

# HUNGRY FOR GOD: STUDIES ON PRAYER

## 10

### FASTING

**Matthew 6:1–18,  
9:14–17**

**By Rebecca B. Shaw**

*“Regular or weekly fasting has had such a profound effect in the lives of some that they have sought to find a biblical command for it so that it may be urged upon all Christians. The search is in vain. ... Our freedom in the gospel however does not mean license; it means opportunity. Since there are no laws to bind us, we are free to fast on any day. Freedom for the apostle Paul meant that he was engaged in ‘fastings often’ (2 Cor. 11:27, KJV). We should always bear in mind the apostolic counsel, ‘Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh’ (Gal. 5:13).”*

Richard Foster

*“We’ve seen breakthroughs in people’s lives when we’ve prayed for them during our fasting. ...After successfully making it through a partial fast, we’ve been able to celebrate more of God’s grace and healing in this person’s life. Even though she still struggles, she has been able to grow in the Lord in ways I don’t think would have happened outside of the dedicated and desperate prayer that comes from fasting.”*

Sherry, Small Group Leader

## AIM OF STUDY

- To consider the merits of fasting and embrace the practice as a means to devote more attention to the Lord and to draw closer to him. This study will help answer, “Does God want me to fast?” or “When and how should I fast?”

## KEY VERSES

“But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Matthew 6:17–18

## PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**How to Teach the Bible in Small Group**” and “**Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (\*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are supplying this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to provide resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for study.

This study begins in the New Testament, goes back to Old Testament for background, and returns to the New Testament. If your group is still unfamiliar with the Bible, you may want to print out the Scriptures or assign passages for people to read ahead of time so they can find their places. You want to turn to the Scriptures quickly as the study progresses to allow as much time as possible for the hearing and discussing of God’s Word. Also, make **copies** of the **Guidelines for Fasting** to hand out to your group members during the Application time.

**Note: Individuals with certain health conditions, such as diabetes, pregnancy, heart problems, etc., should not fast. Instead, they should consult with their doctors before modifying any of their dietary habits.** In lieu of food and drink limitations, they might choose to fast from a favorite pastime, such as watching television, and devote that time to worship and prayer.

## **OPENER**

People have fasted for many reasons, from political to health-related. Fasting is enjoying a resurgence of popularity in Western culture after a century or so of being relegated to the pages of history. We hear of movie stars losing weight by means of fasting and now see the subject more frequently included and referred to in Christian literature. All the major religions of the world include fasting in their practices. Health practitioners assure us of innumerable benefits for our bodies through fasting. But when fasting is suggested, people have a variety of reactions, from being attracted to it to resisting it strongly. What about you? If you were asked to participate in a fast for spiritual purposes, how would you respond?

1. Let's do it!
2. It might be a good idea, but I have some doubts. (I'm not sure how... or, I'm afraid because of health concerns, etc.)
3. No, I don't think we need to because Jesus never commanded us to fast.

*Listen carefully* to those who are willing to share their responses; knowing where your group is coming from on this subject will help you gauge which part of the study to spend more time on.

In Scripture, fasting and prayer seem to complement each other when people are drawing near to God, especially for guidance. [See Introduction to the Study section for examples.] So, as the final study in this series on prayer, we will take a quick look at a few Bible passages on the topic of fasting.

***Pray that as you give your time to the Lord, He will reveal truth and give you ears to hear and hearts that will receive what He has to say.***

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

[This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.]

Fasting in the Bible generally means going without food for a period of time but continuing to drink water (Foster, p. 48). Some fasts are “partial” which means the people refrain from certain foods (Daniel 1:12–16). On rare occasions, people in the Bible went a short period without food or drink, but the body usually cannot survive without water more than 3 days (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9). The 40-day fasts by Moses and Elijah seem to have been miraculous since these men were able to live without

food or water. During Jesus' 40-day fast, we assume He had access to water since Luke 4:2 mentions only that he was hungry (Foster, pp. 49–50).

