

Resource: Prayer & Fasting

Below you will find:

- > BACKGROUND INFORMATION — why fast and what the Bible says
- > PRACTICAL INFORMATION — how to fast and answers to some questions you may have, inc. what to do if you can't food fast
- > SPECIFICS — outlining the focus and shape of our fasting day (*this will be updated each month*)
- > RESOURCES — for those wanting to dig deeper

Feedback from your time of prayer can be posted on our website or communicated how you find easiest.

THE BACKGROUND BIT

What is fasting and why is it important?

Fasting is a practice found in Scripture that's as normal as the discipline of giving money. We find both private and corporate times of self-denial of some or all food and drink for short and long periods of time. God's people do this to sincerely express a variety of concerns alongside prayer and worship—e.g., times of mourning (2 Samuel 1:11-12), preparing for renewal (Numbers 29:7), expressing repentance (Ezra 10:6), crying out for God's extraordinary help (2 Chronicles 20:3). Throughout church history, it's no wonder Christians have always turned to God in troubled times with prayer and fasting.

When we look to Jesus, He makes the assumption that his disciples will fast (Matt 6:16-18) but warns them to be careful of their underlying motives. For fasting is not a practice to get God to do what you want (Isaiah 58:3-4), nor a way to appear super-spiritual (Luke 18:11-12), or a legalistic rule (Colossians 2:20-23), rather it's about devotion to God, having hearts open to change and longing to hear His voice.

***“In fasting, what we are saying is that more than we enjoy food, we enjoy God”
(Rev'd David Platt).***

So fasting is a matter of the heart—to draw near to God and hear his voice; it is also a matter of motive—to glorify Him, to hear from Him and be changed. Psalm 63:1-5 (NLT) expresses it in this way:

O God, you are my God;
I earnestly search for you.
My soul thirsts for you;
my whole body longs for you,
in this parched and weary land
where there is no water.

I have seen you in your sanctuary
and gazed upon your power and glory.
Your unfailing love is better than life itself;
how I praise you!

I will praise you as long as I live,
lifting up my hands to you in prayer.
You satisfy me more than the richest feast.
I will praise you with songs of joy.

And what of the physical hunger? Well, the hunger we feel when fasting reminds us of our soul's appetite for God, as we 'Taste and see that the LORD is good' (Psalm 34:8).

Some types of fasting

There are a number of different types of fasting found in the Bible. Below are three examples; the last being an extreme we find!

- **A Regular Fast** — abstaining from all food, solid and liquid, except water (e.g., Luke 4).
- **A Partial Fast** — omitting certain "choice" foods / activities (e.g., Daniel 10) looking to the Lord for comfort and strength.
- **An Absolute Fast** — abstaining from all food or water (e.g., Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9). These lasted three days, but Moses and Elijah took part in a supernatural fast of 40-days (Deut 9:9; 1 Kings 19)!

Other benefits

Now whilst the above **MUST** be the main desire of our heart, there are secondary benefits. For fasting also:

- exposes things that control us—e.g., jealousy, fear, anger, pride (food can be used to cover up these internal struggles)—and we thank God that he makes us aware and offers healing in the power of Christ (Psalm 69:10);
- reminds us that God's word sustains us, so we use this time to feast on it (Matt 4:4; John 4:32, 34);
- reveals the non-essentials that are taking over our lives (notice the urge to go to the snack cupboard/turn on the phone/watch TV/not take part at all... 1 Cor 6:12);
- enables our minds to focus more clearly on Jesus (Psalm 63:1-5);
- leads us to the true partner of fasting—Kingdom action (Isaiah 58:6-9).

"Fasting helps express, deepens, confirms the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves, to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God."
Andrew Murray, Missionary to South Africa (1828-1917)

What does the Bible say?

Below is a selection of verses covering different aspects of fasting. There are a lot more—you might be surprised!

