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FASTING
ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE

Joseph Carroll



FASTING

ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE

This booklet discusses fasting according to the Bible to help us turn to our Lord wholeheartedly. It also gives some practical suggestions on how to fast in order to devote ourselves to God through fasting.

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Providing resources to help believers and churches live
faithfully according to God's word.



Introduction

The content of this booklet is from a sermon that I gave in April 2025 at Emmanuel Evangelical Church a week before Good Friday. I asked the church to fast on Good Friday to worship the Lord and remind ourselves of Christ's suffering for us. Therefore, I gave a sermon on fasting to help the saints at Emmanuel Evangelical Church know the biblical principles of fasting before we entered into our corporate fast.

For many Kurds, fasting has been a part of their lives. Every Ramadan, many people fast. However, this fasting is very different from the fasting described in the Bible. During Ramadan, many people ask me about fasting in Christianity. Therefore I adapted my sermon to write this booklet as a short resource to help answer that common question, "what is fasting according to the Bible?" I hope this booklet helps believers understand God's purposes for fasting and learn to fast according to His will. I pray that God's holy people among the Kurds will turn to God through fasting and prayer and ask Him to accomplish His will for their lives.

Note, this booklet was originally written in Kurdish and then translated to English, so it may not read so smoothly in English.

This booklet is divided into 5 sections.

1. What is fasting?
2. We fast out of love, not out of obligation
3. Fasting without repentance is meaningless
4. The purposes of fasting
5. How to fast

Part One

What is fasting

When we think of a mature believer who lives for God, we typically think of someone who is humble, goes to church weekly, memorizes many verses, shares the gospel with others, and can teach God's word clearly. These things are good, but do we consider fasting when we think about a mature believer? Fasting is a biblical act that many believers and churches neglect despite the fact that the Bible talks a lot about fasting.

I believe that fasting is vital to growing with God. Why? Because in this world, there are so many things that can easily distract us from focusing and meditating on the Lord and calling out to him for help. For example, our mobile phone is always with us and constantly calls us to look at it. We are all so busy that it is difficult for us to pray for even 15 minutes without interruption. It would be very helpful for our growth in Christ if we could set aside time to pray to him and seek him without distractions. It is important for believers to learn how to meditate on God's word, overcome worldly desires, and know that true happiness comes from the

Lord. Fasting helps us do these things. Fasting strengthens our times of prayer and seeking the Lord.

Fasting is abstaining from food for a certain period of time in order to turn to God in prayer for a divine purpose. Fasting can be not only about giving up food and drink, but also about abstaining from other things, such as social media, smoking, and television for a certain period of time, such as a week or a month. I know several believers who gave up social media for a month as a form of fasting because they thought it had become an idol for them. They had come to care more about social media than God. Social media was feeding their worldly desires and pushing them away from Godly desires, so they fasted from it. Giving up things such as smoking and social media in order to leave idols and grow more with Christ is a good thing. So I encourage you to think about what things in your life have become idols, wasting your time and preventing you from living for God. Give up those things and replace them with something that pleases the Lord.

But when the Bible speaks of fasting, it's referring to abstaining from food. So in this booklet we will focus on that kind of fasting. That is, fasting is

abstaining from food for a certain period of time in order to turn to God in prayer for a divine purpose.

Fasting is also practiced in many other religions. However, in many other religions, the purpose of fasting is to cleanse oneself from sin. Some think that fasting draws them closer to God so that God will reward them. This kind of fasting is like trying to do business with God, meaning you try to work for God in hopes to receive some benefit from him in return. But according to the Bible, this is not true fasting. Fasting is not to cleanse ourselves from sin or receive earthly benefits from God.

The gospel says that only Christ alone can cleanse someone from sin and bring them back to God through His life, death, and resurrection. Man's sin, which comes from our corrupt hearts, separates man from God. Because everyone has sinned, all people deserve God's wrath. Therefore, the most important question for us is this: How can we escape sin and God's wrath and be reconciled to God?

The answer is not fasting, going to church, or giving money to the poor, but the answer is believing in

Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Romans 4:25 and 5:1 says:

He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

Do you see this? God cleanses us from sin by His grace through faith in Christ. That is, when we are convicted of sin and we see that we are far from God and deserve hell because of our sins, and we want to be free from our bondage of sin, what should we do? We should repent and believe in Christ. We take our sins to Christ and his cross. In return, he justifies us and gives us his righteousness. He gives us new life and then in his strength we live for God as an expression of our love and gratitude to him for saving us.