The Old Testament law required only one annual fast observed by the Hebrews, on the Day of Atonement when they mourned over their sins (Leviticus 16:29–34; 23:27–32, Numbers 29:7). Because Jesus made a once for all time atonement for our sins (Hebrews 9:24–28; 10:12–14), Christians do not observe the Day of Atonement. However, it is appropriate that we mourn the grief we have caused the Holy Spirit when we recognize or confess our sin (James 4:4–10; Ephesians 4:29–32). Four fasts marking stages of the attack on Jerusalem and the temple were kept later in Israel's history (Zechariah 8:19). In addition, there were occasional fasts, both individual and corporate, for the following reasons: to give expression to grief and penitence; as a means for men to humble themselves; to secure the guidance and help of God; and as a self-inflicted punishment. Some came to think that fasting would automatically gain humans a hearing from God, but He told them through the prophets that this wasn't true (Jeremiah 14:11, 12; Zechariah 7). God is sovereign, free, in debt to no one, and unable to be manipulated (Job 41:11; Isaiah 46:10).

The New Testament shows Jesus fasting once, probably not of His own initiative but under the direction of the Holy Spirit, at the time of His temptation in the desert/wilderness (Matthew 4:1–4). No doubt He was praying to His Father who had called Him to prepare for ministry this way. We also read that Jesus assumed that His hearers would fast (Matthew 6:16–18). In Acts, leaders of the church fasted while worshipping and when choosing elders and sending out missionaries (Acts 13:2–3, 14:23, Belben, pp. 418–419). [Leaders: In 1 Corinthians 7:3–5, Paul refers to couples devoting themselves to prayer for a short period of time by abstaining from sexual relations. This is a form of fasting, but should always be mutually agreed upon and should never last for long.]

#### **STUDY THE PASSAGE: Matthew 6:1–18, and 9:14–17**

1. **Let's look at Jesus' words about fasting in Matthew 6:16–18. We'll begin with Matthew 6:1 and read verses 1–18 for the context.**

**What is the context for Jesus speaking about fasting (vv. 1–2)? How are the instructions regarding fasting similar to the previous instructions given in Matthew 6:1–2, and 5–6?**

The context is Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount," in which He is talking to followers gathered around Him. In Matthew 6: 1–15, He refers to three acts of righteousness: giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting. The instructions first assume God's people will perform these acts, but Jesus also addresses the attitude or motivation for doing them. He speaks about doing religious things for show. This is evident in the phrases, "...to be honored by men" for giving to the needy, "...to be seen by men" praying on the street corners, and "...to show men" they are fasting.

In all three, Jesus condemns the hypocrite who performs religious practices to be seen and presumably admired by others. Luke 18:12 quotes a Pharisee saying, “I fast twice a week,” referring to a frequent practice of the Pharisees to fast on Monday and Thursday because those were market days. That meant they could have bigger audiences to see and admire their piety (Foster, p. 51). Jesus wanted none of that for His disciples. He wants us to be careful to do these acts of righteousness with our focus on God, not men.

**2. What words in verses 16–17 indicate that Jesus expected his followers to fast?**

Jesus says, “**When** you fast” in both verses.

**3. Why did He tell them to put oil on their head and wash their faces? Who was supposed to know that they were fasting?**

Jesus didn’t want fasting to be obvious to others, so they were to dress and go about their normal personal business. People in Jesus’ day would put oil on their heads and faces to help combat the drying effects of the sun (Keener). Only our Heavenly Father should know that we are fasting (v. 18).

**\*Is it ever appropriate for people to know that you are fasting?**

Sure, people can know that you are fasting. It may be inevitable if close friends and family see that you are eating differently. Jesus’ point is that we should not fast to make ourselves look more spiritual in other’s eyes.

**4. Looking at verses 1, 16, and 18, what two kinds of rewards does Jesus talk about with regard to fasting?**

In verse 1, the consequence of “doing acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them” is that those showing off will have no future reward from God the Father. This implies that the attention they receive when they publicly do good works is all that they can expect. In verse 16, Jesus repeats this idea in the context of fasting. The hypocrite will get his reward in this life in the form of whatever attention or esteem others give him. But God Himself will reward those who keep their fasting between themselves and God.

Some Christians may avoid speaking about rewards for obeying God or doing His will, since that could sound self-serving. But the humblest and most self-sacrificial person in history, Jesus Christ, referred to eternal rewards nine times in His Sermon on the Mount! There is an expectation in Scripture that those who suffer for God’s sake will receive justice and reward from Him in eternity. This is also evident in Paul’s writing and in the book of Hebrews (Dozeman, p. 180).

