

Fasting: A Simple Guide

What is fasting?

To 'fast' is to abstain from something (usually, but not always, food) for a set period of time. The name of our first meal of each day (*breakfast*) literally means to **break** the **fast** of not eating during night hours.

During the season of Lent, many people choose to fast from *all* or from *certain* foods (most notably luxury foods) or to fast from other things such as social media, alcohol or TV.

Why fast?

Fasting is an ancient Christian discipline which is actively encouraged in both Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In the Old Testament, Kings and armies often fasted and prayed before important battles or as a sign of penitence and humility. Queen Esther fasts and prays for three days as she intercedes for the salvation of the Jewish people. And, famously, Daniel and his friends fasted from all meat and rich food whilst in exile in Babylon as a way of setting themselves apart for prayer and the work of God.

Jesus, of course, fasted for forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of his earthly ministry – and it is this story and this period of time that gave rise to the church season of Lent. And Jesus Himself gave instructions to His followers about how they should fast (Matthew 6:16-18).

The Early Church regularly practiced the discipline of fasting and it is mentioned several times in the book of Acts. In his pastoral epistles, the Apostle Paul also assumes that the Greek-speaking churches are fasting regularly as part of their rhythm of prayer and worship.

Fasting is a powerful discipline that can greatly enhance your prayer life and sense of intimacy with God. Apart from the fact that the Bible encourages it, there are a few other good reasons why Christians should consider fasting:

- Our hunger for food reminds us to hunger and long after God
- Our abstention from food demonstrates our seriousness and devotion
- The depriving ourselves of the gratification of eating for a short time can humble us before God
- Fasting is a physical sign that we desire God even more than we desire food
- Fasting literally gives us more time to pray because we are not occupied with the tasks of eating, cooking or contemplating what we might eat
- Fasting makes us conscious of our weakness and frailty and encourages us to depend upon God more and to pray with greater fervour

Is it safe for me to fast?

For most people, it is perfectly safe to go without some or all food items for a limited period of time. However, if you have never fasted before or you haven't done so for a long time, you should probably start off with small steps.

If you are pregnant, elderly, have a serious health condition or work in a job that is physically or mentally very demanding then it probably isn't advisable for you to abstain from food completely.

What different ways are there to fast?

Traditionally, fasting has meant going without all forms of food for a set period of time, and drinking only water. In this instance, we are encouraging people to consider fasting for one day during Holy Week (Maundy Thursday if that is practical for you).

If you decide to fast from food completely, you should make a decision about when you wish to begin and end your period of fasting. Some people will choose to fast for a whole 24 hour period of time. Others will do a 'sunrise to sunset' fast, whereby they eat the night before their fast day and then again on the evening of their fast day.

For some, it will not be safe or practical to abstain from food entirely and so they may choose to fast in a different way. For example, people may fast from all *solid* foods and decide to sustain themselves only on soup and other liquids. Or people may choose a slightly longer fast where they eat only fruit and vegetables and cut out meat, dairy and carbohydrates.

As stated above, you should make a decision about how you wish to fast, based on your own conscience and informed by your health. Nobody should be putting themselves at serious risk by fasting.