

MATTHEW 4:1–4; 6:16–18;  
ACTS 13:2–3

Fasting is one of the most ancient spiritual disciplines. It plays a role in all major religions, including Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. From the first gatherings of Christians, it has been a way for the followers of Jesus to grow closer to God. Fasting is a practice that creates space and time for intentional spiritual growth, by setting aside something else for a period of time. While fasting often refers to abstaining from food (literally creating space in your stomach), it can also mean deliberate abstention from other activities of daily life. As we consider the role fasting can have in faithful living today, we will talk about it in both ways.

Richard Foster, in his book on spiritual disciplines, says “fasting reveals the things that control us.”<sup>1</sup> If we get panicky thinking about going without food for half a day or start to itch at the idea of turning off our phone after dinner, it might be time to consider the outsized role we have given these activities in our lives. No one sets out to be dependent on an overly full belly or a fully charged smartphone. Our dependence on them creeps up on us. Fasting, whether from food or other things that ensnare us, can help us restore balance. In this way, we make room for following Jesus, putting him at the center of our lives.

Fasting as a spiritual practice helps us remember the goal of all our practices: to grow closer to God. You can certainly eliminate a meal or two, and use the time for work or a distraction, and call that a fast. That would be fasting, but not as a spiritual practice. Fasting with the goal of growing in faith opens up space for more intentional time with God. It takes conscious reflection, which is our aim in all spiritual practices.



1. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 55.

# INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE



*In the plate, draw or make a list of what you have had to eat and drink so far today. Use yesterday's meals if more appropriate.*

Now, reflect a bit on your notes above with some additional notes or drawing.

- ✦ Did you eat alone or with others?
- ✦ Did you engage in other activities while eating—reading, watching TV, scrolling social media, working?
- ✦ Was the meal purely for fuel, or was it enjoyable in another way?
- ✦ Did you spend the time with any kind of spiritual focus—with a prayer, perhaps?

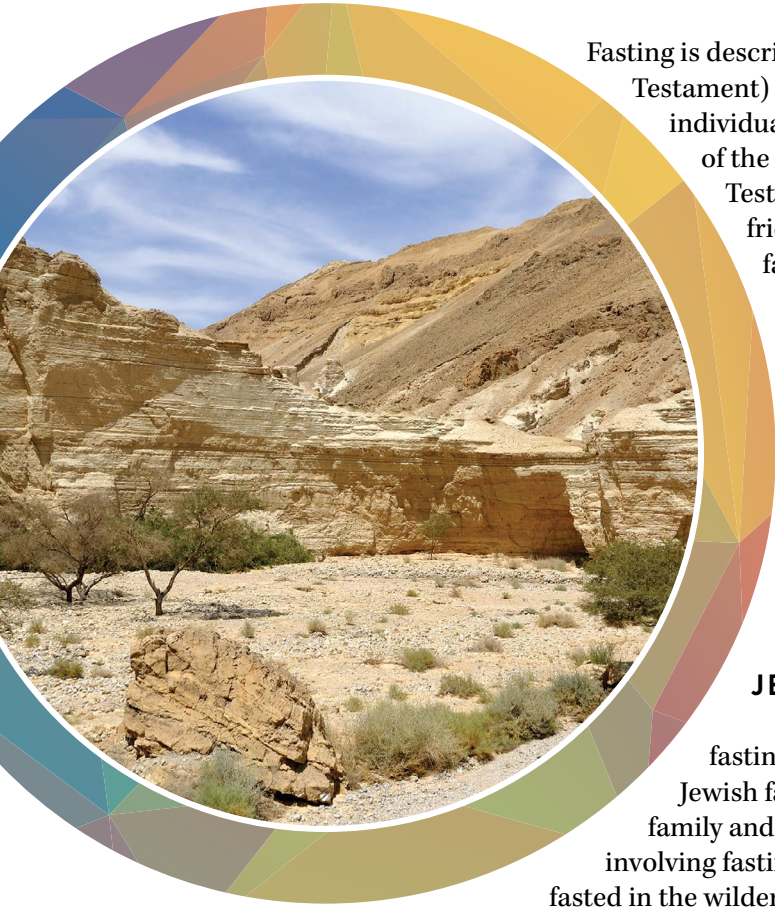
## OPENING RITUAL

Each session in this guide includes an opening ritual for your reflection time. If you are studying with a group, use the litany responsively. The bold words are repeated for each session, and may be spoken by the whole group. If you are studying on your own, speak all the lines aloud, knowing that your voice joins with all those who are seeking to follow Jesus, wherever they are.

