Fasting in the Bible and the Christian Life

Should Christians fast?

Jesus expected we would fast, but did not command it
Luke 5:33-35

The early church fasted on some special occasions
Acts 13:1-3 - the ordination of the first missionaries
Acts 14:23 – when ordaining elders to the ministry

Why fast?

Fasting shows urgency and seriousness of purpose
2 Samuel 12:16
Ezra 8:21
Esther 4:16
Mark 8:1-3

Fasting demonstrates genuine repentance
Joel 2:12
Nehemiah 9:1-2

Fasting is an expression of genuine sorrow
1 Samuel 31:13
2 Samuel 1:12
Nehemiah 1:4
Judges 20:26

Fasting expresses our concern for others in a deep way
Psalm 35:13
Ezra 10:6

Jesus promised that God would reward fasting done in the right spirit
Matthew 6:16-18

Fasting is a way of serving God
Luke 2:37

Fasting may make us more spiritually receptive
Acts 13:2

Warnings about fasting

We must fast with the right motive
Matthew 6:16-18

Fasting by itself accomplishes nothing
Isaiah 58:3
Jeremiah 14:12
Luke 18:9-14
Joel 2:12-13

Fasting should almost always be accompanied by extra prayer
Nehemiah 1:4
Luke 2:37

Fasting opens us up to added temptation
Matthew 4:1-11

Fasting is not a secret path to higher spiritual experience
1 Timothy 4:1-3

Must we fast?

There was only one fast required in the Old Testament, on the Day of Atonement Leviticus 16:29-31. (Most scholars believe "Humble yourselves" or "humble your soul" refers to fasting.)

Fasting is never commanded in the New Testament.
Prayer is
Fellowship is
Scripture study is
Sharing our faith is
Caring for others is
Giving is
Fasting is not

Jesus himself fasted on at least one occasion.
Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus' disciples did not fast and Jesus taught that his coming ushered in a new age where old practices would no longer be suitable.
Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:19-20, Luke 5:33-38

Yet Jesus anticipated his followers would fast after his leaving and they did (see above.)

We conclude that fasting is not required but is still a valid expression of humility, sorrow, repentance, and seriousness of purpose before God.

If we fast, how long should we fast?

There are different lengths of fasts in the Bible

One night

Daniel 6:18

One day
Daniel 6:18
1 Samuel 7:6
Judges 20:26

Three days and nights
Esther 4:16

Seven days
1 Samuel 31:13
2 Samuel 12:16-23

Twenty-one days
Daniel 10:1-3

Forty days
Deuteronomy 9:9
1 Kings 19:8
Matthew 4:2

There is no length of time a person must fast. It appears the length of the fast depends on the person involved and the circumstances that may have led to the fast itself.

What should we give up during a fast?

There are two types of fasts in the Bible

Absolute or total fast
Deuteronomy 9:9
Ezra 4:16

Partial fast (or withdrawal from certain foods)
Daniel 10:3

What are the potential benefits of fasting?

It can help us focus our mind on God

It can help us express the seriousness of our purpose

It will help us turn our thinking from our material needs to the One who supplies all things

It will be a constant reminder of our commitment to pray and to seek our spiritual desire

Some practical suggestions about fasting:

1. Reach a personal conviction on the subject through a careful biblical study.
2. Make sure you are medically able to fast before attempting it.
3. Enter with a positive faith that God will reward those who fast with the right motives.
4. Begin with short fasts and gradually move to larger periods of time.
5. Be prepared for some dizziness, headache, or nausea in the early going.
6. Mix your prayer time with Scripture reading and singing or devotional reading.
7. Keep checking your motives during the fast.
8. Break a prolonged fast gradually with meals that are light and easy to digest.