

9. Fasting: God's Secret Weapon to Grow Faith.

Growing Faith in God

In 1977, I spent four months in Israel, the first of three extended visits to the Holy Land. Most of my time was in Jerusalem, with a few long weekends in Haifa, Beersheba, and Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. I stayed with a group of about 30 people, mainly young Christians. During this period, I learned a lot about spiritual disciplines. I also experienced a close sense of community and a deep fellowship that shaped my early years as a Christian. Several friends there undertook long fasts on just water, sometimes lasting as long as forty days. I was a young Christian then, but I grew in my faith by living with others who fasted regularly. Fasting was an essential part of their Christian journey, and I knew they expected me to fast too. I decided I needed to learn about and practice fasting. I admit that even though we all agreed to fast every Monday and Wednesday until sundown, I sometimes broke my fast with a bread roll and a banana when I was away from the group. It was difficult to fast when others expected me to. I needed motivation to fast. Fasting simply to discipline the body wasn't enough—I love food too much! I needed a reason to fast. Since then, my approach to fasting has improved. I'm grateful to have been introduced to this discipline early in my Christian life. My goal with this study is to help you understand what the Bible says about fasting and its role in our lives as disciples, especially together with prayer. Although this topic isn't often discussed in the Western Christian church today, it was a vital part of the early church's life.

Today, more teaching on fasting is available outside the church because it has become popular for health reasons, especially intermittent fasting. Various types of fasting appear throughout Scripture. There is personal fasting for a breakthrough in your life and congregational fasting, where the church or a group of people fast together for a specific need. If you cannot fast for medical reasons, you can still set aside time to refrain from certain activities to dedicate time to prayer. I have titled this study "God's Secret Weapon" because I believe fasting is a powerful spiritual tool God has given us. It is not about using fasting to "twist God's arm," but rather about engaging in spiritual warfare and tipping the scales by denying the flesh and allowing the Spirit of God to accomplish His will on earth. Practically speaking, through fasting and prayer, we partner with the Spirit of God. There have been times in our nation's history when fasting turned the tide in significant events. Many American presidents, including George Washington, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, and John Adams, have proclaimed days of national fasting. If there was ever a time when we need to return to fasting and restore this vital tool to the church, it is today.

Jesus Expected His Disciples to Fast.

Jesus spoke of three disciplines He expected all Christians to practice regularly, which are found in His famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, chapter six, verses 1-18:

- 1) The discipline of giving to the needs of those without (verses 1-4).
- 2) The regular discipline of prayer (verses 5-15).
- 3) The discipline of fasting (verses 16-18).

In the second verse, Jesus said, "When you give to the needy," not "if" you give to people in need. The Lord assumed that His followers would give to those who are poor. In verses five and

six, He said, "when you pray," not "if you pray." He expected and assumed that we would pray. Again, in verses sixteen and seventeen, twice, He said, "when you fast," not "if you fast." The Lord expected all Christians to practice these disciplines.

There are spiritual benefits to fasting. The Book of Isaiah, chapter 58, talks about the "fast that God has chosen." I'll focus on just a few verses from that chapter.

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ⁸Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. ⁹Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I (Isaiah 58:6-9).

The Lord said that fasting would "untie the cords of the yoke" and "set the oppressed free" (v. 6). He also said that "light will break forth like the dawn" and "your healing will quickly appear" (v. 8). Another spiritual benefit is that people would experience hearing God's voice when they cry out to Him for help (v. 9). There are also promises of God's guidance, provision, and strength. He said we would be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail (v. 11). If you are experiencing depression, joy will overflow within you instead (v. 14). All of this is possible through fasting!

What benefits, so far, do you see in practicing fasting? What would motivate you to desire to fast?

Some tangible benefits you may experience, especially during a fast of several days or more, are detoxification and mental clarity. After your initial weakness subsides, you often feel a surge in strength and even a sense of euphoria. You might experience dizziness, headache, and constipation when you start fasting, along with an unpleasant taste in your mouth, nausea, and weakness — natural reactions as your body begins to eliminate toxins. Fasting helps cleanse your body and gives your digestive system a break and a reset.

