A Brief Overview of Biblical Fasting

Prepared by Donna Castle – March 2009

Definition Fasting is a Scriptural discipline referring to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes for a predetermined length of time. The type and length of fast should be consistent with your purpose for fasting.

Matthew 6:16-18 reads: "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they will have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." By the words "whenever you fast" in this quote, there is an assumption that believers will fast. As Christians we are not required to fast but allowed to fast (The Beginner's Guide to Fasting, pg. 11).

In fasting, your heart attitude is what is important. "Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained" (Celebration of Discipline, pg. 48). "Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that could never be had in any other way" (Celebration of Discipline, pg. 52). See also Matthew 17:21. Andrew Womack writes of fasting: "Fasting was always used as a means of seeking God to the exclusion of all else. Fasting casts out unbelief. The real virtue of a fast is in humbling ourselves through self denial."

Fasting is primarily a private matter between you and God. If you decide to fast with a friend, you have someone with whom you can pray, share any doubts or struggles and be accountable. There are times of corporate or public fasts and national fasts (Joel 2:15, 2 Chron. 20:1-4).

Prayer, worship and reading the Bible usually accompany fasting (Daniel 9:3, 20; Nehemiah 9:1-3, Luke 2:37). How and when you incorporate these into your fast will depend on such things as your schedule, family responsibilities, etc. You can use your hunger pangs as a call to pray for the reason you are fasting. During a fast you will likely encounter spiritual resistance or spiritual warfare. Remember that Satan does not want you to get closer to God, to know Him better, to be in His presence; all of which are benefits of fasting. Be sure you put on your spiritual armor as described in Ephesians 6.

Who should not fast Diabetics, expectant mothers, heart patients; anyone with a specific medical reason not to fast. If you are to take food with medications, do not stop that when fasting. If you have blood sugar issues, discuss fasting with your doctor. If you have any questions, discuss fasting with your doctor prior to the fast.

Reasons to fast Determine the reason you are fasting before you begin your fast. Following are some of the reasons listed in the Bible:

To solve a problem (Ezra 8:21-23)
For divine intervention in a situation (Esther 4:16)
Intercession for the people of God (Daniel 9:1-19)
To humble yourself (Ps. 35:13)
To seek the Lord on a matter or decision (Ezra 8:21-23, Judges 20:26-28)
In repentance and confession of sin (Ezra 10:6, Nehemiah 9:1-3)
Spiritual deliverance (Isaiah 58:6, Matthew 17: 21)

Types of Fasts Following are descriptions of various types of fasts. Pray about how you are to fast. God will give you clear direction then fast with a clear conscience. "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you

do, do all to the glory of God" (I Corinthians 10:31). Rely on God's grace to help you fulfill your commitment to fast. You fast to please God, not yourself or others.

- *Normal fast*: abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water (Luke 4: 2)
- *Partial fast*: abstaining from selected items in your diet or selected meals. A *Daniel fast* is a type of partial fast. "Please test your servants for 10 days and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink." (Daniel 1:12) "I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth" (Daniel 10:3). There are numerous lists of foods "allowed" during a Daniel fast.
- *Absolute fast*: abstaining from both food and water (Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9). Going without water can have serious physical consequences. **"This (absolute fast) is the exception and should never be engaged in unless one has a very clear command from God, and then for not more than three days."** Celebration of Discipline, pg. 43). Arthur Wallis repeats this same warning (God's Chosen Fast, pg. 17).
- *Supernatural fast*: Moses was miraculously able to survive not eating or drinking for 40 days (Deut. 9:9,18; Exodus 34:28)
- *John Wesley fast*: eating only whole grain bread and water for ten days

Length of fast Determine the length of your fast before you begin.

One night (Daniel 6:18)
One day (Lev. 16:29; Judges 20:26; I Samuel 7:6; II Samuel 1:12, 3:35)
Three days (Esther 4:16)
Seven days (I Samuel 31:13)
Twenty-one days (Daniel 10:3-13)
Forty days (Exodus 34:28; I Kings 19:8; Matthew 4:2)

How to fast If you have never fasted, it is recommended that you begin with a one day fast. You could go from lunch to lunch, skipping two meals, or go from sundown to sundown, skipping three meals. You might drink fresh fruit juices during your fast, unless you are doing a normal fast. The key is to pray about how to fast and to be obedient to the Lord's leading. If the Lord leads you to go on a longer fast, please study the topic and learn how to prepare for a fast and how to break a fast. If you regularly drink coffee or tea, you may experience a headache when you go without. If you undertake a long fast, you will want to slowly wean yourself from caffeine-laden drinks prior to the fast.

Questions to ask yourself as you prepare a fast of God's choosing:

1. Am I confident that this desire to fast is God-given? Would God have me undertake a normal or a partial fast?
2. Are my motives right? Is there any hidden desire to impress others?
3. What are my spiritual objectives in this fast?
4. Do my objectives tend to be self-centered? Is my desire for personal blessing balanced by genuine concern for others?
5. Am I determined above all else to minister to the Lord in this fast?

(God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis, pgs. 85-86)

How to listen to God as you seek Him during your fast

1. Get ready. Have your Bible, notebook or journal, pen, etc. with you as you enter your time with the Lord.
2. Get quiet. Be prepared to listen rather than to do all the talking. Know that He does want to speak to you.
3. Get focused. Do whatever it takes to give God your full attention.
4. Get rid of distractions. Put aside the pressures of life.
5. Get still. This does not necessarily mean being physically still. You might walk around the room or rock. Quiet your spirit so that you can hear God.

(The Beginner's Guide to Fasting by Elmer Towns, pgs. 114-115)

SOURCES:
The Beginner's Guide to Fasting by Elmer Towns
Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster
Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough by Elmer Towns
God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis
Knowing God Through Fasting by Elmer Towns
Andrew Womack Ministries, http://www.awmi.net/devotion/jesus/mar_07
There are numerous articles on fasting on the internet. As always, read these with caution and always let the Bible be your guide.