God, by his grace, is the one that opens our hearts to believe in Christ. It is God who empowers us to repent. God declares us innocent by his grace and gives us eternal life as a divine gift because of Christ's

righteousness, not because of our own righteousness, and not because of our fasting.

The Bible says in Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." When did Christ die for us? Was it after we had left our sin and improved our lives? No. What does the verse say? When we were still sinners. That is, before we loved Christ, Christ loved us first and came into the world to save us because we cannot save ourselves in our own strength. This is the essence of the gospel of Christ.

Therefore, according to the Bible, we cannot draw near to God by fasting, but through fasting we seek the God who has drawn us near to Himself through Christ. We do not fast to become children of God, but we fast because we have become children of God through receiving Christ and His grace. Therefore, believers, children of God, when you fast, remember we fast to seek the true God who loves us and has saved us by his grace.

Now that we have seen what fasting is, let us now ask the question, "why should we fast?" This brings us to the second part of this booklet.

Part Two
We fast out of love for God,
Not because it is obligatory

There is no verse in the New Testament that commands us to fast. Nor does the New Testament give us a long detailed list of requirements or instructions on how to fast. For example, it does not say to fast on a particular month, or to begin and end your fast at a particular time. Nor does it say what not to eat and what not to drink. But this does not mean that fasting is unimportant according to the Bible. Let's look at Mark 2:18 - 20:

¹⁸Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

¹⁹Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

In these verses, several people ask Jesus, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" In verse 19, Christ answers them by saying that those invited to a wedding cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them. But who is the bridegroom that Jesus is referring to? It's himself. Christ is the bridegroom. Therefore the disciples did not fast like John's disciples when Christ was with them.

Then in verse 20 Christ says, "The days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and on that day they will fast." So there is indeed a day when Christ's followers will fast. But when are those days? The verses are clear, it's when the bridegroom, or Christ, is taken away. My friends, 2,000 years ago, Christ ascended into heaven, the bridegroom was taken away. So what should we do today according to Jesus? We must fast. Yes, according to Christ, today is the time to fast.

Let's also turn to Matthew 6 to see the significance of fasting according to scripture. In Matthew 6:2 Jesus says, "So when you give to the needy..." In this verse Jesus does not command us to give to the needy, but is giving to the needy a good and

important thing? Yes, of course. Now look at verse 5. In verse 5 Jesus says, “When you pray...” Again, it's not a command, but is prayer important? Yes, of course. Now look at verse 16, Jesus says: “When you fast...” You see, in the same way that giving to the needy and prayer are important, so is fasting. It is true that Jesus does not directly give a command and say, “fast,” but we should not take advantage of our freedom not to fast. According to Jesus's teaching in Matthew 6, fasting is very important.

For example, my wife and I have three children, and we have many guests come to our home. We're busy. Sometimes it is difficult to talk to each other for long periods of time without interruptions. Therefore it's important for the health of our marriage that from time to time we set aside special time for each other and go out without our kids and put aside our phones to listen and talk with one another.

Why do we do this? Do we do it because it is obligatory and there is a law that forces us to go on dates together? No. Rather, it is because we love each other and want to be with each other. So it is with fasting. We do not fast because it is obligatory and a law forces us to

do so, but we fast because we love God and we want to devote ourselves to him by praying without losing our focus.

Now that we know what fasting is and why we fast, let us now ask with what heart we should fast with. This brings us to the third part of this booklet.

Part Three

Fasting is meaningless without repentance

One of the most important passages in the Bible about fasting is this: Isaiah 58:1-7. Let's read these verses to learn an important principle about fasting.

¹“Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion

and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

²For day after day they seek me out;

they seem eager to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that does what is right

and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions

and seem eager for God to come near them.

³‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,

‘and you have not seen it?’

Why have we humbled ourselves,

and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.

⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

In these verses, the people of Israel were fasting and asking God to bless them. Now look at the end of verse 2, it says, "[They] seem eager for God to come near them." They only *seemed* to be eager to draw near to God, but they were not really eager for God. They were only concerned about receiving God's blessings and rewards, not following and obeying God.

