

Key Principles of Biblical Fasting



Kay Arthur & Pete De Lacy



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PRECEPT MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL



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P R E S S

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CONTENTS

How to Use This Study	v
Introduction: Key Principles of Biblical Fasting	1
Week One: The Right Attitude Toward Fasting	3
Week Two: The Relationship Between Fasting and Sin ...	17
Week Three: Fasting in Difficult Circumstances	31
Week Four: Corporate Fasts	43
Week Five: The Role of Prayer in Fasting	57
Week Six: Examining Our Spiritual Condition	67

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This small-group study is for people who are interested in learning for themselves more about what the Bible says on various subjects, but who have only limited time to meet together. It's ideal, for example, for a lunch group at work, an early morning men's group, a young mothers' group meeting in a home, a Sunday-school class, or even family devotions. (It's also ideal for small groups that typically have longer meeting times—such as evening groups or Saturday morning groups—but want to devote only a portion of their time together to actual study, while reserving the rest for prayer, fellowship, or other activities.)

This book is designed so that all the group's participants will complete each lesson's study activities *at the same time*. Discussing your insights drawn from what God says about the subject reveals exciting, life-impacting truths.

Although it's a group study, you'll need a facilitator to lead the study and keep the discussion moving. (This person's function is *not* that of a lecturer or teacher. However, when this book is used in a Sunday-school class or similar setting, the teacher should feel free to lead more directly and to bring in other insights in addition to those provided in each week's lesson.)

If *you* are your group's facilitator, the leader, here are some helpful points for making your job easier:

- Go through the lesson and mark the text before you lead the group. This will give you increased familiarity with the material and will enable you to facilitate the group with greater ease. It may be easier for you to lead the group through the instructions for marking if you, as a leader, choose a specific color for each symbol you mark.

- As you lead the group, start at the beginning of the text and simply read it aloud in the order it appears in the lesson, including the “insight boxes,” which appear throughout. Work through the lesson together, observing and discussing what you learn. As you read the Scripture verses, have the group say aloud the word they are marking in the text.
- The discussion questions are there simply to help you cover the material. As the class moves into the discussion, many times you will find that they will cover the questions on their own. Remember, the discussion questions are there to guide the group through the topic, not to squelch discussion.
- Remember how important it is for people to verbalize their answers and discoveries. This greatly strengthens their personal understanding of each week’s lesson. Try to ensure that everyone has plenty of opportunity to contribute to each week’s discussions.
- Keep the discussion moving. This may mean spending more time on some parts of the study than on others. If necessary, you should feel free to spread out a lesson over more than one session. However, remember that you don’t want to slow the pace too much. It’s much better to leave everyone “wanting more” than to have people dropping out because of declining interest.
- If the validity or accuracy of some of the answers seems questionable, you can gently and cheerfully remind the group to stay focused on the truth of the Scriptures. Your object is to learn what the Bible says, not to engage in human philosophy. Simply stick with the Scriptures and give God the opportunity to speak. His Word *is* truth (John 17:17)!

KEY PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL FASTING

Do you long for intimacy with God? Do you desire to feel His presence, to hear His voice, to sense His pleasure? If drawing near to God is the desire of your heart, then we invite you to join us in an invigorating study of the discipline of fasting.

Since ancient times, fasting has been considered an essential means of deepening one's faith and connection with God. But in recent years it has become an increasingly rare—and often misunderstood—practice. Many wonder if fasting is an outmoded form of spiritual discipline, something modern-day Christians needn't bother with. Others are convinced this discipline is only for the superspiritual. And some see it only as a bizarre ritual connected to other faiths.

The Bible refers to fasting more than fifty times, and in this six-week study we'll examine many of those

passages to learn what the Word of God teaches about the topic. We'll consider what fasting involves and what it means to the average Christian. As you discover for yourself the biblical principles behind this practice and observe its impact on the lives of the faithful throughout history, you'll discover the unique role fasting plays in the life of the church. And by the end of our time together, you'll be equipped to decide how you will enter into the discipline of fasting as a means of deepening your walk with God.

WEEK ONE

Let's start our study of fasting by examining what Jesus said on the subject in His Sermon on the Mount. Then we'll look at some Old Testament references to this practice to see what we can learn about its nature and purpose.

OBSERVE

The Sermon on the Mount records Jesus' teaching about the basics of righteous living. Let's look specifically at what He said about fasting.

Leader: Read Matthew 6:1, 16–18 aloud. As you read, have the group say aloud and...

