

How To Conduct A 24-Hour Fast

On March 30, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared and signed the following proclamation to the American people:

By The President of The United States of America A Proclamation For A Day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer

Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme Authority and Just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day for National prayer and humiliation:

And whereas, it is the duty of nations, as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord:

And... may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven.... But we have forgotten God.... Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Now, therefore,... I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer. And I do hereby request all the People to abstain on that day from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes....

Abraham Lincoln

If you had been a United States citizen in 1863, would you have known what to do on April 30th? Would you have known why you were doing it? It is the intent of this article to help you conduct such a fast whether it be as a personal discipline, as part of a church-wide fast, or as part of a national day of prayer and fasting like the one Abraham Lincoln called.

Why Would You Want to Conduct a 24-Hour Fast?

Jesus assumed we would fast. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed His followers, "When you fast..." (Matthew 6:16-18). For Jesus, it would be the norm for His followers to fast.

Many throughout the history of the church have found that a weekly 24-hour fast has been a solid spiritual discipline that has enhanced their prayer life, served as a check-and-balance to their flesh, and reminded them tangibly of their hunger for and dependence upon God.

John Wesley called all Methodists to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, and he refused to license any preachers who would not commit to do so. Hudson Taylor was in the habit of conducting a weekly 24-hour fast during his work in China. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, did the same. The Promise Keepers movement was begun by 72 men committing to fast and pray one day a week for an entire year.

Some churches will conduct a season of 40 days of prayer and fasting surrounding an important decision or outreach effort in the church. One practical way that people can participate in this fast is by taking turns conducting one day fasts in order that someone is constantly fasting and praying on behalf of the church's need.

Why conduct a 24-hour fast? Because fasting and prayer work! Consider some of the reasons that people fasted in the Bible:

- 1) to intensify their prayers regarding guidance (Nehemiah 1:4), protection (2 Chronicles 20:3), healing (Psalm 35:13), deliverance (Matthew 17:19-21), and success in the Lord's work (Esther 4:16);
- 2) during special assignments from the Lord (Exodus 34:28; Matthew 4:1-11);
- 3) while preparing for ministry (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23)
- 4) to repent as a nation in a solemn assembly (Joel 1:14; 2:15)
- 5) while worshipping (Acts 13:2).

Additionally, a 24-hour fast can be training for a longer fast. Fasting is like exercising--you must start small and build.

Ten Practical Steps in Conducting a 24-Hour Fast

Step One: Determine the Goals of Your Fast.

I agree with Richard Foster when he says, "Fasting must forever center on God.... Physical benefits, success in prayer, the enduing with power, spiritual insights--these must never replace God as the center of our fasting." John Wesley declared, "Let fasting be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven."

With this perspective as your foundation, I believe it is helpful to dedicate your fast for a secondary purpose--to submit your request(s) to God. In the planting of the church I pastor, we conducted a 7-week fast with 98 people taking turns fasting for 24-hour periods. Our central request was God's blessing in starting this new church, and the 98 of us agreed in prayer on 7 specific requests that became the "goals" of our fast. What is the goal of your fast?

Step Two: Ask the Medical Questions.

It is highly recommended that you consult your physician before conducting a fast. There are some people who should never fast: expectant or nursing mothers, diabetics, and those on certain medications. Bill Bright has some good recommendations regarding medical questions in his book The Coming Revival.

Step Three: Schedule Your Fast.

Pick your starting point and stopping point. If you are conducting a 24-hour fast, then you are committing to miss 2 meals. So, for example, you would eat dinner one night, and then not eat again until dinner the next night, thus missing your breakfast and lunch meals.

Step Four: Schedule Some Time Slots For Prayer.

You do not fast just for the sake of fasting -- you fast to glorify God and to intensify your prayers. Thus, it makes sense that you would purposely schedule extra slots of time for prayer. Two obvious time slots would be the meal times that you are missing. In the above example, you could dedicate the time you would have spent eating breakfast and lunch to prayer. As your schedule permits, set aside some additional periods of time for prayer. Some people will be able to dedicate the entire day to a prayer retreat. Others will only be able to come up with 2 time slots. Both are "successful" in my eyes.

Step Five: Determine the Type of Fast.

Will you conduct an absolute fast (no food or water), regular fast (water only), partial fast (water and juice only), or Daniel fast (vegetables and liquids only--abstaining from "rich" foods). I would discourage the absolute fast unless you are hearing a clear call from God to do so. It is recommended that you not chew gum or drink beverages with caffeine during your fast.

For those who cannot abstain from food due to medical reasons, you can abstain from rich foods (Daniel fast), television, telephone, people (discipline of solitude), or speech (discipline of silence).

Step Six: Eat Healthily Before and After.

During extended fasts (3 days or more), it is important that you eat smaller meals with low-fat and low-sugar prior to beginning the fast and that you break the fast with juices and raw vegetables. A 24-hour fast does not require quite the same graduations, but it makes sense to eat healthily (low-fat, low-sugar) before and after your fast.

Step Seven: Begin With Confession, Dedication, and Prayer.

Begin your fast with confession and repentance. Pray Psalm 139:23-24. Repent of specific sins in your life and identify with the sins of your church, city, and nation by repenting on their behalf (Nehemiah 1 and Daniel 9). Claim 1 John 1:9 and 2 Chronicles 7:14. Ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18; Luke 11:12-13).

Dedicate your fast to God's glory and to your desire to love Jesus with the same love and passion that the Father Himself loves His Own Son (John 17:26). Also dedicate your fast to the prayer goals that you have determined in Step One. Begin your first round of praying for those requests. Carry them with you wherever you go during your fast, praying as often as you can for them. Also spend significant time just praising and communing with God. Your objective is not to manipulate God into answering your stated requests, but rather to grow closer and become more intimate with Him. Part of that intimacy is surrendering to Him your heart's desires.

Step Eight: Journal.

In keeping with the goal of intimacy and communion with God, I would encourage you to keep a journal of your prayer and fasting time. Writing letters to God is a great way to communicate with a close Friend. Spend some of your prayer time just listening to God. Journal the things that you think you are hearing from Him.

Step Nine: Expect Some Side Effects.

Different people will react differently to going 24 hours without food. Some common side effects include headaches, bad breath, less energy, irritability, and hunger pains. Some of these are actually signs that your body is doing some work. Because your digestive system is resting, your body is able to work on purging itself of toxins (thus the bad breath). Use the hunger pains as a reminder of your hunger and dependence upon God (Matthew 5:6).

Step Ten: End with Thanksgiving.

As you break your fast, thank God for the communion you had with Him. Thank Him for the things He taught you. By faith, thank Him for the prayers He will answer through this time of prayer.

*Article written by Jim Leggett