**\*How important is it that Jesus included fasting as an act of righteousness in His speech?**

Some people have never given any thought to how Jesus—almost unconsciously—groups almsgiving, prayer, and fasting together. Since fasting was such a common practice in that day, He makes the assumption that they will fast, and He wants them to know how to do it properly in God’s eyes. Some Christian circles teach that fasting is not something for ‘today’ or not to be practiced because Jesus never actually commanded it. It’s true that nothing in this passage can be construed as a command. Jesus never says we must fast. But He assumed His followers would, and mentioned rewards from the Father that give it some importance. Since we’ve continued caring for the poor and praying from the first century until today, perhaps we should resume the habit of fasting, too.

**5. In Matthew 9:14–17, what reason did Jesus give for his disciples not fasting?**

He was there with them at that time. The disciples were like the guests of the bridegroom [Jesus], and therefore wouldn’t mourn [fast] while the groom [Jesus] was with them. Then Jesus said they would fast after the bridegroom was taken from them (Matt. 9:15). This implies that while they were with Jesus, they had no need to earnestly seek Him, but after He left, they would need to fast and seek His face or presence and His voice. This implies that fasting is tied to God’s Presence or voice being “absent.” [See next question.]

**6. Why would Jesus want them to fast when He was gone?**

Jesus said it would be appropriate for them to fast when He was gone. When Jesus was at hand, the disciples could ask Him all sorts of questions and imitate Him. Once He had left, they still needed to connect, listen, put their trust in, and obey Him as they carried on His work. If we read between the lines, then, fasting helps us draw near to God, which we all need to do on a daily basis. That doesn’t mean we should fast everyday. But there are special times we may choose to fast if we feel distant from God, or don’t feel certain of His voice, direction, or counsel.

Rich Nathan has said that fasting is about slowing down and making room for God (Nathan, “How to Hear”). In our noisy, busy lives, in which media overload and multitasking are common, it is difficult to hear God speaking. Therefore, we have an even greater need to fast—fasting not only from satisfying our appetites for food, but also from satisfying our appetites for stimulation and motion. Fasting is a way to set aside time in which we forego “busy-ness” and wait on God (Nathan, “How to Hear”).

Note that Jesus didn’t say they *might* fast or they *can* fast. “He (Jesus) made it clear that he expected his disciples to fast after he was gone. Although the words are not couched in the form of a command, that is only a semantic technicality. It is clear from this passage that Christ both upheld the discipline of fasting and anticipated that his followers would do it” (Foster, p. 54).

Did Jesus mean only that they would fast in mourning after his death? No, if his statement is interpreted in light of the next passage talking about the new wineskins of the kingdom of God, Jesus did not limit when they would fast. In verse 15, “then” refers to the present Church age, the time between His ascension to Heaven and His return to earth. We have no record of the apostles fasting until after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 13:2, 3), which supports the idea that the apostles interpreted Jesus’ words about the bridegroom in this way, too (Wallis, quoted in Foster, p. 53). The implication here is that if one is a child of the Kingdom of God, he or she will fast. Jesus’ followers won’t do it in the old legalistic way any more than new wine is put into old wineskins, but they will fast. “In the coming of Jesus, a new day had dawned. The kingdom of God had come among them in present power. The Bridegroom was in their midst; it was a time for feasting, not fasting. There would, however, come a time for his disciples to fast although not in the legalism of the old order” (Foster, p. 53).

**\*Why does it matter that Jesus assumed His followers would fast? As His disciple, have you ever considered fasting?**

**\*At this point, what would prohibit you from trying to fast?**

**Again note: Individuals with certain health conditions, such as diabetes, pregnancy, heart problems, etc., should not fast. Instead, they should consult with their doctors before modifying any of their dietary habits. In lieu of food and drink limitations, they might choose to fast from a favorite pastime, such as watching television, and devote that time to worship and prayer.**

**7. Let’s examine scriptural reasons to fast from the Old Testament. Will someone read aloud Genesis 1:27 and 2:2–3, and another volunteer read Exodus 20:8–11 after that?**

**Why does God care about taking time to rest? How is fasting related to resting?**

Because we were made in God’s image, we were created to observe the same rhythm of work and rest that God established. In fact, in all of creation there is an ebb and flow, an on and off, that’s inherent in the proper working of the world and in our bodies. We rest our bodies when we sleep, which includes a time for our digestive system to pause. Thus the first meal of the day is referred to as one that breaks the fast—breakfast. We should not think that there is anything inherently harmful to the body about abstaining from food for a brief period; our bodies were created with this capacity. It is our consumer mentality, fueled by advertising and the 24 hour a day availability of food and

drink, that seduces us into eating greater quantities and more frequently than we should.