- underline every occurrence of whenever or when you.
- circle every reference to fasting.

As you read the text, it's helpful to have the group say the key words aloud as they mark them. This way everyone will be sure to mark every occurrence of the word, including any synonymous words or phrases. Do this throughout the study.

MATTHEW 6:1, 16–18

¹ Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven....

¹⁶ Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face

18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

INSIGHT

The word *fast* in this passage is translated from the Greek word *nesteuo*, which means “to abstain from food or drink.”

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking *when-ever* and *when you*?
- What did you learn from marking the references to fasting?
- From what you read in this passage, did Jesus seem to expect His listeners to fast? Explain your answer.
- If you’ve ever fasted, describe your experience. What prompted you to fast and what was the outcome?

OBSERVE

We've seen what Jesus expected of His followers when it came to fasting, but did He ever observe this practice Himself?

Leader: *Read aloud Matthew 4:1–4 and have the group...*

- mark each reference to **Jesus**, including pronouns, with a cross: **+**
- circle the word ***fasted***.

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking the references to Jesus?
- What does this passage reveal about His perspective on fasting?

MATTHEW 4:1–4

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

² And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.

³ And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.”

⁴ But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’”

ISAIAH 58:1–3A

¹ Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways, as a nation that has done righteousness and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me for just decisions, they delight in the nearness of God.

3A “Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?”

OBSERVE

Now let's go to Isaiah 58, the most comprehensive passage about fasting in the Bible. This message originally was given to God's people, the Jews, yet we know from Romans 15:4 that “whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction.”

The context for this passage is that God's people had been fasting in the wrong spirit. Though they outwardly seemed sincere, God knew their hearts and saw through their attempts to manipulate Him.

Leader: *Read Isaiah 58:1–3a aloud. As you read, have the group...*

- underline all references to **My people**, including pronouns and synonyms such as **the house of Jacob**.
- circle the word **fasted**.

INSIGHT

The word *fasted* in this passage is translated from the Hebrew word *tsum*, which means “abstained from food.” The only fast God required of His people occurred each year on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. However, fasting was practiced in a variety of circumstances as a means of seeking God’s help.

The word *humbled*, translated from the Hebrew word *anah*, refers here to self-afflicted contrition or bowing down.

DISCUSS

- What did God tell Isaiah to do in verse 1?
- What did you learn from marking the references to God’s people? What was happening with them?

- In verse 3, what action is described as a parallel to fasting?
- God's people looked sincere and eager; however, would He call what they were doing sin if they were truly sincere? Explain your answer.
- The people went to the temple, obeyed God's laws, fasted, and appeared eager to seek the Lord; but their worship was only an outward show. What does that tell us about the condition of their hearts?
- From what you have seen, is God more concerned about our outward appearance or the condition of our heart?

OBSERVE

Let's continue observing Isaiah 58.

Leader: *Read Isaiah 58:3b–5 aloud and have the group...*

- *underline the words **you** and **your**.*
- *circle each occurrence of the word **fast**.*

DISCUSS

- How did God describe the way Israel was fasting?
- What kind of practices did Israel engage in when fasting, according to verse 3?
- What did God admonish the people about in verse 4? Were they truly humble as they claimed earlier? Explain your answer.
- Did God find Israel's *outward* practices acceptable? Why or why not?
- According to what you've read, is the external ritual of fasting enough to be heard by God? Explain your answer.

ISAIAH 58:3B–5

3B Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers.

4 Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

5 Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD?

ISAIAH 58:6–12

⁶ Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?


⁷ Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

⁸ Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

OBSERVE

Let's listen as the Lord continues speaking in Isaiah 58.

Leader: *Read aloud Isaiah 58:6–12 and have the group do the following:*

- *circle every reference to **fasting**.*
- *mark every reference to **the Lord**, including pronouns, with a triangle: *
- *underline every reference to **Israel**, including pronouns such as **you**, **your**, and **yourself**.*

DISCUSS

- What did God tell Israel was the right kind of fast? What would be the result of such a fast?

- Contrast this with Isaiah 58:3b–5. Which kind of fasting reveals a heart truly concerned with spiritual matters? Explain your answer.

⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry, and He will say, “Here I am.” If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,

¹⁰ And if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday.

¹¹ And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.

¹² Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; and you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

ISAIAH 58:13–14

¹³ If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure and speaking your own word,

¹⁴ Then you will take delight in the LORD,

- What did God promise to do if Israel would fast according to His desires?