### Litany

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.**

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE



Fasting is described in both the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament as a faith practice of individuals and communities, and includes some of the most recognizable names. In the Old Testament, David fasted with his men when his friend Jonathan died (2 Samuel 1:12). David fasted alone to pray for the unborn baby conceived with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:16). Esther fasted, along with her servants and all the people of Israel in her city, before going to her husband, King Ahasuerus, with a dangerous request (Esther 4:16). Ezra asked the people traveling with him to fast and pray for God's protection as they left Persia to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21–23). The Hebrew Scriptures mention many others who fasted.

## **JESUS AND FASTING**

Jesus would have known the stories of fasting by the prophets, priests, and kings of his Jewish faith. He would have participated with his family and community in regular Jewish traditions involving fasting. Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus fasted in the wilderness between his baptism and the start of his ministry. Later, in the chapters in Matthew called the "Sermon on the Mount" (5–7), where some of his most important teachings are gathered, Jesus gives instructions about fasting to his listeners, and to us. Clearly, fasting was a practice familiar to Jesus and the people of his day.

✦ What stands out to you in the following verses about Jesus and fasting?

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

—Matthew 4:1–4

- What might it mean to live “by every word that comes from the mouth of God” in addition to bread?
- How did fasting help Jesus resist temptation?

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

—Matthew 6:16–18

- What would a social media post by Jesus look like today that reflects the above verses?
- Do you think Jesus would encourage the use of the hashtag #fasting? Why or why not?

Fasting enabled Jesus to hear God’s call to him. It allowed him the space and time to focus on what God was asking him to do. In this way, fasting was a very personal act—just Jesus and God in the wilderness, wrestling with temptation. Later, when he spoke to the crowds listening on the mount, he told them also to fast in private. In the same section where he talks about giving to the poor and praying, he adds fasting as a way to practice piety—to grow close to God—as a personal spiritual act.

- If you were to practice fasting, who would you be inclined to tell?
- What would it be like not to tell anyone else?

Fasting is often used as a practice during the forty days of Lent, following the model of Jesus in the wilderness in Matthew 4. Watch the YouTube video “40 – A Video of Jesus in the Wilderness” ([bit.ly/FMJesusWilderness](https://bit.ly/FMJesusWilderness), 4:05). This short video reflects how Simon Smith imagines what those forty days might have been like for Jesus.

## FASTING IN ACTS

The early church included fasting as a practice from their earliest gatherings. While we can assume the private fasting Jesus encouraged continued, communal fasting also happened as a way to listen to God, and to prepare for ministry in God's name. We read in Acts about the first Christian church in Antioch where fasting was part of worship and preceded the commissioning of disciples.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

—Acts 13:2–3

- How does this communal fasting compare to the private fasting Jesus did in the wilderness?

After Barnabas and Saul (Paul) are sent out, they travel to multiple locations, teaching about Jesus and helping establish brand-new churches. They do not have an easy time of it. But read what they do wherever they go:

After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God." And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

—Acts 14:21–23

- The early church saw fasting as a way to discern the will of God, and to prepare for ministry in God's name. What do you read here that reminds you of your own faith community?

# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Following the tradition of the earliest disciples, fasting has been a staple in Christian life for centuries. Christians in Orthodox traditions and many in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have always maintained fasting as a central and 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 recent years, forms of fasting have caught on in the wider culture too. Do an internet search on “fasting” and the first results you see are likely to be about intermittent fasting from food as a way to lose weight. People fast from specific kinds of foods or for specific periods of time for medical or dietary reasons. People today also fast for periods of time from media, social media, cellphones or shopping to clear their minds and simplify their lives.

