

NINE FASTS GOD CAN USE

To better illustrate and reveal the significance of these nine reasons for fasting, I have chosen nine biblical characters whose lives personified the literal or figurative theme of each of the nine aspects highlighted in Isaiah 58:6-8. Each fast has a different name, accomplishes a different purpose and follows a different prescription.

I do not want to suggest that the nine fasts we are about to explore are the only kinds of fasts available to the believer, or that they are totally separate from each other. Nor do I want to suggest that there is only one type of fast for a particular problem. These suggested fasts are models to use and adjust to your own particular needs and desires as you seek to grow closer to God. What follows is a brief overview of the nine fasts that will comprise the rest of this book:

1. The Disciple's Fast

Purpose: "To loose the bands of wickedness" (Isa. 58:6)—freeing ourselves and others from addictions to sin.

Key Verse: "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21, *KJV*).

Background: Jesus cast out a demon from a boy whom the disciples had failed to help. Apparently they had not taken seriously enough the way Satan had his claws set in the youth. The implication is that Jesus' disciples could have performed this exorcism had they been willing to undergo the discipline of fasting. Modern disciples also often make light of "besetting sins" that could be cast out if we were serious enough to take part in such a self-denying practice as fasting—hence the term "Disciple's Fast."

2. The Ezra Fast

Purpose: To "undo the heavy burdens" (Isa. 58:6)—to solve problems, inviting the Holy Spirit's aid in lifting loads and overcoming barriers that keep ourselves and our loved ones from walking joyfully with the Lord.

Key Verse: "So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer" (Ezra 8:23).

Background: Ezra the priest was charged with restoring the Law of Moses among the Jews as they rebuilt the city of Jerusalem by permission of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, where God's people had been held captive. Despite this permission, Israel's enemies opposed them. Burdened with embarrassment about having to ask the Persian king for an army to protect them, Ezra fasted and prayed for an answer.

3. The Samuel Fast

Purpose: "To let the oppressed (physically and spiritually) go free" (Isa. 58:6)—for revival and soul winning, to identify with people everywhere enslaved literally or by sin and to pray to be used of God to bring people out of the kingdom of darkness and into God's marvelous light.

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Key Verse: "So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the Lord. And they fasted that day, and said there, 'We have sinned against the Lord'" (1 Sam. 7:6).

Background: Samuel led God's people in a fast to celebrate the return of the Ark of the Covenant from its captivity by the Philistines, and to pray that Israel might be delivered from the sin that allowed the Ark to be captured in the first place.

Elijah Fast

Purpose: "To break every yoke" (Isa. 58:6)—conquering the mental and emotional problems that would control our lives, and returning the control to the Lord.

Key Verse: "He himself went a day's journey into the wilderness....He arose and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights" (1 Kings 19:4,8).

Background: Although Scripture does not call this a formal "fast," Elijah deliberately went without food when he fled from Queen Jezebel's threat to kill him. After this self-imposed deprivation, God sent an angel to minister to Elijah in the wilderness.

5. The Widow's Fast

Purpose: "To share [our] bread with the hungry" and to care for the poor (Isa. 58:7)—to meet the humanitarian needs of others.

Key Verse: "The jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah" {1 Kings 17:16, NIV).

Background: God sent the prophet Elijah to a poor, starving widow—ironically, so the widow could provide food for Elijah. Just as Elijah's presence resulted in food for the widow of Zarephath, so presenting ourselves before God in prayer and fasting can relieve hunger today.

6. The Saint Paul Fast

Purpose: To allow God's "light [to] break forth like the morning" (Isa. 58:8), bringing clearer perspective and insight as we make crucial decisions.

Key Verse: "And he [Saul, or Paul] was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank" (Acts 9:9).

Background: Saul of Tarsus, who became known as Paul after his conversion to Christ, was struck blind by the Lord in the act of persecuting Christians. He not only was without literal sight, but he also had no clue about what direction his life was to take. After going without food and praying for three days, Paul was visited by the Christian Ananias, and both his eyesight and his vision of the future were restored.