OBSERVE

The keeping of the Sabbath was a barometer of one's faithfulness to the Mosaic covenant. A person who observed the Sabbath according to the Law was acknowledging his dependence on God by seeking Him above his own desires.

Leader: Read Isaiah 58:13–14 aloud and have the group do the following:

- double underline every reference to **the Sabbath**, including any pronouns and the synonym **holy day**.
- underline every reference to **Israel**, including the pronouns **you** and **your** as before.
- mark with a triangle each reference to **the Lord**, including pronouns.

INSIGHT

Exodus 20:11 says, “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.” The seventh day of the week was to be kept as a “sabbath to the LORD” (Exodus 20:8–11). On that day no one, including servants and visitors, was to work.

and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

DISCUSS

- What did the people of Israel need to do in order to please God in the way they kept the Sabbath?
- What would God do for Israel if the people observed the Sabbath with a right attitude?

- In these verses about keeping the Sabbath, what similarities do you find related to the previous passages about Israel's behavior and attitude toward fasting?
- Discuss what principles, if any, you can discern from these passages regarding God's response to a person's attitude or heart.

OBSERVE

Because of the depraved state of the nation, God would have to initiate salvation. Again God spoke of the people's sin and how it was preventing Him from saving them.

Leader: Read Isaiah 59:1–2 aloud and have the group...

- mark every reference to **the Lord**, including synonyms and pronouns, with a triangle.
- underline each occurrence of the words **you** and **your**.

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking *you* and *your*?
- What did you learn from marking the references to the Lord?
- What point was the Lord making? Is it that He *cannot* hear or save?
- From all we have seen in this lesson, what have you learned about fasting?

ISAIAH 59:1–2

¹ Behold, the LORD's hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear.

² But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

WRAP IT UP

What does it take to be close to God and hear from Him? We saw that Jesus expected fasting to be a regular part of His followers' lives, something that would be rewarded by God. In addition He Himself fasted in the wilderness.

The people of Israel thought they could be right with God simply by performing the ritual of fasting. But they didn't hear from God, and they didn't understand why.

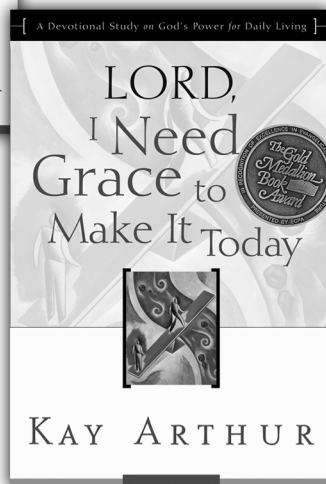
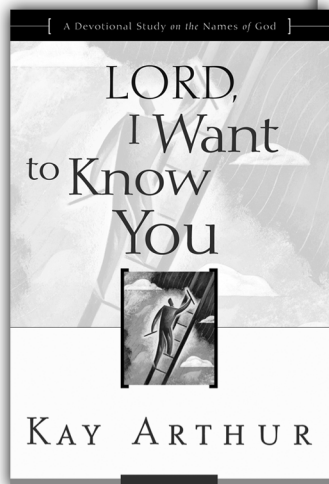
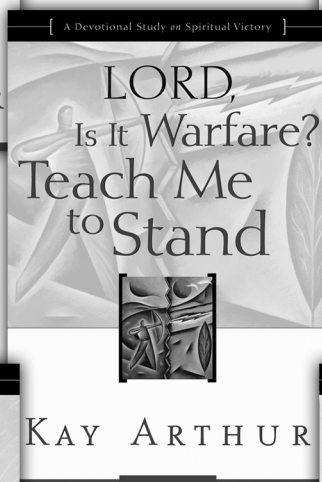
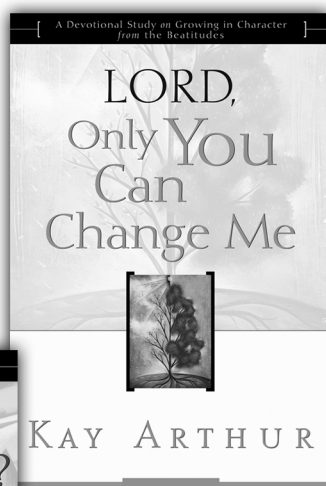
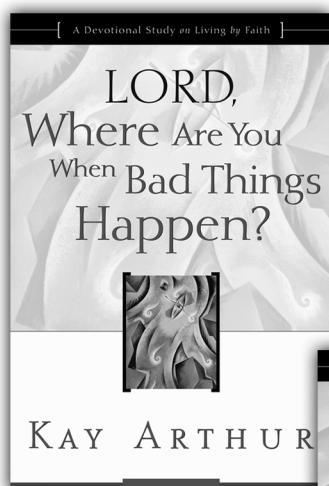
The answer was sin! Sin had separated them from God so that He *would* not listen to their cry. God was concerned with their motives as well as their behavior. Fasting would have no effect until they dealt with their sin.

