The Bible's lessons on fasting

Fasting goes beyond giving up food. It is a spiritual practice that brings peace, clarity, and a deeper connection with God, plus surprising benefits for your mind, heart, and life.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

"I would simply say that it is an act of sacrifice in honour of what the Lord has done for us," Innocent Byeragizo says when asked what fasting means to him.

For many believers, fasting is not just a teaching explained in church but a deeply personal journey of faith, sacrifice, and reflection. According to Biblestudytools, fasting, abstaining from food or drink to focus on prayer and seek God's will, is mentioned more than 70 times throughout Scripture. Both the Old and New Testaments highlight its spiritual value, showing that fasting can be public or private, with significant benefits for the believer.

Restoring our relationship with God

Fr James Moro SJ explains that fasting is rooted in Scripture as a way of restoring one's relationship with God. Drawing from early Jewish tradition, he says it was practised as an act of repentance, particularly when one felt they had strayed.

"It was a way of seeking to amend a broken relationship with God. By reducing what sustains the body, a person expresses sorrow, humility, and the desire to return to the right path," he notes.

This understanding is consistent throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, fasting often accompanied mourning, repentance, or urgent appeals for divine intervention. A striking example is found in the Book of Esther, where Queen Esther calls for a communal fast before risking her life to save her people (Esther 4:16).

In the New Testament, fasting takes on even deeper spiritual meaning. Jesus Himself fasted for 40 days in the wilderness, a model that continues to shape Christian practice during Lent. Fr. Moro says this period is an opportunity to "cut the clutter that makes one's Christian and human life less effective and fruitful."

Fasting as a private devotion

Beyond the act itself, Fr Moro cautions against turning fasting into a public performance. In the Gospel of Matthew 6:16–18, Jesus teaches that fasting should be done quietly and sincerely, not for outward admiration, but as a private devotion between the believer and God.

This emphasis on inward transformation echoes the biblical call: "Rend your heart and not your garments" (Joel 2:13). Genuine repentance, he stresses, comes from the heart rather than external displays.

A personal experience of fasting

For Byeragizo, these teachings shape how he approaches fasting each year.

"To me, fasting is a time to try to step into the life of Jesus. It helps me reflect on the pain and sacrifice He went through to save us," he says.

Like many Christians, he observes fasting primarily during Lent, aligning his practice with the 40 days that Jesus fasted. "It is unique because it has its season. And it mirrors the exact period that Jesus fasted. So it becomes an opportunity to try and walk in His footsteps."

The broader dimensions of fasting

Fasting is not only about abstaining from meals. Innocent embraces another dimension, emphasised by Fr Moro: abstinence paired with almsgiving.

"Each year, I give up things I love, especially those that cost money, and take that money to support people in need, especially those back in the village," Byeragizo says.

This reflects a biblical pattern where fasting is closely tied to prayer and generosity. In the early Church, fasting was often combined with discernment and action. For example, in Acts 13:2–3, believers fasted and prayed while seeking guidance, which led to the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul.

"Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving go hand in hand. It is not just about denying yourself, but redirecting what you sacrifice toward others in need," Fr Moro emphasises.

Spiritual and emotional benefits

For Innocent, fasting brings both spiritual clarity and emotional fulfilment.

"It gives me a sense of peace and fulfilment. You feel like this is what Jesus would have done. It brings calm to your heart."

Fr Moro stresses that fasting should never be mechanical or blindly observed. "Understand why you are fasting. These practices are meant to help us reflect, recognise where we have gone wrong, and mend our relationship with God and with others."

Ultimately, fasting is less about what is taken away from the body and more about what is restored within the soul.

Fasting, as shown in Scripture and modern practice, is a holistic spiritual discipline. It restores the believer's relationship with God, encourages reflection and repentance, and fosters generosity toward others. Far from being a mere ritual, it is a journey of faith, one that shapes the heart, mind, and soul.

Biblical examples and promises

Many figures in the Bible fasted and received guidance and revelation from God. Moses, Daniel, and Jesus all practiced fasting as a path to spiritual growth. Biblestudytools explains, "Fasting helps us grow a more intimate relationship with Christ and opens our eyes to what He wants to teach us."

Key Bible verses on fasting:

- Daniel 10:3: "I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks."
- Exodus 34:28: "So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments."

FAST FACTS

Types of fasting in the Bible:

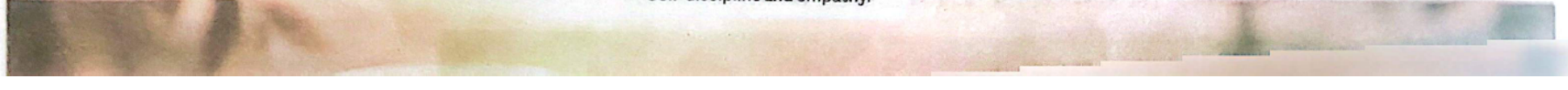
Private Fasting: Done quietly for personal reflection (Matthew 6:16–18)
Public Fasting: Shared by communities in times of mourning or crisis (Esther 4:16)

Practical tips:

- Combine fasting with prayer and reflection.
- Use the time to help others through almsgiving.
- Focus on inward transformation, not outward display.

Spiritual benefits:

- Clarity of mind and purpose.
- Deeper intimacy with God.
- Self-discipline and empathy.



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