When Jesus began His ministry, He first went to John the Baptist and was baptized by him in the River Jordan. **"The Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:22).** After leaving John the Baptist, He was **"full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1).** Many of us might wonder why, if He was full of the Holy Spirit when leaving after being baptized in the Jordan River, He didn't go straight to Galilee to begin His ministry. Instead, we see that the Holy Spirit led Him into Judea's dry and barren wilderness for a forty-day fast on nothing but water. We believe it was toward the end of His fast, at His weakest point, that He was tempted by Satan (Luke 4:2). What were the results of the forty days of fasting and Satan's temptation? He **"returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14).**

It seems that the full power of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus received at His baptism in Jordan, did not fully manifest until after He completed His fast. His ministry started to unfold after He separated Himself during a time of fasting, solitude, and prayer. He serves as a perfect example

for us because of His obedience to the Spirit of God. Our bodies often dictate what they want. When we fast, we are signaling to our bodies that our spirit is in charge and that our bodies must obey the Holy Spirit's guidance, not the other way around. Just as a rider brings a stallion under control through discipline, so our bodies can be brought into submission by the Holy Spirit (if you will allow Him). In the early days of walking with Jesus, the Lord did not require the disciples to fast; He first built their relationship with Him. Those who disciplined themselves through regular fasting noticed this early on:

¹⁸Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" ¹⁹Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast (Mark 2:18-20).

During the time of Christ, the Pharisees fasted from sunrise to sunset on Mondays and Thursdays, so this criticism of the disciples might have been made on one of those days. The Scriptures only mandated one fasting day a year for the Jewish people, on the Day of Atonement, a national day dedicated to repentance and humbling the soul (Leviticus 16:29-34). Jesus replied to the Pharisees by reminding them that it was customary for wedding guests to be excused from religious duties, such as fasting, during wedding celebrations that lasted a week after the wedding. The Lord viewed His time on earth as a celebration of marriage, not mourning and fasting. While Christ was still on earth, He wanted to enjoy being with His people rather than impose strict fasting rules. When He left and ascended to the Father, it would then be appropriate for them to fast. We are currently living in the period when Christ's physical presence is absent; therefore, this is the time when we are expected to fast, give to the needy, and pray. In the Scripture passage we will examine now, the Lord was accelerating His training of the disciples because His crucifixion and departure were imminent.

Growing in Faith through Fasting

¹⁴When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. ¹⁵"Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him." ¹⁷"O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." ¹⁸Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. ¹⁹Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁰He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." ²¹But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:14-21). Verse 21 was removed from the New International Version by the editors and put at the bottom because some manuscripts don't have this verse.

In the passage above, we see Jesus returning from the Mount of Transfiguration with three disciples—Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1-13). When they encounter the nine disciples, a man whose son had demonic seizures begged Christ for help. I do not believe that all people with

seizures have demons, but on this occasion, what the boy's father saw as seizures resulted from demonic influence in the boy's life. This becomes clear when reading the parallel passages in Mark 9:14-28 and Luke 9:37-43. When the Lord heard of the nine disciples' failure to cast out the evil spirit from the boy, He reacted with disappointment and frustration. He said, **"O unbelieving and perverse generation,"** Jesus replied, **"How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"** (v. 17).

Why was Jesus expressing frustration and disappointment with His disciples?

By this time, Jesus had already shown them how to minister with power to heal the sick and cast out demons. They had already gone out in pairs to do the works of the kingdom (Luke 9:1-6). But now they are without power and lacking faith. Jesus was frustrated with them because He wanted them to work through the Holy Spirit's power and not rely solely on their own abilities. The Lord knew His time with them was short, and He wanted them to understand this! Human intelligence and personal effort would not change the world. It is God's power that is needed, now and always! God's work requires God's power. When they asked why they couldn't cast out the spirit from the boy, He told them it was because of their lack of faith. But then He shared something interesting: **"But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting"** (Matthew 17:21). Some Greek manuscripts do not include this passage, so the New International Version translators placed the sentence at the bottom of the page. The English King James Version includes it.