**8. Let's turn to two more short passages found in Leviticus 16:29–31 and Exodus 19:14.**

Leviticus is the third of five books, known as the “Pentateuch,” that record the history of God’s relationship with Israel. It contains God’s instructions to Moses about how Israel can be holy and thus enjoy His Presence and reflect His character. As the leader, try to read all of Leviticus 16 in preparation. Note that in verses 29 and 31, “deny yourselves” could be rendered as “must fast” in the New International Version. In other translations, it also appears as “afflict yourselves” which became associated with fasting (Harris & Youngblood, p. 168). Exodus, the second book of the Pentateuch, records God’s bringing Israel out of Egypt. The section of interest here is in Exodus 19 where Moses comes down the mountain to prepare Israel for God’s revelation of Himself and His covenant to the people.

**Why are the people asked to deny themselves in these cases?**

In each case, the Israelites were asked to deny themselves in preparation to receive something from God. In the Leviticus passage, they were preparing to receive pardon for their sins on the Day of Atonement. Once a year, the high priest would follow the Lord’s commands to cleanse himself, the worship place and articles, and the people by the means God provided for that time—the animal blood sacrifice. This was the most sacred day of the year, and fasting from both food and work was required. In Exodus 19:14 they were to wash their clothes and abstain from sex before receiving God’s covenant terms and ratifying the sacred agreement. This does not imply that God viewed sexual relations between a husband and wife as evil. After all, He invented the whole idea [editor’s note]! The reason for abstaining from sex may have been that any bodily discharge caused by illness or an emission of semen could make both the man and woman “ceremonially unclean” spelled out in Leviticus 15 (Harris, pp. 165–166).

**\*Why might we experience more intimacy with God or hear from God better after denying our bodies for a time?**

Answers will vary. When we allow our selfish desires to flood our lives, we can get out of touch with God. We naturally tend to fill ourselves up with things that will give us immediate gratification. Continually saturating our bodies and souls with even good, permissible things of this world will take the edge off our felt need for God.

“Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until they enslave us. Paul writes, “‘All things are lawful for me,’

but I will not be enslaved by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12). Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels. “I pommel my body and subdue it,” says Paul in 1 Cor. 9:27. Likewise, David writes, “I afflicted myself with fasting” (Ps. 35:13). This is not excessive asceticism; it is discipline and discipline brings freedom” (Foster, p. 56).

**9. Let’s read one last Biblical example of fasting from the New Testament in Acts 13: 1–3.**

**What were the prophets and teachers doing?**

These church leaders were worshipping and fasting. By Jesus’ time, fasting was an integral part of Jewish life, but its practice went beyond what Jewish law required, as we saw in the Matthew 9 passage.

**10. What happened while they were worshipping and fasting?**

They received direction from the Holy Spirit to prepare two men to begin a missionary journey. Some people may be more motivated to fast and wait on God when they are eager or desperate to receive direction, confirmation, or a breakthrough. Some Christians have fasted and prayed, and seen greater openness in others to the gospel. Some in our church have fasted and received God’s provision of jobs, financial assistance or an increase in other’s service.

**\*When have you made a special effort to seek God or be alone with Him? What was your purpose in doing so?**

Answers may vary, so prepare your own answer to either get the group started or to sum up. There is nothing unspiritual about seeking God when we are in need. He tells us to ask and promises He will answer (Luke 11:9–10). We may ask Him for His will to be done (Matthew 6:10), for our daily bread (Matthew 6:11), for protection from the Evil One (Matthew 6:13), for workers to help Him harvest new believers (Luke 10:2), and for His Spirit (Luke 11:9–11). Our motives will never be pure this side of heaven, but we can admit that to the Lord when we approach His throne of grace in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

However, seeking something from God should not dominate our times of drawing near to Him. We ought to spend time with God just to draw close and deepen our relationship with Him. That is our joy and privilege as children of God; fasting is not a technique for manipulating God or obtaining what we want when we desire it. A mature relationship with God or another person will display enjoyment of another’s presence without always using that person to achieve some end. Since God is the Sovereign (absolute ruler), we should humbly worship in His presence and leave it up to Him how He will respond or “reward” us.