So, what makes a fast uniquely Christian today? Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose. It is undertaken voluntarily by an individual, family, community, or nation. The specific time is typically part of a day, a whole day, a few days, a week, or seasonally, like during the forty days of Lent. Christians fast for repentance, to clarify and intensify our prayers, to ask God for guidance, to invite God to purify our hearts, or to free up money or other resources to give to people who are poor or to Christ’s mission. Fasting in the Bible almost always has a component of prayer, and Christians who fast for spiritual reasons from food, or other aspects of daily life, report that fasting focuses their prayers. The key is to connect fasting from something to making space and time for God. Otherwise, we are just dieting.

➤ Which of the Christian reasons for fasting resonates with you?



# PRAY FAST GIVE

## LENT IN THREE MINUTES

Fasting is often talked about during the season of Lent. Watch the YouTube video “Lent in 3 Minutes” ([bit.ly/FMLentInThreeMinutes](https://bit.ly/FMLentInThreeMinutes), 3:00) to learn more about three traditional Lenten practices of fasting, praying, and almsgiving.

- ➔ If you did a Lenten fast, what would you give up?

If you are considering fasting, perhaps as part of a Lenten discipline, take note of Augustine of Hippo’s sage advice in one of his sermons from fifth-century North Africa:



You must certainly beware of just revising, not reducing, your pleasures. I mean, you can see some people searching out unusual liquors as a substitute for the usual wine . . . and concocting delicacies . . . which at other times they are ashamed to bother with. The result is that the observance of Lent means, not the repression of old lusts, but the occasion for new enjoyments. . . . Let your fasting be accompanied by frugality.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, if you fast from eating meat during Lent, don’t substitute fancy take-out vegan dumplings instead. Just eat something simple.

2. Sermon 207, *Essential Sermons: (Classroom Resource Edition)* (The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century), 260. Daniel Doyle New City Press, Hyde Park, 2007

# PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Like all spiritual disciplines, fasting can be practiced in a variety of ways. For some, fasting might mean avoiding meat on Fridays during Lent. (You may have been served fish in your school cafeteria because of this practice.) For others, it might mean skipping a meal to attend a lunchtime prayer service. Still others might fast with a group of people to raise money for a cause. A number of ideas are presented here. Choose one or two to try.

## FASTING FOR JUSTICE

One spiritual focus while fasting is to show solidarity with those who are food deprived. Take the money saved by not eating a meal and give it to an organization that serves meals to people who need them. Fasting with this purpose in mind can serve as a reminder that all of our daily bread is a gift from God. The prophet Isaiah told ancient Israel that solemn assemblies and denial that serve only those fasting is not what God wants. Instead, God desires fasting that leads to justice, transformed lives, and a renewed world for all.

Isaiah 58:5–8 tells about the kind of fasting that pleases God. As you read these verses, underline what stands out to you. Then think about how you might use your fast to show solidarity with people who are hungry, homeless, or face other injustices.

Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

—Isaiah 58:5–8





## PLANNING A FAST

Fasting from food is not possible for everyone. It is not recommended for expectant mothers, or for people with certain medical conditions or a history of eating disorders. The ability to fast from food is a mark of privilege for those who have plenty, who are assured of having enough to eat when the time comes to break the fast. The spiritual desire to make space for God is possible to practice in other ways.

Fasting creates space in our lives so that we can keep company with Jesus. Many Christians who fast from meals or media use the time that's been freed up to pray, read the Bible, and meditate on God's goodness. Fasting can transform us further into Christ's image because our deep desires are revealed when we fast, as well as our dependence on the item from which we are fasting.


What is taking up more space and time in your life right now than you want it to? Social media? Watching television or movies? News? Junk food? Shopping? List a few:

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Choose one for your fast, and circle it. Consider what portion of time you can fast from what you circled. There are many options to plan a fast. It doesn't require you to cut out everything for a whole day or longer. Start with a few hours. Or consider fasting only on certain days of the week; fasting only during daylight hours, as Muslims practice during Ramadan; or fasting through a single meal or other recurring event each week. Choose a time period that will enable you to spend that time instead on something faith-related. Will you fast for . . .

