

FASTING

FASTING HAS BEEN PART AND PARCEL of the Judeo-Christian tradition for millennia. Scripture is replete with examples of people who fast for a variety of reasons.

Old Testament saints fasted at times of mourning and national repentance. They fasted when they needed strength or mercy to persevere and when they wanted a word from God (see 1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16). However, fasting was no magical guarantee that God would answer as the intercessor wanted. King David fasted when he wanted God to spare the life of Bathsheba's child, but the child died (2 Samuel 12:16-20).

Fasting was a normal practice for the Jews of Jesus' day. Jesus began his ministry with a forty-day fast. He also practiced fasting before healings and to overcome temptation. But he did not hold his followers to a strict regime of fasting (Matthew 4:2; Mark 2:18-19; Luke 5:33).

The New Testament church sometimes fasted when it sought God's will and needed the grace and strength to remain faithful to God's work. There were also fast times linked to times of worship (Acts 13:2-3).

In many Christian traditions fasting is an important part of preparing to embrace a particular liturgical season. During Lent, fasting reminds the church of how Jesus gave up everything—even his life—for us.

Scripture also gives a variety of warnings about fasting for the wrong reasons or with the wrong attitude: (1) When people do not live as God desires they should be prepared for fasting to accomplish nothing (Isaiah 58:3-7). (2) Fasting is not for appearances. It does not make anyone pious or holy, and it does not earn points with God (Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:9-14).

Fasting is not a magical way to manipulate God into doing our will; it's not a way to get God to be an accomplice to our plans. Neither is fasting a spiritual way to lose weight or control others. Fasting clears us out and opens us up to intentionally seeking God's will and grace in a way that goes beyond normal habits of worship and prayer. While fasting, we are one on one with God, offering him the time and attentiveness we might otherwise be giving to eating, shopping or watching television.

Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite—an appetite for food, for media, for shopping. This act of self-denial may not seem huge—it's just a meal or a trip to the mall—but it brings us face to face with the hunger at the core of our being. Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts.

Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us. Our small denials of the self show us just how little taste we actually have for sacrifice or time with God.

This truth is not meant to discourage us. It's simply the first step in realizing that we have to lay down our life in order to find it again in God. Brian Taylor puts it like this in *Becoming Christ*: "Self-denial is profoundly contemplative for it works by the process of human subtraction and divine addition." Deny yourself a meal, and when your stomach growls "I'm hungry," take a moment to turn from your emptiness to the nourishment of "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Feed on Jesus, the bread of life. Skip the radio or TV for a day and become aware of how fidgety you are when you aren't being amused or diverted. Then dodge the remote, and embrace Jesus and his words: "my food . . . is to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34). Taste the difference between what truly nourishes the soul—the living bread and the life-giving water—and what is simply junk food.

Fasting reminds us that we care about "soul" things. We care about the church. We care about the world. We care about doing God's will. Thus we willingly set aside a little comfort so we can listen and attend to the voice and nourishment of God alone. For God can give us grace and comfort and nurture we cannot get on our own.

GUIDELINES FOR FASTING FROM FOOD

- Don't fast when you are sick, traveling, pregnant or nursing. People with diabetes, gout, liver disease, kidney disease, ulcers, hypoglycemia, cancer and blood diseases should not fast.
- Don't fast if you are in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision. Fasting is not magic.
- Listen for a nudging from God to fast.
- Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.
- If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting for one meal. Spend the time with God that you would normally be eating.
- Work up to longer fasts. Don't attempt prolonged fasts without guidance. Check with your doctor before attempting long periods of fasting.
- If you decide to fast regularly, give your body time to adjust to new rhythms of eating. You may feel more tired on days you fast. Adjust your responsibilities appropriately. (Expect your tongue to feel coated, and expect to have bad breath.)
- Begin a fast after supper. Fast until supper the next day. This way you miss two, rather than three, meals.
- Don't break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer the fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.

WHAT TO DO IN THE TIME SET APART FOR FASTING

Bring your Bible and a glass of water during your fast.

Relax and breathe deeply. Place yourself in the presence of God. Offer yourself and your

time to God by repeating Samuel's words "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Or simply say, "Here I am."

Spend some time worshiping God for his faithfulness. Thank him for where he has come through for you. Psalm 103:1-5 also provides a starting point for praise.

Bring your desires to God. Ask him if this desire is in line with his will and his word for you and the church. Be still and listen. Offer your desires and prayers to God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you feel empty or restless, what do you do to try to fill the emptiness?
What does this tell you about your heart?
2. What is your attitude toward fasting or self-denial?
3. In what ways do you currently deny yourself?
4. When has self-denial brought you something good?
5. What has the experience of fasting been like for you?
6. Where do you operate from an entitlement mentality?
How can you wean yourself from this way of life?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. To deepen your understanding of how Jesus denied himself and embraced suffering and death for you, practice some sort of fasting during Lent. • When the fasting is difficult, share your thoughts and feelings with Jesus. What does Jesus say to you? • Tell Jesus what it means to you to share and fellowship with him in his sufferings.
2. Fast one meal a week. Spend your mealtime in prayer. When you feel hungry, sit with Jesus in the wilderness and feed on the bread of heaven. • Talk to Jesus about what his self-denial means to you.
3. For a period of one week, fast from media, sports, shopping, reading or use of the computer. Dedicate the time you now have to God. What feelings arise in you? What thoughts interrupt your prayer?
4. During Lent, particularly focus on Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness. Enter the story in your imagination. What do you and Jesus talk about? How are you tempted to indulge yourself? • How does it help you to talk to Jesus about this?
5. Make two lists: one of needs, the other of wants. Ask God to show you where to fast from some of your wants. Offer to God the time you spend hankering after your wants.
6. Abstain from purchasing morning coffee or daily sodas or evening videos. Offer the money or time to God.
7. When facing a trial, decide on a fast that gives you time to seek God's strength in your journey.

RESOURCES ON FASTING

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster, chapter 4, "Fasting"

- Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* by Lynne M. Baab
- A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer* by John Piper
- Simplicity and Fasting* by Jan Johnson
- Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson, chapter 5
- “Suggestions for Fasting Prayer for the Church” in appendix 9 of this book