

**How to Understand Fasting:
Reasons Why We Fast
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Primary Reasons

- ✓ It is one of the many ways we can worship God, by whatever name called.
- ✓ It is a way we can read, pray, meditate, and contemplate the Word of God. *Lectio Divina* has four separate steps: *lectio* (read), *meditatio* (meditate), *oratio* (pray), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). A passage of scripture is read, its meaning is reflected upon, and it is then followed by prayer and contemplation. For Catholic Christians, the focus is not a theological analysis of passages, but rather a viewing of them with Christ as the key to their meaning. For Orthodox Christians, fasting can be a way of contemplating the Transcendent, which can also involve *Visio Divina* (i.e., divine seeing).
- ✓ It is also a form of prayer that uses the entire body, with each physical sensation reminding us to draw ourselves into deeper prayer and meditation (Matthew 4:4). Fasting by Jesus and his disciples was always accompanied by prayer.
- ✓ It is a way of reminding ourselves what Jesus did for 40 days after his baptism (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:1-2). For many Christians, the 40-day season of Lent begins with fasting on Ash Wednesday, continues on each Friday, and culminates on Good Friday.
- ✓ It is a way of preparing ourselves for the joyful feast of Easter. Celebrated as a single joyful feast, Eastertide is the period of 50 days, spanning from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday, with each of the seven Sundays celebrated as a Sunday of Easter.
- ✓ It is a way to become strengthened against temptations (Matthew 4:1-11), such as the hunger for fame, power, riches, or recognition.
- ✓ It is a spiritual discipline that Jesus assumed his followers practiced. In English translations, Matthew 6:16-18 does not begin with a conditional statement (i.e., not "If you fast..."). Rather, it begins with an affirmative statement (i.e., "When you fast...").
- ✓ It is a way we can identify and empathize with the hungry and the poor, while entering into a spirit of poverty ourselves.
- ✓ It is a way of practicing the spiritual discipline of humility, because fasting can otherwise become a source of boasting and pride (Matthew 6:16). For these reasons, we are better off fasting in anonymity and telling only those who need to know (such as a medical adviser, spiritual director or spouse).

Secondary Reasons

- ✓ It is a way of taking care of our body, which is the temple of the spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).
- ✓ It is a way of living that can provide a counterweight to the American mainstream cultural values of gluttony, hedonism, and greed.
- ✓ It is a way to become more aware of our sins (e.g., pride, gluttony, and lust) and to practice spiritual virtues (e.g., humility, abstinence, chastity, and temperance).
- ✓ It is a way of mastering our physical desires, so that they do not master us.
- ✓ It is a way of taming our material desires, so that they do not own us.
- ✓ It is a way of practicing self-regulation of our emotions. One moment, we can be totally focused on *God* and the next moment we can notice an emotion (e.g., being anxious about needs, wallowing in pity, or harboring resentments). Learning to refocus on *God's* abundance and goodness during our tough emotional times helps us when we experience similar emotions when we are not fasting.
- ✓ It is not a commandment for Christians; it is a voluntary action in which we celebrate our freedom.

Tertiary Reasons

- ✓ It can be a way of focusing on the lives of a virtual Who's Who of Sacred Scripture:
 - Moses the lawgiver fasted 40 days and nights before receiving the Commandments (Deuteronomy 9:9-10), and he fasted 40 more days and nights after shattering the two tablets of stone because of all the sin his people had committed (Deuteronomy 9:18).
 - David the king fasted while mourning his unnamed child's fatal illness (2 Samuel 12:1-23).
 - David the king humbled his soul with fasting (Psalm 35:13).
 - Elijah the prophet fasted 40 days while escaping wicked Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19:4-8).
 - Ezra the scribe and priest fasted while mourning over sin (Ezra 10:6-17).
 - Esther the queen fasted for the safety of the Jews (Esther 4:15-17).
 - Darius the king fasted for the safety of Daniel (Daniel 6:18-23).
 - Daniel the seer fasted after mourning over of a vision of a great war (Daniel 10:1-17).
 - Nehemiah the rebuildier of the walls of Jerusalem fasted (Nehemiah 1:4).
 - Anna the prophetess worshiped night and day, fasting and praying (Luke 2:36-37).
 - John the Baptist's disciples fasted (Mark 2:18; Matthew 9:14).
 - Jesus the Christ fasted before his temptations by Satan (Matthew 4:1-2).
 - Paul fasted for three days as part of his conversion (Acts 9:1-9).
 - Church elders in Antioch fasted before sending out missionaries (Acts 13:1-3).

- ✓ It can be way of learning from the lives of other Christians:
 - St. Francis of Assisi
 - Martin Luther
 - John Calvin
 - John Wesley
 - Jonathan Knox
 - Pastor Wang Hsi (Xi Shengmo) of China

References

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