In verse 3, the people question God and say, "Why have we fasted and you have not looked upon us, and why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed us?" But what was God's response? Look at the end of verse 3. God says, "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please." That is, they did whatever they wanted to do for their own benefit, ignoring God's commandments and satisfying their worldly desires. Also, in verse 3 God tells them, "you exploit all your workers." That is, the Jews were sinning by oppressing their workers, they were not paying their workers the wages they were rightfully due, and they were not repenting.

Now look at the end of verse 4. God says, "You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high." You see, God did not care about their fasting, God did not hear their prayers. Why? Because they were disobeying God with an unrepentant heart. They thought that they could fast and that God would bless them for fasting, despite the fact that they were continuing in sin and their hearts were far from God.

What important principle do we learn from these verses? By fasting we cannot force God to reward us. Fasting is not a means of forcing God to do something good for us. No, God wants us to love and obey Him from our hearts. God sees the depths of our hearts. God wants our hearts, not a traditional fast without loving and obeying Him. Fasting is meaningless without repentance. If you fast and yet you continue in sin without remorse or intention to turn away from your sin, then know that God does not delight in your fast. If you're continuing in unrepentant sin, the most important thing is not fasting, but repentance. We fast to turn our hearts towards God, not just to get things from God.

Part Four

The goals of fasting

There are many examples of fasting in the Bible. In these instances of fasting described in the Bible, people fast for different purposes. I cannot discuss all of them in this booklet, but let us look at a few examples that illustrate three of the main purposes of fasting.

Purpose 1: For repentance

1 Samuel 4-6 tells how the people of Israel had sinned against God. Therefore, the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 7:2-6 calls God's people to repent and return to God. Let's read those verses.

²The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time—twenty years in all.

Then all the people of Israel turned back to the LORD. ³So Samuel said to all the Israelites, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the

hand of the Philistines.”⁴ So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.

⁵ Then Samuel said, “Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the LORD for you.”⁶ When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the LORD.” Now Samuel was serving as leader of Israel at Mizpah.

According to verse 6, why did they fast? To confess their sins. Through fasting they expressed their repentance to God. God is pure and holy and hates sin. Therefore, to seek God, we must turn away from sin. Just as God called the people of Israel to repentance through the prophet Samuel, God calls us to repentance. Beloved, what sin do you have that is so hard to give up? I encourage you to fast and pray to God to give you the strength to repent and turn away from this sin.

At our church, we take the Lord’s Supper together at the beginning of each month. The Lord’s

supper is a good opportunity to examine our hearts and repent. Therefore, why not fast once a month on the day we take the Lord's supper? It's a regular opportunity to focus on prayer and to repent from pride, jealousy, lust, or whatever sin is entangling you. Fasting during the time of communion is not a biblical command, but a suggestion to have a fixed and regular time to fast.

Purpose 2: To ask God for help in difficult and important situations

See Ezra chapter 8:21-23. In the context of these verses, the Jews had been in exile for 70 years and were now returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and start a new life. The verses say:

²¹There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. ²²I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, “The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but

his great anger is against all who forsake him.”
²³So we fasted and petitioned our God about this,
and he answered our prayer.

According to these verses, for what purpose did they fast? To return safely to Jerusalem. This journey was not short or easy. It was very long and dangerous. Thousands of people, including women, children, and all they had were returning to Jerusalem. But Ezra didn't want to ask the king for an escort to protect them as he had told the king that God would protect them. They wanted to show the king that their God does good to those who trust in Him. So instead of asking the king for help, they fasted and cried for help. By God's mercy, God answered their prayers and they arrived safely in Jerusalem.

In Ezra 8, it is evident that the people of Israel understood that their safety was in God's hands. They understood that God was able to protect them upon their return. They trusted in God and knew that He cared for them. My fellow believers, remember, God cares for you. By fasting, we can cast all our worries on God and

demonstrate our dependence on Him. Do you need God's help for something special? Fast and ask God for help.