Ezra 8:21-23	Fasting is about drawing near to God
Matthew 6:16-18	Fasting is normal and about our heart's desire
Daniel 9:3-5	Fasting and prayer go hand in hand
Acts 13:2; 14:23	Fasting is a normal part of worship
Esther 4:16	Fasting is a gathered discipline
1 Corinthians 7:5	Fasting is not a command but a discipline of the heart
Luke 4:2-4	Fasting feeds our soul
Psalm 69:10	Fasting reveals our true heart
Jonah 3:5-9	Fasting accompanies sincere repentance
2 Samuel 1:12	Fasting often accompanies sincere cries for help

THE PRACTICAL BIT

Although fasting is primarily a spiritual discipline, we must prepare physically as well as spiritually. *NB If it is unwise for you to fast for health reasons, that's fine. You can still take part—see below for some ideas.*

How long and what about drink?

There are various lengths of fast in the Bible (up to 40 days). Below we suggest a time frame for our church days of prayer and fasting...but no one will be checking — it's down to you and God to decide what is realistic for that day.

If you've never done this before, try fasting just at lunchtime to start with; for others, aim for two or even all three meals (as you feel able). If you're not fasting food then commit to a period of time (4, 8, 12, 24 hours) with a clear start and end time. Whichever you do, make sure you **prepare** a plan for how you will use this time (see below).

Regarding drink, keeping hydrated throughout is really important. Use water and watered-down fruit juice. When you feel hungry, consuming some liquid can help subdue the pangs. For longer fasts, caffeinated and sugary drinks are best avoided but for our purposes this will probably not be an issue (though be careful not to use lattes as a meal-substitute!)

How to prepare

Plan how you will use the day before the day itself. We will provide some resources below but consider:

- When will you intentionally stop to pray?
- Note some topics for thanksgiving and some personal areas for prayer.
- What readings from Scripture, song/hymn books, apps or prayer books will you use?
- How will you manage any other commitments?
- How will you minimize distractions?
- Would it help to partner with someone else for *some* of the day for prayer and company?
- If you find getting out and about difficult, could you arrange a video or voice call at one point to pray and reflect on God's word with someone else?
- When you get hungry, how will you manage your emotions and maintain good relations with others?

“Fasting is no license to be unloving. It would be sad to lack concern and care for others around us because of this expression of heightened focus on God. Love for God and for neighbor go together. Good fasting mingles horizontal concern with the vertical.” David Mathis (Cities Church, USA)

Pray about the day and for yourself—for protection, guidance, His sustaining hand. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you examine your heart and reveal any unconfessed sin (Psalm 66:16-20) so you are in the best place you can be for that day (of course, this is a good thing to do generally!) Receive God's forgiveness and ask for Christ's help in staying the path with Him. Offer any concerns you have to Him and invite His wisdom for managing them.

Prepare for points in the day when you might face temptation; how will you plan to deal with those times?

Consider reducing the size of your last meal the day before—having a final blowout will just lead you to being hungrier later in the day. Trust me, I've tried! ☺ Reducing your intake helps the body realise that less is ok. Of course, if it's a short fast it shouldn't be so bad...

If you have fixed appointments, can you let someone know in advance that you're fasting so that you don't appear rude? For example,

- If you're visiting someone — advanced notice will avoid an awkward moment of turning down specially made refreshments or not sharing in a meal.
- If you're attending a meeting where food is par for the course, drop someone an email so they're aware.
- If you're out with the family all day, take time to explain what you're doing and why...and perhaps ask them to help you, not tempt you!

How do I use the time?

Firstly, you can shape the day how seems best to you. The only specific is to have times put aside to intentionally meet with God (whatever that may look like for you)—if this is our heart's motivation, it should not be too big a burden.

For those who'd like some structure, I've found this approach from *Pray with Your Eyes Open* by Richard L. Pratt, Jr. quite helpful. If it works for you—great; if not, throw it out and try something else (and let me know what you did so I can share that with others too...)

A pattern for intentional moments throughout the day (NB Don't aim to fill all the time of each section with words; pray slowly, in conversation with God, and make space for him to share his thoughts. He may have names/areas of focus you hadn't planned — follow where he leads):

1. Engage reflectively with a chosen passage of Scripture, hymn/song or book of prayers – note down any thoughts (10 minutes)
2. Offer specific prayers of thanksgiving (*e.g., for my friends*) (10 minutes)
3. Pray for some specific needs (*e.g., the medical profession*) (10 minutes)
4. Pray for the specific church focus (see below) (10 minutes)
5. Take time to quietly rest and reflect in the presence of God (10 minutes)

What if I have a medical condition?

