physical appetite.** Fasting reminds us that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). It loosens the quiet tyranny of comfort and habit.

What unifies every biblical reason for fasting is this.. fasting is the body saying what the soul already means. It is not the cause of nearness to God, that is Christ. It is one of the means God uses to deepen our awareness of Him.

How We Fast — Types and Practical Wisdom

Scripture does not give us a single mandatory method of fasting. It shows us a range of practices, and the church has historically recognized several legitimate forms.

Types of Fasts

- **Normal fast.** Abstaining from all food, but continuing to drink water. This is the most common biblical pattern and what Jesus did for forty days (Matthew 4:2).
- **Absolute fast.** No food and no water. This is rare in Scripture and almost always short. Typically lasts three days, as in Esther 4:16 and Acts 9:9. An absolute fast longer than three days is medically dangerous and should not be attempted without extraordinary reason and supervision.
- **Partial fast.** Abstaining from certain foods or restricting intake. Daniel fasted from “meat and wine” and pleasant food for three weeks (Daniel 10:2–3). This is often called a “Daniel fast” today. A quick clarifying note: this is not the same as Daniel 1. In that passage, Daniel and his three friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) refused the king's food because it was sacrificed to idols and not kosher. This was a matter of avoiding defilement, not fasting. The Hebrew word for fast (*tsum*) never appears in Daniel 1.
- **Corporate fast.** A fast undertaken together as a church, family, or community for a specific shared purpose (Joel 2:15–16; Acts 13:2).
- **Other forms of abstinence.** Some Christians today practice fasting from things other than food. It may be social media, entertainment, the internet, or sleep beyond necessity as some examples. Scripture does not call this fasting in the strict sense, but the principle of setting aside a legitimate good to seek God can be applied broadly. Paul mentions married couples mutually agreeing to abstain for a time of prayer in 1 Corinthians 7:5, which uses similar language.

Practical Wisdom

- **Start small.** If you've never fasted before, don't begin with forty days. Try skipping one meal and using that time to pray. Then a day. Build from there as the Lord leads.
- **Have a purpose.** Don't fast for the sake of fasting. Know what you are seeking the Lord about. Otherwise you're just hungry.

- **Pair it with prayer and Scripture.** The hunger you feel is meant to drive you to God, not to your phone. Use the time and the discomfort as a prayer prompt.
- **Stay hydrated.** Unless you are explicitly undertaking a short absolute fast, drink water freely. Coffee and tea are matters of personal conscience and conviction.
- **Ease in and ease out.** For fasts longer than a day, eat lightly the day before and the day after. Breaking a long fast with a heavy meal will make you miserable and can be physically harmful.
- **Don't broadcast it.** Jesus was explicit. Fasting is between you and the Father (Matthew 6:16–18). Spouses, accountability partners, and pastors are appropriate to tell. Twitch chat and Discord channels are not.

When We Fast

Scripture gives us patterns more than schedules. Fasting in the Bible tends to cluster around moments of weight such as when something significant is being sought, mourned, or discerned. Here are the most common biblical occasions:

- **In response to a crisis.** When you are facing something larger than ordinary prayer feels like it can address.
- **Before major decisions.** Vocational, relational, ministry, financial. The early church fasted before sending out missionaries and before appointing elders (Acts 13:2; 14:23).
- **In seasons of repentance.** When the Holy Spirit has convicted you of sin and you want your body to join what your heart is doing.
- **In intercession.** When you are carrying someone else's burden in prayer such as a sick child, a lost loved one, a persecuted believer overseas, a friend in a spiritual crisis.
- **Corporately with the church.** When the body gathers to seek the Lord together over a specific concern.
- **As a regular rhythm.** Some Christians fast one day a week or one meal a week as a normal spiritual discipline. The early church developed traditions like fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays. This is a matter of Christian freedom, not command.

The Fast God Chooses

It is possible to fast and miss the point entirely. The prophets called Israel out on this repeatedly. They fasted while oppressing their workers. They fasted while ignoring the poor. They fasted as a religious performance with no heart change. God was not impressed.

Isaiah 58:6–7 (ESV) — *“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”*

This is searing and clarifying. The fast God chooses is not just an act of personal piety, it is a heart turned outward in justice, mercy, and care for the broken. Fasting that does not bear fruit in love is exactly the kind of fasting Jesus also rebuked in Matthew 6. The Father is not impressed by hungry self-righteousness.

The fast God chooses is one where the heart is being shaped, where sin is being repented of, where compassion is growing, and where Christ is becoming more precious. Anything else is just skipping lunch.

Common Misconceptions

“Fasting earns me favor with God.” It does not. Christ's finished work is the only ground of our standing before the Father (Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:8–9). Fasting is a response to grace, not a payment for it. If you find yourself believing your fast makes God love you more, repent of that thinking, that is the Pharisee in Luke 18:11–12, not the Christian.

“Fasting twists God's arm to give me what I want.” It does not. Fasting is not spiritual leverage. God is not a vending machine that responds to hunger. Daniel fasted for three weeks and was told an angelic battle had been raging the entire time (Daniel 10). David fasted for his sick child, and God still took the child home (2 Samuel 12). Fasting aligns us with God's will. It does not bend His will to ours.