Let's look at another example when God's people fasted to ask God for help in an important situation. Acts 14 describes the end of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey. On the journey, Paul and Barnabas went to many cities and preached the word of God. In response, many people believed in Christ. At the end of the journey Paul and Barnabas return to the cities where people had become believers to encourage them and appoint leaders for their churches. Let's read Acts 14:21-23:

²¹They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²²strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. ²³Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

In these verses we clearly see that Paul and Barnabas fasted when they appointed elders in the churches. Why? Ordaining a man as an elder of the church is not a small matter, it is very important. Elders are called to lead God's people according to God's will. An elder needs strength, wisdom, and help from God to lead the church well. Paul and Barnabas also needed wisdom to know whom to choose as elders. Appointing an elder in a church is very important. Therefore, they fasted as they called on the Lord for his help and blessing. Because of the example of fasting in these verses, many churches throughout history call a fast before appointing an elder to ask God for help for that elder and the church.

If you are facing a major situation or need in your own life or in the life of your church, like Ezra and Paul and Barnabas, fast and ask God for help. Turning to God through fasting honors him because it reveals our trust in Him, and God is very pleased when we trust Him.

Purpose 3: To Worship God

Let's look at Acts 13:1-3 to see another purpose for fasting. These verses describe the time when the

church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Let's read these verses:

¹Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.
²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

The church in Antioch was worshipping God and *fasting*. In these verses, no other purpose for fasting is mentioned other than to worship God, that is, to focus entirely on the greatness of God and behold his glory.

Luke 2:36-37 also describes another example of fasting for the purpose of worshipping God. At the time of Christ's birth, there was a prophetess named Anna. Let's read these verses:

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.

For Anna, fasting was a way of worshiping God. But notice, what else was Anna doing besides fasting? Verse 37 says that she also was praying.

Note that among all these examples of fasting that we've looked at, there was prayer. Whether the fasting for repentance, for asking God for help in difficult and important situations, or for worshipping, all examples involved prayer. That is, prayer and fasting are intertwined. In the Bible, the majority of examples of fasting are linked to prayer. Therefore, if you are fasting for any purpose, it is important that you dedicate significant time for prayer. Brothers and sisters, because we are united with Christ, the beloved Son of God, we can pray to God our Father with confidence. 1 Peter 3:12 says, "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and

his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

Fasting is abstaining from food for a certain period of time in order to turn to God in prayer for a divine purpose. What are the three main purposes? For:

1. Repentance
2. Asking God for help in a difficult and important situation
3. To worship God

Part Five

How to fast

We have learned what fasting is and why we should fast, but now let's see how we should fast according to the Bible. I remember one time in our church when I preached on fasting. After the sermon some people came up to me and had many questions about fasting. Most of their questions were things like this, "Is it OK to drink water according to the Bible? When should I start and break the fast? What foods can I eat or not eat?"

I hope you have understood from this booklet that fasting is not just about following a set of rules, but about loving God so that we can turn to Him in prayer. But when you fast we have to make practical decisions like: when do you start, and when do you end your fast, what can you eat and drink and what should you not?

Let's look at the Bible and see what it says about how to fast. After looking at the biblical guidance on fasting, I will share some suggestions and ideas on how to fast that I have learned from other believers and what I have found very useful in my own life.

Let's look at Jesus's instruction on fasting in Matthew 6:16-18:

¹⁶“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

What's the main message of these verses? When you fast, you should not brag and show to others that you are fasting. It does not mean that it is a sin if others know you are fasting, but it means that you should not use your fasting to show off in the eyes of others.

For example, when I am fasting, I tell my wife that I am fasting so that she does not think that I am not eating because I am sick or because I don't like her food. But I do not tell others that I am fasting to protect myself from pride. We should not fast to receive the praise of men, but to turn to God and receive his praise. Certainly,

receiving praise from God cannot be compared to receiving praise from men.

This is the only instruction in the New Testament on how to fast. Other than this, there are no other instructions in the Bible on how to fast. I know that the Catholic, Orthodox and some other churches have many requirements and guidelines on how to fast. For example, some begin fasting forty days before Easter. There are many conditions and guidelines during these forty days. However, these requirements and instructions do not come from the Bible, but from church tradition. I am not saying that those traditions are not good or useful, but we must know the difference between biblical instruction and extra-biblical tradition. Because the Bible is our highest authority and does not give us precise conditions or instructions on how to fast, believers are free to choose how to fast appropriately in order to achieve the goal of fasting, which is to turn to God by praying.