The Scriptures encourage us to seek Him humbly and reverently (1 Chronicles 16:10–11; Isaiah 55:6–7; 1 Chronicles 28:9–10; Jeremiah 29:10–14; Hebrews 11:6). Therefore, we should encourage one another to draw close to God to increase intimacy, to learn to wait for and listen to Him, and to allow Him the opportunity to satisfy our deepest longings since we were made for relationship with Him.

## **APPLICATION**

At this point you'll know from previous discussion how the group feels about fasting. Hopefully, the study will have given them reasons to either try a fast or go farther with their fasting experience. Select from the questions below or propose your own to help members put into practice what they have learned.

You might distribute index cards on which they can record their answer to the following questions. Or, you could have men and women pair up and share their answers with each other before praying together.

**\*If you drew very close to the Lord right now and He said He would help you with just one thing, what would you ask Him for?**

- Greater revelation of Who He is?
- A more intimate relationship with Him?
- Direction, provision, or protection?
- A breakthrough in a relationship or in evangelism?
- Control over a part of your life that is not in its proper place?

You can ask the group members to examine their attitudes towards food, the amount of time they spend watching TV, their shopping habits, the ways they distract themselves from responsibility, how much time and effort they put into their work (overworking, under working), their sexual habits, their spiritual activity, etc. It would be best to have men discuss this with other men while women discuss this with other women. As always, trust and confidentiality must be maintained.

- Something else?

**\*How might a fast help you increasingly submit a part of your life to Christ's control?**

**\*Has Jesus given you a burden for someone else? How could your fasting enhance God's work in another person's life?**

Using the guidelines for fasting printed after this study, make a plan for seeking the Lord to know Him better and/or to focus on the issues that your members identified. Some groups have chosen to fast as a group the day of their meeting each week and break the fast with a light meal together. Others just report back after their individual fasting times. To get started, you might include prayer partners to support first-time fasters. Or, several people might fast together on the same day(s). You could invite folks to share about their experiences at the next meeting.

After you conclude your plans pray something along the following lines: *“Lord, we commit these plans to You and ask for You to draw near to us as we fast and seek You this week. Open our eyes to see more of You, and open our hearts to be more like Christ. We give ourselves to You; do what You will through our fast. Amen.”*

### **Optional Homework**

If you want to assign homework at the end of the study, let the group examine David humbling himself before the Lord in Psalms 69:10–11 and 2 Samuel 12:15–23. David sought healing for his enemies through humble fasting in Psalm 35:13–14, and Hannah sought healing from infertility in 1 Samuel 1 with a soul so burdened that she wept and didn’t eat; she just “kept on praying to the Lord” (v. 12). In Daniel 9:3–23, Daniel fasted, prayed, and repented when he contemplated the prophecy of Jeremiah regarding the seventy-year exile God’s people would have to undergo for their rebellion (Farley). You could also assign Luke 2:37 about Anna, another reference to someone devoted to the Lord who was “worshipping and fasting.”

### **WRAPPING IT UP**

While fasting is enjoying a resurgence of popularity in both Christian and non-Christian circles, it’s important for us to remember that fasting for religious purposes is not commanded in Scripture. However, it is assumed. Fasting is available to us as a means to enjoy closer communion with God. Denying our flesh reveals things that control us, which may seem painful at first. However, we have a loving Father who desires to free us from compulsions that interfere with loving Him above all else. Fasting cultivates discipline of the body, which can be a rare and desirable thing in this world of immediate gratification and saturated appetites. With right motives, it can be a tool for great strides in our journey to become more like Christ—humble and submitted to the Father’s will. Fasting can be a means for making God’s Kingdom purposes a reality in the world today, and for bringing Him glory and honor as we draw near and are changed or guided by His Spirit.

## FASTING GUIDELINES

The human body cannot go without water much more than three days, but it usually can exist much longer without food. Therefore, we believe the incidences in Scripture where people went without food and water were exceptional times of supernatural sustaining and not the normal fast which we might attempt (Deut. 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9, cited in Foster, pp. 49–50). The following guidelines are for any individual or group who would like to fast in a safe way. As with any dietary changes, you should consult with a licensed physician before you begin if you have any concerns about your health being negatively affected by fasting.

