

Biblical Fasting

HarvestCall Guiding Principle number 2 states, “Submission to God: We will pray and fast, seeking the Holy Spirit’s direction and the Lord’s will, consistent with the Word of God.” While the purpose and role of prayer is well understood and commonly practiced, there appears to be less understanding about the purpose and role of fasting.

Definition of Biblical Fasting

Biblical fasting is denying our physical body something it needs, typically food, for a period of time for a spiritual benefit.

The “Why” of Biblical Fasting

The goal of fasting is to thoroughly reorient the believer toward God and away from self (e.g. Ps. 109:21-24; Ps. 69:10). Fasting is a sort of humbling of our physical bodies during times of waiting for God’s direction (Acts 13:1-3), waiting for God’s deliverance (Esther 4:16), repentance (Jonah 3:5-10), temptation (Matt 4:1-2), sorrow (Dan. 10:2-3), prayer (Luke 5:33-35), and adoration (Matt. 6:10, 9:14-15). While eating and drinking may sustain us physically, it does not sustain us spiritually because man cannot live by bread alone (Matt. 4:4).

The “How” of Biblical Fasting

The most frequent practice of fasting in the Bible is abstaining from eating and/or drinking for a time (Matt. 4, Acts 9:9, Acts 13:1-3), although for people who cannot abstain from eating and/or drinking for a period of time due to health/medical reasons, fasting may take a different form. In any case, fasting is to be discreet (Matt. 6:16-18), purposeful, thoughtful, and accompanied by prayer. Fasting simply for health benefits, due to a lack of food, or out of rote tradition does not meet the “why” of Biblical fasting. This was the problem in Isaiah 58. God’s people were fasting out of tradition thinking that the act of fasting was what was needed to gain God’s favor. The problem was that while they were fasting, they were not living how God had told them to live in other areas of their lives. God did not want only a day of humility, he wanted a lifestyle of righteousness (Is. 58:5-8).

Why the “Why” is more important than the “How”

It is understandable that believers often focus more on the “how” than the “why” when it comes to fasting. We want to do what is right and so we focus on the “how.” We want clear cut answers to our questions: What protocols must we follow in order to meet the fasting expectation in the guiding principles? What should we fast from? How long should we fast? What circumstances necessitate a fast? What do we do if certain people do not wish to fast or feel the need to fast? The problem is that the Bible does not give clear direction on these sorts of questions and it is unwise to build a spiritual house without a Biblical foundation. While the Bible does illustrate fasting, even these stories of people fasting do not show a clear pattern or direction. Therefore, the goal of the believer is to completely understand the “why” of fasting and leave the how to the individual conscience.