The perspective of eternal God has not changed since the days of Isaiah. He wants us to obey from our hearts, not merely follow a ritual. If we are living in disobedience, then fasting won't draw us close to God. He won't listen. It's not that God *can't* hear, but that He *chooses* not to listen to the cry of the unrepentant sinner.

What is your response to this warning from God? Will you respond by saying, "I'm okay. The Lord knows my heart." Or will you fast, examining your heart and your ways to see if there be any way in you that is displeasing to the Lord (Psalm 139:23–24)?

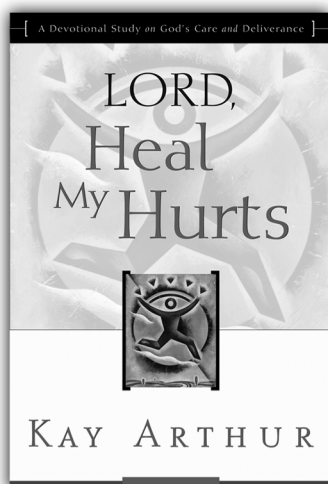
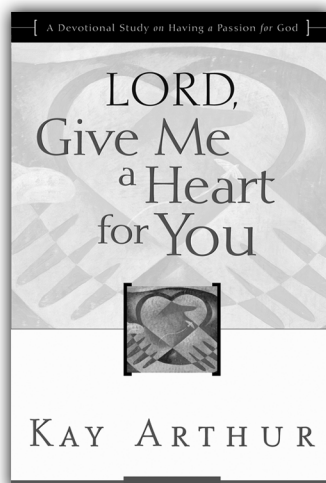
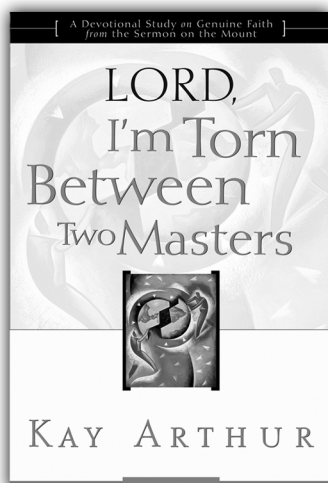
If you truly want to draw closer to God, you'll find you can only connect with Him according to His Word.

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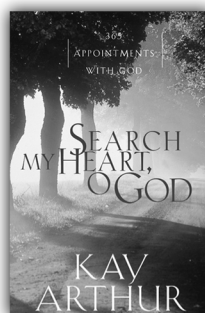
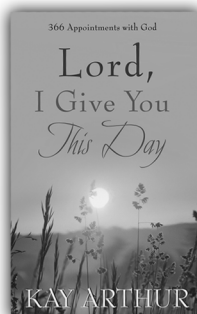


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ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND PRECEPT MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL

KAY ARTHUR is known around the world as an international Bible teacher, author, conference speaker, and host of the national radio and television programs *Precepts for Life*, which reaches a worldwide viewing audience of over 94 million. A four-time Gold Medallion Award-winning author, Kay has authored more than 100 books and Bible studies.

Kay and her husband, Jack, founded Precept Ministries International in 1970 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, with a vision to establish people in God's Word. Today, the ministry has a worldwide outreach. In addition to inductive study training workshops and thousands of small-group studies across America, PMI reaches nearly 150 countries with inductive Bible studies translated into nearly 70 languages, teaching people to discover Truth for themselves.

PETE DE LACY began leading Precept Upon Precept Bible studies and conducting training workshops in inductive study in the 1980s. He joined the staff of PMI in 1989 after retiring from a career in the U.S. Army. The author of several books in the New Inductive Study Series and the 40-Minute Bible Study series, he is a contributor to *The New Inductive Study Bible*, *Discover the Bible for Yourself*, and *How to Study the Bible*. Pete also is a featured teacher at Precept Ministries Conferences and in many Precept Upon Precept videos.

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