

Fast

MATTHEW 4:1-11; 6:16-18; ACTS 13:2-3

1 As you gather, read the other side of this page to familiarize yourself with the topic for today. Once everyone has gathered, spend a few minutes making sure everyone knows each other and introducing any visitors. Open the session with the following prayer:

Draw near to God and God will draw near to us. When we fast, we free up space to ponder God's goodness. Let us keep company with Jesus. Amen.

2 Write what you would fast from for a three-day fast.

Take turns sharing your responses and any experience you have had with fasting.

3 Read "Finding the Practice in the Bible" on the other side of this page and read Matthew 4:1-11. Watch the YouTube video "40 – A Video of Jesus in the Wilderness" (bit.ly/FMJesusWilderness, 4:05) and discuss the following questions:

- What emotions do you see in Jesus over the forty days?
- What and who does Jesus interact with? What is significant about these interactions?
- How does the artist portray the effect of fasting on Jesus?
- How does Jesus' fasting help him draw closer to God?

4 Read "Finding the Practice Then and Now" on the other side of this page, then discuss:

- What would an authentic fast look like today for you?
- What benefits might come from it?
- What kind of fast would you do?

5 Use this space to plan a group fast before you meet again.

- What will you fast from?
- How long will the fast last?

Note: bit.ly addresses are case-sensitive.

SUMMARY OF THE PRACTICE

Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community, or nation.¹ Christian fasting is voluntary, chosen by the individual or group for a specific time. Denying ourselves something long-term is a lifestyle, not a fast.

Christians fast for several reasons: repentance, to clarify and intensify their prayers, to ask God for guidance, to purify their hearts before God and ask God to continue that process of purification, or to free up money or other resources to give to the poor or do Christ's mission. Fasting in the Bible almost always has a component of prayer, and Christians who fast from food or other aspects of daily life report that fasting intensifies and focuses their prayers. Fasting creates space in our lives so that we can keep company with Jesus.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Following his baptism, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days and nights. Matthew 4:1–4 tells of the tempter encouraging Jesus to use his power to make stones into bread to feed himself. Jesus responds that people do not live by bread alone, suggesting that God's Word is necessary for life.

Jesus includes instructions to his listeners about fasting. "Whenever you fast," Jesus says, "do not look dismal" (Matthew 6:16–18).

Acts 13 tells of fasting in the early church. While the Christians in Antioch were praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke and told them to consecrate Paul and Barnabas for the ministry of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2–3).

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Since the time of the earliest disciples, fasting has been a staple in Christian life. Christians in Orthodox traditions and many parts of the world have always maintained fasting as a regular practice, alongside prayer and giving to the poor. In the West, and in most Protestant denominations, the centrality of fasting declined during the twentieth century. A new appreciation for simple, ancient spiritual practices has resulted in a resurgence of interest in how fasting can help us follow Jesus. In addition to fasting from food, some people today also fast for periods of time from media or shopping to clear their minds and simplify their lives.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING THIS GUIDE

If possible, distribute this sheet to participants before gathering. Be prepared to summarize the information on this page. Bring extra copies, some pens, and a Bible.

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CLOSING PRAYER

Close the session in prayer and invite one person to read the non-bolded lines as everyone speaks the bolded response.

We gather together to learn, to practice, and to grow.

For such a time as this.

God, we know you go along with us to lead, to guide, to show.

For such a time as this.

In all we do, we will create space for you, to keep company and to know.

For such a time as this. Amen.

1. Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 16.