

What Type of Fast Are You On This New Year?

Simply stated, biblical fasting is refraining from food for a spiritual purpose. When you eliminate eating from your diet for a number of days, your spirit becomes both uncluttered by the things of this world and amazingly sensitive to the things of God.

The Bible records numerous circumstances under which God's people fasted. The duration of the fasts recorded by Scripture, as well as the type of fasting undertaken, differed a great deal.

Moses fasted 40 days when he received God's law (see Deut. 9:9). Joshua and the elders of Israel fasted for about 12 hours after Israel's armies were defeated at Ai (see Josh. 7:6). The apostle Paul fasted 14 days while he was in peril (see Acts 27:33-36). Jesus fasted too—for 40 days before beginning His ministry (see Matt. 4:2).

These examples indicate that the duration of a fast often has a lot to do with what a person is facing. They also exemplify the three types of fasts modeled in Scripture—absolute, normal and partial.

Absolute. This is an extreme fast that should be done only for very short periods of time. You take in nothing—no food, no water. It should be attempted only with medical supervision.

Normal. No food of any kind is eaten for a certain number of days. You do drink water—and plenty of it. Depending on the length of a normal fast, you may also choose to drink clear broth and juices to maintain your strength.

Partial. A partial fast can be interpreted many ways but usually involves giving up particular foods and drinks for a

time. The most commonly used example is recorded in Daniel 1:11-14, in which Daniel and his three companions ate only vegetables and drank only water for 10 days and, as a result, were blessed more than the king's men, who ate the richer, royal diet.

There is no real formula for determining the amount of time you should fast or the type of fast that's best for you. It is important, however, not to get bogged down in the details. Here are a few suggestions for keeping it simple:

Begin with one day—from sunrise to sunset. As a teenager, I would fast all day on Sunday until after church. It made me so much more spiritually sensitive to God. Don't start with more than you can handle. There is no need to be heroic and attempt a 40-day fast if you have never fasted a day in your life. Just start.

Make it mean something to you, or don't do it. If it doesn't mean anything to you, it won't mean anything to God. Without being combined with prayer and the Word, fasting is little more than dieting.

Fasting, although primarily spiritual in nature, has numerous physical benefits as well.

Fasting gives your body time to heal. We Americans regularly consume and assimilate chemical preservatives, coloring, stabilizers, flavorings and other additives from our foods that build up in our bodies and cause illness and disease. Periodic fasts flush out the poisons. Plus, fasting gives your whole digestive system a break, and that is very healthy for you.

Fasting helps to control the appetite. Fasting can break an addiction to junk food as well as the power of an uncontrollable appetite. Some people bound by nicotine, alcohol and drugs have found freedom from their addictions through fasting.

Medical research has shown that fasting also sharpens your mental process and relieves anxiety and tension. It lowers your blood pressure and can lower your cholesterol, and also aids and improves your sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.

Headaches are one unpleasant physical symptom that often accompanies fasting—but the good news is, they are temporary. People have told me that the devil gave them a headache while they fasted. More likely, it was simply their bodies getting rid of the toxins that had built up over time.

If you will drink plenty of water, or water and juice, your body will flush out the poisons, and you'll reach what can only be described as a "sweet place" in the fast.

Be aware that whenever you fast for at least three days, your digestive system shuts down. It can be unpleasant. Some people feel sluggish or can't sleep—and, let's face it, you are going to get hungry!

I encourage you to avoid all those food ads on TV while you're fasting. During an extended fast one time, I looked forward every night to watching a Pizza Hut commercial on TV. It became a highlight of my fast until one night I dreamed I was enjoying a delicious slice of Pizza Hut's pan pizza—and suddenly I woke up to find nearly half my pillowcase stuffed into my mouth!

When I've been on extended fasts, I've seen no angels and heard no violins during the first few days while my body emptied itself of toxins. In fact, I didn't feel much like focusing on prayer and the Word. But without fail, things soon cleared up, and I found a deeper place in God.

Regardless of how long you choose to fast, try to drink at least one gallon of purified water throughout the first day. Avoid tap water and drink purified or distilled water instead.

Water flushes the toxins from your system, which helps you get off to a good start. It also makes you feel full.

Above all, keep in mind that fasting is a continual prayer before God. There may be days when heaven opens and your heart is prompted to deep times of prayer.

There also may be days when your energy is sapped and you just cannot focus in prayer at all. At those times, don't condemn yourself. God sees your sacrifice.

Each year I encourage the members of my church to join in a 21-day fast. If in less than one month you can be a new person, why not take a radical step of faith?

We have only one life to give to God—let's get control of our bodies and go for God with the best we have.