- A portion of a day? Note the hours:
- A full day? Note the day:
- A full week? Schedule the week:

3. Jen Hatmaker, *Simple and Free: 7 Experiments Against Excess*, (New York: Convergent Books, 2021), 208.



“If a fast doesn't include any sacrifices, then it's not a fast. The discomfort is where the magic happens. Life zips along, unchecked and automatic. We default to our lifestyles, enjoying our privileges tra la la, but a fast interrupts that rote trajectory. Jesus gets a fresh platform in the empty space where indulgence resided.”<sup>3</sup>

## FILLING YOUR PLATE

If fasting as a spiritual discipline is to help us keep company with Jesus, it takes intention. As you plan to eliminate a meal or other distraction, consider how you will fill the time and empty space with a focus on God, and others of God's children. Here are some ideas. Which one(s) might you try?

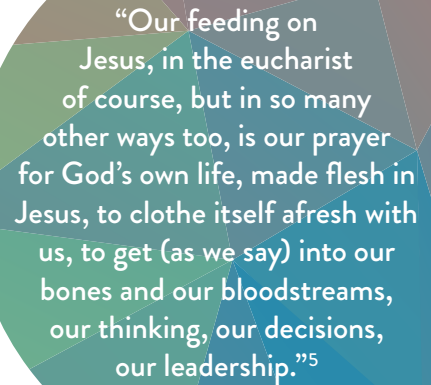
- Use this table grace from Latin America as a prayer to focus your thoughts during a fast.

“O God, to those who hunger give bread;  
and to us who have bread, give the hunger for justice. Amen.”<sup>4</sup>

- Fast while working for hunger relief. Read about Bread for the World's call to end hunger in the United States by 2030. In 2017, they launched a project to encourage fasting on the 21st of each month (because that is the day when SNAP benefits run out for families.) At the same time, they encourage advocacy for Congressional legislative changes. See [bit.ly/FMForSuchATime](http://bit.ly/FMForSuchATime).

Other suggestions:

- Experiment with a new form of prayer when you fast.
- Read Scripture or a devotional while you fast.
- Find a partner with whom to fast. Plan together and compare notes.
- Fast with a small group or family group.
- Simplify a meal rather than skipping it.
- Break your fast with communion.



“Our feeding on Jesus, in the eucharist of course, but in so many other ways too, is our prayer for God's own life, made flesh in Jesus, to clothe itself afresh with us, to get (as we say) into our bones and our bloodstreams, our thinking, our decisions, our leadership.”<sup>5</sup>

There is plenty of guidance on Christian fasting available online. Here are a few sources for more information:

- A Beginner's Guide to Christian Fasting from Virginia Theological Seminary's Building Faith blog ([bit.ly/FMGuideToFasting](http://bit.ly/FMGuideToFasting))
- Fasting and Freedom from The Upper Room ([bit.ly/FMFastingAndFreedom](http://bit.ly/FMFastingAndFreedom))
- Fasting 101 PDF from Durham Crop Walk, adapted from the Office of Spiritual Formation, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2003 (auto-downloaded at [bit.ly/FMFastingConsiderations](http://bit.ly/FMFastingConsiderations))

➔ How can you “feed on Jesus” in a way that gets into your bloodstream and thinking?

4. Web Editors, “Prayer of the Day: Latin American Prayer,” *Sojourners*, February 6, 2012, [sojo.net/articles/prayer-day-latin-american-prayer](http://sojo.net/articles/prayer-day-latin-american-prayer).
5. N. T. Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays, Years A, B, and C: Biblical Meditations on the Christian Year* (Morehouse Publishing, 2012), 97.

# FOLLOWING JESUS

We have seen how fasting was a common way that Jesus and his friends and early followers connected with God. Fasting today can be more than a way to diet, when it is intentionally undertaken as a way to make space for God. We have explored some ways to plan a fast from food or other distractions, and set some intentions to try it for a period of time. We have also considered some ways fasting can be the impetus to turn us from our own growling stomachs to the needs of others in our ongoing work with God for justice.

You might find that fasting is a spiritual discipline you would like to maintain on a regular basis, perhaps each Lent, or on another schedule. As with all the spiritual practices we will consider, fasting does, indeed, take practice. It also overlaps with each of the other practices we will look at, like prayer, simplifying, listening to God, and more. All of these are ways we seek to make space in our lives so we can draw near to God. We will turn to prayer next, for another small taste of a banquet of God's grace we are offered in these disciplines.

In closing, play and listen to the YouTube video “Isaiah 58 (feat. Amena Brown)” ([bit.ly/FMIsaiah58](https://bit.ly/FMIsaiah58), 2:29).

