
What Does the Word “Fasting” Mean in the Bible?

The word *fasting* originates from the Aramaic and Hebrew languages. In Hebrew, the term “tsom” (צוֹם) is used, which means “to abstain from food and drink.” In biblical practice, fasting was primarily a spiritual discipline meant to express humility, repentance, and a deep desire to seek God.

Fasting is not just a physical act of denying oneself food—it is a spiritual practice meant to align the heart with God’s will.

> *Zechariah 8:19 (NIV):*
> “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.’”

This verse shows that fasting was practiced regularly in Israel as a spiritual tradition, often tied to national events like mourning or remembrance. But God desires that these fasts be transformed into times of joy, truth, and peace when done with the right heart.

> *Joel 1:14 (NIV):*
> “Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.”

Here, fasting is connected with national repentance. The people are called to turn back to God through prayer and mourning for their sins.

Also see:

> *Joel 2:15 (NIV):*
> “Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.”

Again, fasting is linked with a collective call to repentance and revival. Fasting that pleases God is more than skipping meals—it’s about transformation of the heart and actions. The prophet Isaiah delivers a powerful message from God, rebuking religious fasting that lacks love, justice, and mercy.

> *Isaiah 58:3-8 (NIV):*
>
> [3]Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.
>
> [4] Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.
>
> [5]Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?
>
> [6]“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the

> chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
>
> [7] Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter ,when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
>
> [8] Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.”

God rebukes superficial religion. He desires worship that reflects His own character: justice, mercy, and compassion. Fasting is empty when it’s disconnected from righteous living. Jesus affirms this heart-centered view of fasting in Matthew 6:16–18, where He teaches that fasting should be sincere, not for show.

Fasting is meant to be a way of humbling ourselves before God and creating space to hear Him more clearly. In Scripture, people fasted:

To seek guidance (Acts 13:2–3)In repentance (Daniel 9:3–5)In mourning (2 Samuel 1:12)For deliverance (2 Chronicles 20:3)To grow spiritually (Matthew 4:2 – Jesus fasted in the wilderness)

Yet even long fasts—like Moses’ 40-day fast (Exodus 34:28)—are meaningless if they are not accompanied by repentance and spiritual renewal. As Paul writes in

> *1 Corinthians 13:3 (NIV):*
> “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

When you fast, ask yourself: *Is my heart turning away from sin? Am I growing in love and righteousness?* If not, the fast may have little eternal value. Fasting should not just be a ritual—it must be an act of surrender, a cry for holiness, and a commitment to justice.

Otherwise, as Isaiah warns, you might be working hard in vain—even fasting 40 days and nights won’t please God without genuine transformation.

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