I am grateful for this insight because it explains that some situations we face can only be resolved by a higher level of God's presence and power upon us. This faith and power come only through a life of consistent prayer and fasting. We need time to fast and pray, and it's often impossible to ask someone to wait until later so we can have enough time for both. If only the nine had known in advance that they would face an evil spirit resisting their commands to come out of the boy, they would have prepared themselves spiritually. Jesus encourages a lifestyle of prayer and fasting so that we are always ready for whatever situation arises. I don't think the words "this kind" (v. 21) refer only to a powerful evil spirit; I believe they relate to stubborn cases that cannot be resolved through regular prayer alone. As believers in Christ, we sometimes face spiritual strongholds that only prayer and fasting can break. I like to think of fasting as the Holy Spirit's secret weapon. A desperate situation can be resolved through the discipline of fasting. Fasting adds intensity, earnestness, and authority to prayer. This writer believes Jesus is saying that if His disciples live a life of prayer and fasting, they will have the faith of God to move mountains. I don't think He was talking about literal mountains; He was using a figure of speech about impossible situations that require God's Spirit to move them for us. When Zerubbabel was rebuilding the second temple after Israel's exile in Babylon, he faced such difficulties that the prophet Zechariah was sent to him with a word from the Lord.

"So he said to me, 'This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty. 'What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!' " 8Then the word of the LORD came to me: 9"The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you. (Zechariah 4:6-9).

It would not be by any might that Zerubbabel could boast about his abilities. In the passage above, God told him that the Lord would intervene by His Spirit, and the mountain of difficulties would become a flat plain as he exercised his faith in God. Sure, I agree that God can move mountains, but I don't see any situation where God expects us to speak to actual mountains to move them out of our way. However, He certainly can use us to speak with authority to situations like immovable mountains and see them become a flat plain through God's Spirit. A mountain symbolizes something that won't move—an obstacle that you can't go around; you must go through it. We need God's power to move the mountain!

Have you ever fasted and prayed to see a “mountain of problems” move? If so, please share your situation or a prayer request. (If you'd like to pray, it would be better to wait until the meeting ends.)

The Early Church Practiced Fasting

¹In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ²While they were **worshipping the Lord and fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³So after they had **fasted and prayed**, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3).

Acts 11:21 describes the church at Antioch as having many people who became believers. The church leadership team gathered to seek God's direction by worshipping and fasting. Since there were prophetic people among them (v. 1), the Holy Spirit spoke through one of them to send two leaders into a special ministry: Barnabas, the encourager (Acts 4:36), and Saul, whose name was changed to Paul the Apostle. God used their time of worshipping and fasting to send the church into missionary work. Fasting was mentioned twice. What did they do about leadership for the new churches they planted?

²¹They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²²strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. ²³Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with **prayer and fasting**, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. (Acts 14:21-23).

After their first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul sought the Lord's blessing on the new leadership of the churches by praying and fasting for guidance on which leaders God wanted in the role of elders. We can't tell from the text if Paul and Barnabas were fasting or if the whole church was fasting together.

In 2 Corinthians 11:27, Paul said, “I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food.” “Gone without food” should be translated as Paul had “often fasted.” Just previously, he wrote that he involuntarily felt hunger and thirst, but also voluntarily fasted from the food he had available. The King James Version

translates the same passage: *In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in **hunger and thirst, in fastings often**, in cold and nakedness (2 Corinthians 11:27).*

If Paul lived a lifestyle of prayer and fasting often, and God used him so powerfully, we need to realize that this power is available today for all believers in Christ. Perhaps the amount of prayer and fasting that Paul engaged in was the very thing that resulted in the great grace that was upon his life. Yes, God had a plan for Paul, but the Lord responds when His people express faith in Him. Paul had zealous faith and expressed it in humility. In one place, Paul wrote that God spoke to him a powerful truth:

⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for **my power is made perfect in weakness.**" Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, **I delight in weaknesses**, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For **when I am weak, then I am strong** (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Paul's testimony was that he discovered a secret—the weakness of his own strength brought the power of God upon him. He said he delighted in being weak so Christ's power could rest on him. One thing is certain; we need the power of God to be active in and through the church of the 21st century. It will require men and women dedicated to labor with God's energy working in them, rather than relying solely on their own abilities without God's enablement. In another place, Paul wrote:

To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so **powerfully** works in me (Colossians 1:29).

It is Christ in us, the hope of glory, who must do the works of the kingdom. When a man or woman of God seeks the Lord through prayer and fasting so the Holy Spirit can take control of their life, God can be glorified by doing His work through us. Heaven forbid that the church should seek the glory that belongs only to Christ. That's why Paul could say to the church in Rome: *"**I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ**" (Romans 15:29).* Paul had learned that the Holy Spirit would work powerfully through him as he served the Lord through fasting and prayer. He fully expected to come with the Spirit's power. So, hopefully, you are convinced that times of fasting would be beneficial for you, so now, let's go over some practicalities.