7. The Daniel Fast

Purpose: So "thine health shall spring forth" (Isa. 58:8, K/V)~to gain a healthier life or for healing.

Key Verse: "Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank" (Dan. 1:8).

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Background: Daniel and his three fellow Hebrew captives demonstrated in Babylonian captivity that keeping themselves from pagan foods God had guided them not to eat made them more healthful than others in the king's court.

8. The John the Baptist Fast

Purpose: That "your righteousness shall go before you" (Isa. 58:8)—that our testimonies and influence for Jesus will be enhanced before others.

Key Verse: "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink" (Luke 1:15, *KJV*).

Background: Because John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus, he took the "Nazirite" vow that required him to "fast" from or avoid wine and strong drink. This was part of John's purposefully adopted lifestyle that designated him as one set apart for a special mission.

9. The Esther Fast

Purpose: That "the glory of the Lord" will protect us from the evil one (see Isa. 58:8).

Key Verses: "Fast for me...[and] my maids and I will fast...[and] I will go to the king...[and] she found favor in his sight" (Esther 4:16; 5:2).

Background: Queen Esther, a Jewess in a pagan court, risked her life to save her people from threatened destruction by Ahasuerus (Xerxes), king of Persia. Prior to appearing before the king to petition him to save the Jews, Esther, her attendants and her cousin Mordecai all fasted to appeal to God for His protection.

FOUR KINDS OF FASTING

The nine fasts described in this book are merely suggestive of a variety of ways to practice this helpful discipline. There are probably as many ways to fast as there are ways to pray—obviously, there is no set number in either case. The following four kinds of fasts, however, taken from Dr. Rex Russell's book *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living* (Regal Books, 1996; see Appendix 1), are good guidelines for you to follow or modify as God directs.

1. The *normal fast* is going **without food for a** definite period during which you ingest only liquids (water and/or juice). The duration can be 1 day, 3 days, 1 week, 1 month or 40 days. Extreme care should be taken with longer fasts, which should only be attempted after medical advice from your physician.

2. The *absolute fast* allows no food or water at all, and should be short. Moses fasted for 40 days; but this would kill anyone without supernatural intervention, and should never be attempted today. Be sure to test the spirit that tries to talk you into a 40-day fast, even if it includes liquids.

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3. The *partial fast* is one that omits certain foods or is on a schedule that includes limited eating. It may consist of omitting one meal a day. Eating only fresh vegetables for several days is also a good partial fast. John Wesley ate only bread (whole grain) and water for many days. Elijah practiced partial fasts at least twice. John the Baptist and Daniel with his three friends are other examples of those who participated in partial fasts. People who have hypoglycemia or other diseases might consider this kind of fast.

4. A *rotational fast* consists of eating or omitting certain families of foods for designated periods. For example, grains may be eaten only every fourth day. The various food families are rotated so that some food is available each day.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF FASTING

The spirit and the body are so interrelated in God's creative design that fasting has both spiritual and physical benefits, Russell's book describes several tangible benefits to fasting that are good to know before we begin.

Russell notes that just as the seventh day was designated as a day of rest at Creation, so the very cells of our bodies may need a rest from food. One of the main benefits of a night's sleep includes rest for our digestive systems, We call, appropriately enough, the first meal of the day *break-fast*.

Dr. Russell notes that our bodies were designed to respond to sickness by fasting and fever! When we are sick we usually don't want to think about eating, but to snuggle down in the covers and be left alone. We work hard to lower a high temperature because it causes us to ache, motivating us to seek the bed, rather than the table. Rest, fever and fasting are parts of God's design to fight infection.

God designed our bodies to heal themselves at the level of the cells, Dr. Russell observes. These healing processes use proteins, carbohydrates and fats to gain calories and nutrients, yet each of the ways these substances are utilized produces waste products. The cells have built-in ways to clear this waste, and apparently they can be overloaded. Fasting helps unclog the system and eliminate poisons. It is encouraging to know that the same God who designed the discipline of fasting designed our bodies to be benefited by periods of abstinence from food (see appendix I).