Before I give you some practical tips on how to fast, know that there are generally two types of fasting. The first is corporate fasting and the second is personal

fasting. Corporate fasting is when the elders of a church call their church to fast together for a specific purpose.

For example, as we saw in Acts 13:1-3, the church in Antioch was fasting together to worship God. It wasn't only one person in the church who was fasting. All the members of the Antioch church fasted together for the purpose of worshiping God. Also, in Acts 14:21-23, we saw that Paul and Barnabas fasted with the new churches to appoint leaders for them. That is, the members of these churches fasted together with Paul and Barnabas. The other two examples mentioned in this booklet, Ezra chapter 8 and 1 Samuel 7, are also examples of corporate fasting by the people of Israel. The people of Israel fasted together under the leadership of Samuel and Ezra for a specific purpose.

I have announced corporate fasts twice in my church. The first time was one week before we were planted and officially constituted as a church from Erbil Baptist Church. The second time was on a Good Friday, the Friday before Easter, so that we could focus more on Jesus's suffering for us.

The first type of fasting, corporate fasting, strengthens the unity of the church. If the elders of your

church declare a fast, I encourage you to submit to their leadership and fast with your brothers and sisters to turn to God together.

The second type of fasting is personal fasting, which means when you fast alone. For example, when Christ fasted for forty days, he was alone. Also, in Luke 2 when Anna was fasting, she was fasting alone. It is important for the believer to fast alone from time to time to turn to God in prayer for the purposes mentioned above. For this type of fasting, personal fasting, I have some suggestions.

This advice on how to fast comes from my experience and other believers that I know. But know that these are my instructions, not the Bible, so fast any way you can to achieve the biblical purposes.

- Drink water to avoid weakness
- As for the start and end time, you are free to start and end when you would like. For example, you may want to start in the morning and not eat breakfast or lunch, and then break your fast in the evening by eating dinner. Or you could abstain from eating and drinking from eight o'clock in

the evening until you break your fast the next day, at noon by eating lunch. Or you could fast in whatever way is convenient for you, it can be 12 hours or 24 hours, depending on your abilities and habits. For example, when I started fasting, I didn't eat breakfast and lunch, but I ate dinner. After fasting by not eating two meals several times, I became used to fasting and then I could fast for longer.

- Because the purpose of fasting is to turn to God in prayer, I encourage you not to use social media or watch television that day. The point is, avoid anything that distracts you from praying, because that time of fasting should be devoted entirely to God in prayer.
- I encourage you to meditate on God's word when you are fasting. Believers listen to God by reading the Bible and they pour out their hearts to God in prayer. So, to connect your fasting with listening to God from the Bible, choose a passage or sections of the Bible to read on your day of fasting.

- When you fast, use your normal meal times for times of prayer. If you can, go to a quiet place or room to keep your focus on God.
- It is usually difficult for us to pray for 15 minutes, but it is easy for us to talk to a friend for two hours. It is important to learn how to talk at length with God in prayer. So, I encourage you to make yourself pray at length. Force yourself to pray for 30 minutes.
- If you're able to, sing spiritual songs to God during your day of fasting. God uses spiritual singing to stir our feelings for Him.
- Also, when you feel hungry, let that feeling cause you to pray to God.
- Set a schedule for your fasting. Some fast once every two weeks, or every month, or once every two months, but having a schedule for fasting will help you not to neglect fasting.

Fasting may be difficult at first, but do not give up, because as you continue to do it, you should grow in

the joy and blessing of fasting. When you fast, you learn how to control your desire for food, and thus you learn how to overcome your worldly desires in order to live for God. Satan wants to convince us that we cannot live without satisfying our evil, worldly desires. But by fasting, you learn to restrain the desires of the flesh, which will help train your body and give you confidence to reject worldly desires with God's help. You will also learn that true happiness comes from the Lord.

I want to end this booklet by encouraging you with a promise that our Lord made to us about fasting in Matthew 6:17-18. Jesus said:

¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

What does this verse promise if we fast according to God's will? It promises that God will reward us. These verses do not explain how God will reward us, but God is trustworthy. God is our good Father who knows what is best for us. Therefore, I encourage you; Don't put off

fasting, make a plan and start turning to God in fasting and prayer. If you do, surely God will reward you.