Practical Advice about Fasting

- 1) Don't begin fasting for more than a day if you've never tried it before. Building on success is wise. Start by fasting for breakfast and lunch, and plan to eat in the evening. Gradually increase the duration as the Lord guides you.
- 2) If you usually drink tea or coffee, plan to cut out caffeine a day early to avoid a severe headache and hunger on the first day of a fast. I recommend drinking only water during fasting because it helps naturally flush toxins from the body. There are a few cases of someone fasting without water, but going longer than three days without water is dangerous and unhealthy.

Moses fasted supernaturally with the Lord, without food and water. A person can die if they go more than three days without water.

- 3) Record what you are experiencing and the types of prayers you are offering. Later, when you reflect on your fasting period, you will be greatly encouraged by how God has answered prayer during that time.
- 4) If you are taking medication, check with your doctor and inform them of what you're doing. People with certain health conditions, such as Type 1 Diabetes or those taking heart medication, should consult a physician. If fasting from food isn't possible, consider doing a partial fast or abstaining from some activity and dedicating that time to prayer. God knows your heart, and He will reward your act of faith regardless of its form.
- 5) Get some books on fasting to motivate you. One of the best books I've read on fasting is God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis. I also recommend Mahesh Chavda's The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting and Derek Prince's Shaping History Through Prayer and Fasting.
- 6) Set aside specific mealtimes by going to your room and praying. Being around when food is being cooked is difficult to resist, especially during the first three days of a fast.
- 7) Beware of the TV. One becomes aware of how many food commercials there are on TV.
- 8) In the first three or four days, the body clears out many toxins due to the types of foods we eat in most Western countries. You may feel weak by the end of the first day until around the fourth day. This process of detoxification is very beneficial. During this time, your urine turns yellow, your breath may smell bad, and your body can feel cold quickly in winter. If you fast for more than four days, your strength will come back once the toxins are eliminated. Fasting then becomes easier.
- 9) You will gain greater clarity of mind while fasting. Read the Scriptures frequently and draw closer to God during your fast.
- 10) Fasting is not harmful to your health—it's normal in the animal kingdom. The hunger pangs experienced toward the end of the first day are simply your body's way of signaling that it's time to eat. The cravings will subside.
- 11) Read chapter 58 of the Book of Isaiah, the section on fasting, and be watchful over your motives.
- 12) Fasting frees you from sin's grip and weakens the control of bad habits and their dominance over your life.
- 13) Pray for God to release the gifts of the Spirit into your life. Fasting opens your life to new spiritual gifts from God because it humbles the spirit and makes it more sensitive to God's Spirit leading.
- 14) Fasting helps with weight loss. Be careful not to overeat when you start eating again. During the fast, your stomach will shrink, and overeating afterward can be dangerous. Any fast longer than six days should be broken with broth or easily digestible food.
- 15) There are different types of fasts. Daniel and his three friends went on a vegetable and water fast (Daniel 1:12). Later, he fasted for three weeks without any tasty food, meat, or wine touching his lips (Daniel 10:2-3). Decide for yourself how you will fast. Ask God to show you what kind of fast you should undertake.
- 16) Avoid heavy exercising or long walks. It's easy to get tired and want to break your fast early.

An average healthy person can fast on water for up to 40 days. After that time, hunger pangs will return, and the person begins to starve. Beyond 40 days, our bodies start to consume living cells instead of fat. Jesus fasted for forty days, and at that point, the Bible tells us that He was hungry.

When hunger returns, it's time to break the fast. Satan's temptation of Jesus began at the forty-day mark when hunger pangs started, tempting Him with bread (Matthew 4:2-3). It's likely that all three temptations occurred on the last day of His fast.