**Individuals with certain health conditions such as diabetes, pregnancy, heart problems, etc., should not fast. Instead, they should always consult with their doctor before modifying any of their dietary habits.** In lieu of food and drink limitations, they might choose to fast from a favorite pastime, such as watching television or talking at length on the phone, and devote that time to worship and prayer.

The following recommendations have been taken primarily from *Celebration of Discipline*, “Chapter 4: The Discipline of Fasting,” pp. 47–61, by Richard Foster. The author also consulted *Fasting and Eating for Health*, by Joel Fuhrman, M.D.

Every fast should include the consumption of healthy amounts of pure water. Many people use distilled water with a little lemon for taste. Also, note that the digestive enzymes in the stomach are reduced by absence of food. That’s why people are encouraged to break a fast with fresh fruits and vegetables—easily digested foods—rather than fatty foods or complex carbohydrates. Fasting should be gradual, a process.

1. Begin by trying a partial fast for 24 hours from lunch to lunch. This way you abstain from only two meals. Consume **fresh** juices (not bottled or sugared) during the fast. Drink lots of water (at least 8 eight oz. glasses a day). No matter how routine your activities, they will be worship as you spend your time more aware of spiritual purposes. Develop a ‘gentle receptiveness to divine breathings’” (Bonhoeffer’s phrase, cited in Foster, p. 57), that is, try to remain quiet and prayerful, more focused on the Holy Spirit’s leading than you normally would. Then end your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables. Try this once a week for several weeks or until you feel you have been able to connect more closely with the Lord.
2. Attempt a regular fast of 24 hours. Just drink water and ignore the hunger pangs you might feel. These are not real hunger signals of the body; real hunger is signaled in the mouth like thirst (Fuhrman, p. 215). Instead, the stomach gets trained to receive food at a certain time. It’s okay to not give in to the “spoiled child” that is the stomach. In fact, as Martin Luther said, the stomach must be disciplined, not indulged. Of course, do not call attention to yourself when you are fasting. End the fast with fruits and vegetables, as above.

3. After several of these fasts, you can move on to a 36-hour fast—three meals. If you sense God leading you to try a longer fast, then seek medical advice and supervision beforehand (Furhman, pp. 216–217). Three to seven days “will probably have a substantial impact on the course of your life” (Foster, p. 58). The first three days of a fast can be uncomfortable due to your body eliminating built up toxins from what you have previously consumed. Your tongue may become coated; you may feel flu-like and have a headache. Don’t let these conditions disturb you; they will pass. On the fourth day be careful to move more slowly in case of dizziness, and rest if you feel weak.

Now you’re through the worst of it, and by the sixth or seventh day you will feel stronger and more alert. By the ninth or tenth day, hunger pains will lessen. You will feel more focused and may think you could continue fasting for a very long time. Enjoy that feeling! You might feel a little colder than normal because your metabolism is not producing the usual amount of heat.

Between twenty-one days and forty days, you will feel hunger pains again. Break the fast at this time because this is the first stage of starvation. Do not continue because your body will now survive by drawing on itself. “Depending on the nutrition reserves of the individual, I prefer to fast a person...close to three weeks. Most people of normal weight should not fast much longer than that because we do not want them to become so thin that they have a long road back regaining their strength” (Furhman, p. 216).

Don’t try to “stock up” by eating a large amounts of food before an extended fast; in fact, it’s wise to taper off your eating for a couple of days before commencing the fast. Abstain from tea and coffee. If your last meal in the stomach consists of fruits and vegetables, you shouldn’t have trouble with constipation. If you do, aloe vera mixed with your water will help relieve it and is readily available at health food stores.

You should break an extended fast with small amounts of fruit or vegetable juice. Your stomach has shrunk and your entire digestive system has slowed down. On the second day, add fruit. Next, try fresh salads and cooked vegetables. Keep away from salad dressings, grease, and starches. It’s very important to not overeat. Instead, use this transition time to forge improved and more self-controlled eating habits. Consider further reading along with consulting your doctor on how to end a long fast.

In fasting, remember that you are not just fighting a battle of the flesh. What happens in your relationship with God is much more important. You will need all the armor mentioned in Ephesians 6! Be aware of temptation to quit especially near the end of your fast, when you may let down your guard. But, others assure us that any struggles will be far surpassed by “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17, cited by Foster, p. 60).

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