“Fasting is just a religious diet.” It is not. If your motive is weight loss or self-improvement, that's fine as a health choice, but it is not biblical fasting. The aim of fasting is God, not your waistline.

“Fasting is showy. Real Christians don't need to do it.” Fasting can be done in a showy way (which Jesus condemned), or it can be done in secret (which Jesus commended). The problem is the showiness, not the fasting. Jesus did not abolish fasting; He reformed it.

“If I don't feel anything during my fast, I'm doing it wrong.” Feelings are not the measure. Some fasts are dry and ordinary. Some are dramatic. Both can be faithful. The reward Jesus promised in Matthew 6:18 is from the Father who sees in secret, not necessarily an emotional experience you'll feel mid-fast.

A Word of Caution

Fasting is a good gift, but like any good gift it can be misused, and there are real circumstances where it should not be undertaken.. at least not in the form most people picture.

Medical Concerns

Diabetes, pregnancy, breastfeeding, heart conditions, low blood sugar, certain medications, and many other medical realities can make food-fasting genuinely dangerous. Caring for your body is not weakness; it is stewardship (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). If you have a medical condition, talk to a doctor before any extended fast. A partial fast, a media fast, or a different kind of sacrificial setting-aside may serve the same spiritual purpose without harm.

Eating Disorders

If you are in active recovery from an eating disorder, or have a history of one, food-fasting is generally not the spiritual discipline God is calling you to right now. Restricting food in the context of disordered eating can be deeply harmful and is not what biblical fasting is for. There are many other ways to humble yourself before God, seek His face, and long for Christ. Talk to a pastor, counselor, or trusted Christian friend. Your spiritual life is not measured by your willingness to harm yourself.

Spiritual Pride

Fasting can feed pride faster than almost any other discipline. Watch your heart. If you find yourself counting days, comparing yourself to other Christians, or wanting credit for what you're doing, stop. Repent. Re-center on Christ. Jesus reserved His harshest fasting-related rebuke for those who used the practice to look spiritual (Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:12).

Pressuring Others

Never pressure another believer to fast. Fasting is a matter of Christian freedom, personal conviction, and the leading of the Spirit. Inviting your community into a corporate fast is fine. Shaming someone for not fasting is not. People come to this practice from many different histories.. medical, emotional, and spiritual.. your job is not to push them into yours.

How to Respond When This Comes Up in Digital Ministry

Questions about fasting will come up in your stream, your Discord, and your DMs. Here are a few common ones and how to think about them pastorally.

“Is it wrong if I've never fasted?”

No. You are not less of a Christian. But Jesus assumed His followers would, and you may be missing a **gift** He intended for you. Start small. Try one meal. See what God does.

“What should I give up for Lent?”

Lent is a Christian tradition, not a biblical command. Many believers find it a meaningful season of preparation before Easter. If you want to participate, choose something that creates real awareness of dependence on God, not something so trivial you won't notice it, and not something so dramatic you can't sustain it. The point is Christ, not the sacrifice.

“Someone in my community is doing a 40-day fast. Is that biblical?”

Moses, Elijah, and Jesus all fasted forty days, so the biblical precedent exists. But all three were under direct, extraordinary leading by God, and Jesus was, well... Jesus. A forty-day complete food fast is medically serious and should never be undertaken casually, copied as a trend, or attempted without medical input and spiritual accountability. If a believer feels called to that, ask questions gently.. what is the purpose, who knows about it, who is checking on them, what does their doctor say. Encourage humility, not heroics.

“Can I fast from social media or video games?”

Scripture doesn't call that fasting in the strict sense, but the principle of setting aside a legitimate good to seek God absolutely applies. For many believers today, particularly streamers and gamers, abstaining from screens for a season may be exactly the kind of dependence-building discipline they need. Just be honest about what it is. A season of focused abstinence, rather than collapsing every form of self-denial into the word “fasting.”

“Should I tell my chat I'm fasting?”

Generally, no. Jesus was clear (Matthew 6:16–18). Fasting is between you and the Father. There may be ministry occasions where you mention it such as calling your community to a corporate fast over something specific for example, but in general, broadcasting your fast tends to do the very thing Jesus warned against. The reward of fasting is the Father's, not your audience's affirmation.

A Final Word

Fasting is not a religious obligation. It is not a spiritual flex. It is not a way to earn God's favor or twist His arm. It is one of the historic, embodied, Spirit-led ways God's people have always said with their stomachs what their hearts are saying.. that we need Him more than we need anything else.

Under the new covenant, fasting takes its truest shape: longing. The Bridegroom has gone, and we wait for His return. Every empty stomach in faithful fasting is a wordless

prayer.. come, Lord Jesus. Every set aside meal is a confession, You are more satisfying than this. Every hour of hunger held in His presence is an act of trust. I do not live by bread alone.

If you have never fasted, don't start with forty days. Start with one meal. Take that hour. Spend it in the Word and in prayer. See what God does with a small act of dependence offered honestly. He is gracious. He is merciful. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will meet you there.

This resource was born from a real conversation in digital ministry.

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

— Matthew 4:4 (ESV)