My Personal Experience of Fasting

I have practiced fasting, though not as often as I would like. I try to set aside a few days now and then, guided by the Lord, for prayer and fasting. Typically, my fasts last between three and five days on just water. A few years ago, my wife and I felt an urgent need to fast and pray for someone close to us. The Lord led us to fast for ten days on only water for a person struggling with her faith. We believed it was an attack from the enemy trying to separate her from us and her newfound faith in Christ. After ten days of prayer and fasting, she came to our door in tears and brokenness. We prayed and talked. Before she knocked, we hadn't contacted or invited her; the Holy Spirit prompted her to come. It was an answer to prayer. Although she still faced difficult years ahead, she returned to her faith in Christ and now has her own stories of answered prayer. Prayer and fasting can help loosen the enemy's grip on someone's life, allowing them to respond more freely to the Holy Spirit's promptings. Maybe you have a loved one you've been praying for, desperately wanting to see a breakthrough. Is God asking you to fast and pray for them? Some situations won't change until you step into the battle with prayer and fasting. Fasting, combined with fervent prayer, is a powerful combination.

Mahesh Chavda shares the story of a young boy whom God used to teach him about the power of fasting and prayer. As a young man starting his ministry, God guided Mahesh to a state school in Lubbock, Texas. It was a school for children with severe disabilities. One of these children, whom he calls Stevie, suffered from a compulsive urge to self-mutilate. He would cry out and hit himself in the face repeatedly. The skin on his face became thick, like alligator skin, due to the constant beating. The school's psychologist had obtained permission from state officials in Austin, Texas, to administer electric shock therapy to Stevie for six months. This "negative operant conditioning," as they called it, aimed to change Stevie's behavior by giving electric shocks whenever he hurt himself.

They tracked his behavior during that time, and Mahesh states that he saw no improvement; Stevie's condition seemed to worsen. Finally, the staff tied Stevie's hands in splints so he couldn't bend his arms to reach his face. The only problem was that Stevie couldn't protect himself, and the other children made a cruel game of it. They would push Stevie over, and he couldn't regain his balance with his arms at his sides. He would fall, often face down on the floor, sometimes with blood coming from his nose and mouth. Mahesh was filled with sorrow and love for this young boy. He asked God, "What is the answer for Stevie?" Mahesh felt the Lord say, "This kind goes not out but by prayer and fasting," so he began to fast. On the fourteenth day, his fast ended, and he felt that God told him, "Now pray for Stevie." The following is a direct quote:

When I arrived for my shift at the school that day, I took Stevie into my little office cubicle and said, 'Stevie, I know your mind may not understand what I'm saying, but your spirit is eternal. I want to tell you that I am a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. I've come to preach good news to you. I want you to know that Jesus Christ came to set the captives free.' Then I said, 'In the name of Jesus, you evil spirit of mutilation, you let him go now in the name

of Jesus.' Suddenly Stevie's body was flung about eight feet away from me and hit the other wall of the cubicle. When Stevie hit the wall, his body was elevated about three feet above the floor before sliding down and loudly sighing. Immediately, I smelled an incredibly foul smell of rotten eggs and burning sulfur in the room, which gradually faded away. I quickly went to Stevie, cradled him in my arms, and removed his splints while he watched with wide eyes. Then Stevie began to bend his arms and gently feel his face. I watched him softly touch his eyes, nose, and ears, and then he started sobbing, realizing the spirit did not drive him to beat himself. Stevie was gently touching his face knowing that he had been delivered. In that unforgettable moment, the Lord revealed to me what a powerful weapon He has given us to pull down strongholds and set captives free. All the scabs had fallen off Stevie's face within a few months. He began to heal because he had stopped beating himself.¹

What a powerful story of God's strength released through prayer and fasting! Ask God to teach you how to develop the discipline of fasting. When combined with prayer, it is the most effective tool to show our spirit's control over our physical needs and cravings. It is a mystery that's hard to understand, but in some way, fasting shifts the balance toward the spiritual and grants power over the enemy that prayer alone cannot. If we incorporate fasting into our spiritual lives, we will be prepared when situations arise that require this kind of faith and spiritual strength.

Prayer: Father, please help us grow in faith through fasting and prayer. Our world needs people filled with the Spirit and empowered by You through these spiritual disciplines. We desire to be involved in Your kingdom's work and to carry out Your will on earth. Encourage us to see answers to prayer so miraculous that they will be clear evidence that You have responded.

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A website for free Bible studies: www.groupbiblestudy.com

¹Mahesh Chavda, *The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting*, Printed by Destiny Image, Pages 11-14.