It is important you talk with your doctor to establish if it is wise to do a food fast with your condition(s). If not, there are definitely other ways to be involved.

As fasting is about the heart, consider what other things take up significant amounts of your time and could act as a substitute of self-denial, making more time to spend with Father God. For example,

- If you're someone who has the TV, radio or similar on during the day, consider a *noise fast* — deliberate times of silence to meditate on God's word and rest in his presence.
- If you're someone who is comfortable alone, consider an *urban fast* — go to a place where people are and invite God to open your eyes to this new setting and his presence amongst these people. If you're brave, pray for the Spirit to prompt

you to someone and then start a conversation with them and reflect on what happens later.

- Isaiah 58 reminds us that fasting should lead to Kingdom action. Are there specific areas of service you could lean into as part of your fast—not for your own benefit but in His name for others? Be expectant of God speaking through the people you encounter and the activity you do for Him but don't fill the whole day with service, also make time to be alone with Father God.

How can my family and I engage in this together?

Pray together — whilst the children almost certainly will not be fasting, you can change the setting for a meal time to signal something is different (e.g., not in lounge, or visa versa with the TV off) and use this time to talk about what you're doing and why. Invite them to discuss how they might respond to a particular topic — (depending on age) drawing pictures as prayers; making clay/junk models; doing skittle/smarty/fruit prayers (see below); reflecting on a parable, even acting it out; prayer walking your street or local area.

Time-share — plan for one parent to release the other, or invite someone around to help give you time alone with God during the day.

Support groups — meet up with other Christians during the day at the park, or doing another activity, and pray together as you watch over your family.

I can't do that date/time; can I still be involved?

Absolutely! We realise there's never a perfect day for everyone, and even if you plan to take part life events can overtake you. Don't let that put you off – just plan in another day as near to the day as possible. God doesn't mind when we do it; he cares why we do it.

I'm not a fan of sitting still / I find prayer difficult

Prayer walking is a great way to engage with God on the move. We can print you a guide to how you do this—please ask. If you can't get out, use a map or Google maps and imagine walking the route before you. Pray for the various businesses you see; the different demographics of people you encounter; the sounds you hear in urban and natural creation. Invite the Spirit to lead your thought and prayers from those you experience into ones joining the church focus for that day.

THE SPECIFICS: SUN 9th OCTOBER

What shape will the day take?

On Sunday 9th October, the *suggested* fast is 12 hours—7.30am until 7.30pm (but remember this is at your discretion).

The day will begin with our normal gathered worship (10.30am) and end with a time of open prayer and worship (6.30-7.30pm). If it can be organised, we will also open the Lounge in the middle of the day as a quiet space (tbc).

Any reflections can be posted on online here, sent in to Kevin's email or shared in conversation with Kevin. These will be made available to all.

What is our focus?

Our verse for today is **Jeremiah 29:13**: *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

As a church, we long to be known as a beacon of hope in Warwick and beyond. On this day, we seek God's guidance with all our hearts for the next steps in the use of our buildings for His Kingdom work—Gerrard Street Hall, Gateway, the Smith Street flat, the manse and our main church building.

Some suggestions

- > Come before Him, open-handedly, and offer these assets back to Him.
- > Thank Him for all they've been used for in the past.
- > Ask Him to reveal what it means for us to be a beacon of hope in Warwick and beyond today?
- > Where and how can we shine for Him, bringing His hope?

RESOURCES

The above is compiled from a variety of sources. Below are some of those I have gratefully borrowed from. Should you wish to explore the spiritual discipline of fasting further, these are a good place to start. *Remember: weigh all you read against Scripture.*

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (1998) — chapter 4

Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *Pray with your eyes open* (1987) — chapter 13

Dr Bill Bright, 7 Basic steps to successful prayer and fasting

<https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/fasting/7-steps-to-fasting.html>