

Fasting in the Bible

There are many different reasons people fast. The best way to understand this area of fasting is to study the many examples in the Bible. Looking closely in the Bible, even within the examples in the Bible, there were different reasons for fasting.

Moses Fasted Before Receiving the Commandments – Deuteronomy 9:9-18

Fasting in preparation for an important commission / work

Moses fasted for 40 days when he went up to the mountain to receive the commandments of God written on stone tablets. This was an unusual and miraculous fast because the Bible said that Moses did not eat nor drink water during the 40 days (Deuteronomy 9:9). A human body cannot survive extended periods of time without water. This is to be a supernatural fast.

After he came down from the mountain of God and saw the people transgressing the commandments that were just given, Moses angrily breaks the tablets of stone. He then ascends the mountain once again and proceeds to fast another 40 days without food and water before receiving the law once more (Deuteronomy 9:18, 25, 26; 10:10). In essence, he spent 80 days with food and water, something that only God can sustain.

It is dangerous to go more than 3 days without water. For anyone to do a supernatural fast, God must be the One who has instructed the individual. The other individual who fasted like Moses but for lesser days was Queen Esther (Esther 4:16).

David Mourning His Child's Illness – 2 Samuel 12:1-23

Fasting for God's intervention over an illness

After David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, he learned that she was pregnant. David had her husband executed so that he could take her to be his wife. After the baby was born, Nathan the prophet confronted David about his sin. David confessed and repented (2 Samuel 12:1-14).

Even though David repented before God, there were still consequences for his sin of adultery. The prophet told David that the child would die. After the prophet left, the young boy became very ill. David immediately went into prayer and fasting for his son. He knew that God said the child would die, but he had hoped that he might find grace in the eyes of God.

David refused to eat while the child was ill. After the seventh day his son died. When David's servants told him about the child's death, David cleaned himself up, ceased from his mourning and began to eat once again (2 Samuel 12:15-20). The servants were surprised by the actions of the king. But David said that now that the child had died, there was nothing that could be done. He would one day see his son again in Heaven (2 Samuel 12:23).

In times of need, God provides us with the instrument of fasting and prayer to seek His face for help. God is the One who will sovereignly decide the outcome and it is our responsibility to submit to the Lord's will.

Ezra Fasted While Mourning Over Sin – Ezra 10:6-17

Fasting because of someone else's sin in the hope that the Lord will bring the individual back

Ezra 10:6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

The Jews began to return to Israel after the Babylonian captivity. Yet they had disobeyed God's laws during their captivity. Ezra gathered the people together to confront them for their sins.

Ezra 10:6 does not say specifically how long his fast was (though there is indication that it lasted 3 days while waiting for the people to gather). The Bible does tell us that he did not eat any bread and only drank water during this fast. He fasted because he was mourning the sins of those who had been carried away from Israel but had finally returned.

When someone sins against the Lord, God may move us to fast so as to implore God to bring the individual back to the Lord.

Esther Fasted for the Deliverance of the Jews – Esther 4:15-17

Fasting for the Lord's intervention in imminent danger or crisis and as we take the steps of faith in response to the handle the situation

Mordecai heard that the Jews were to be destroyed from the kingdom of Ahasuerus. This kingdom stretched from India to Ethiopia (Esther 1:1). The reason

for the genocide was because one man, Haman, did not like Mordecai and his family. He felt that Mordecai did not show him proper respect.

Queen Esther was a Jew but Haman did not know this. Mordecai came to his niece Esther to ask her to petition the king to spare the Jews. Because of royal tradition, it was not appropriate for Esther to enter the king's court without an invitation. Even as queen she could be executed for approaching the king without an invitation (Esther 4:11).

Mordecai told Esther that God may have given her the position in the kingdom that she had for the sole purpose of saving the Jewish race (Esther 4:14). She agreed to approach the king, but she asked Mordecai to spread the word to the Jews that they should fast for 3 days without food or drink. She fasted in the same manner.

When there is impending danger or a looming crisis, the Lord showed us that even in such situations, we can plead for the Lord to intervene and then to bravely take steps of faith to handle the situation.

Daniel Fasted for an Answer to Prayer – Daniel 10:1-3

Fasting to plead God for an answer to prayer

Daniel fasted and prayed for understanding of a vision in Daniel 10. Verses 2 and 3 tell us that this fast was for 3 weeks. The vision Daniel saw showed what would become of the people of God in the future.

When we are confused about what to do for the Lord or need answers that will help the ministry of God, fasting and prayer will open the doors of Heaven and answers will come.

Jesus Fasted Before Temptation by Satan – Matthew 4:1-2

Fasting in preparation for testing

Before Jesus was tempted by Satan and before He started His public ministry, He fasted 40 days. The Bible says that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness (Matthew 4:1). This verse indicates that the purpose of Christ going into the wilderness was for the temptation that would come. Verse 2 tells us that for 40 days and nights before He was subjected to a personal attack by Satan, Jesus fasted.

Though physically weak (Jesus was hungry), Jesus was spiritually well prepared for the temptation that followed.

For the Lord Jesus to be prepared for ministry, He must be ready for spiritual war with the enemy and He has the weapon of fasting and prayer, which you and I have available to us as well.

Paul Fasted After His Conversion – Acts 9:1-9

Fasting to be still and to wait on the Lord

Saul was a man who persecuted Christians. He had gotten permission from the Jewish leadership to go to Damascus and arrest any who claimed allegiance to Christ. Along the way to Damascus Saul had a personal encounter with the Lord.

Part of this encounter involved a bright light which left Paul blinded. Paul was in Damascus for 3 days without sight. Paul did not eat and drink for 3 days in order to wait on the Lord for his sight to be restored and also to learn of the Lord's will for him. (Acts 9:9).

Church Elders in Antioch Fasted Before Sending out Missionaries – Acts 13:1-3

Fasting and prayer prepared the church to send out missionaries.

Barnabas took Paul to Antioch. The older Christian saw something in the new convert that others could not see. Barnabas actively worked to train Paul in the teachings of Christianity.

After a time of fasting and prayer, the Holy Spirit told the leaders of the church to separate Paul and Barnabas for mission work (Acts 13:2, 3). These two men were sent from the church as the first missionaries. Barnabas and Paul began their missionary journey by preaching everywhere they went.

Fasting and prayer, unity in prayer here was the key to the Lord impressing the church to send forth the missionaries.

Pastor's note

I pray that these short expositions will add to our knowledge of fasting and prayer. I hope that the believers will use what the Lord has given us both for personal growth and also for evangelism and discipleship and to deal with the situations, issues and challenges that come into our lives and ministry.