

To Fast ...or Too Fast?



**SWIMMING UPSTREAM AGAINST A
BUSY, CONSUMERIST SOCIETY**

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Fasting is too often relegated to the realm of the perceived “spiritual elite”...or those who are “really desperate”. It is accepted that those in “the ministry” or those who have an urgent need for a breakthrough are likely to fast...from time to time...but surely it is not an expectation of believers in general?

Or worse, fasting is sadly associated with religious fanaticism: “Who would want to deprive himself of the nutrition the body needs? Isn’t fasting unhealthy...isn’t it a manipulation tactic for extremists and weirdoes?”

We live in a world that applauds us when we satisfy our every whim. Walk into any shop...and a host of snacks and treats are lined up, designed to appeal to our never-satisfied taste buds...you could almost expect them to jump up, dance to a catchy jingle and sing, “Buy me...buy me...!”

We are encouraged to feed ourselves on demand: “Thirsty? Open the fridge...buy a soft-drink...just quench your thirst now!” “Hungry? Butter a slice of bread...head for the nearest fast-food joint...feed your face right now!” If a person’s fridge is not filled with an assortment of snacks, or his cupboard filled with a range of treats...we conclude: “Maybe they are month-end tight or perhaps...they’re just being old-fashioned...you know, tight-fisted?”

Fasting – *abstaining from food* – is certainly an upstream thought in a consumerist world going downstream fast. Our abstain-from-nothing mentality is completely contrary to the spirit (and power) of Biblical fasting. “Deny our natural need for food? Why? What’s the point?...Oh, another advert for delicious grub...Munch on!”

What does it mean to fast?

Fasting* means to *abstain from eating food, for a period of time, in order to earnestly seek the Lord*. In other words, we abstain from food to focus more intently (and intensely) on the Lord, using the time we would normally eat to pray. Fasting without prayer is simply a diet! It is, in a very real sense, “intensified prayer”.

Fasting should be as normal to the Christian walk as prayer is. Jesus taught, “**when you fast,**” not, “**if you fast**” (Matthew 6:16). Clearly, He expected His followers to tap into the discipline and power of this “intensified prayer” even as He modelled it for us (Matthew 4:2). In fact, Jesus spoke into the three “great disciplines of Judaism” – giving, prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:1-18) – pruning the abuses of all of them, while recapturing the spirit and passion of each of them.

Fasting has been a vital means of drawing nearer to God and securing spiritual power throughout the history of the church. The great revivalist John Wesley, accredited by both secular and Christian historians to having changed Britain in his lifetime – being pivotal in averting a British “French revolution” – was known to refuse to ordain people into “the ministry” (as he understood it) who did not fast two days each week.

We pray that the contents of this article may challenge and provoke you, the reader, to live a fasted-lifestyle: to consider fasting one day a week and to be quick to respond to the Lord’s promptings to participate in longer fasts.

*There are two Hebrew words used for fasting in the Old Testament. The first literally means, “to cover the mouth,” which refers to abstaining from food (see for example, 2 Samuel 1:12; Nehemiah 1:4). The second means, “to humble oneself,” and captures the attitude behind the act of fasting (see for example, Psalm 35:13; 69:10, 11). The Old Testament had four categories of fasting:

- (1) The only commanded absolute fast in the Mosaic Law was a corporate (national) fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:26-32). The fast commanded to precede the wave offering was a partial fast (Leviticus 23:14).
- (2) There were several voluntary corporate (national) fasts initiated out of a response to a crisis in Israel’s history even though they were not required by the Mosaic Law (see Zechariah 8:18, 19; Esther 9:31). These voluntary fasts then became holy days to remember God’s faithfulness and were intended to conclude with celebration and feasting (Zechariah 8:19).
- (3) Several prophets called the nation of Israel to fast in repentance (see for example, Joel 2:15-17), although their rebuke was often only partially (or half-heartedly) heeded, and most times not at all. These corporate (national) calls to fast were prophetically (circumstantially) obligatory but not mandated as a regular practice of the Mosaic Law.
- (4) Individuals voluntarily fasted as they felt the need to do so. Moses (Deuteronomy 9:18), Elijah (1 Kings 19:8) and Daniel (Daniel 10:3) are just three examples of those who chose to fast voluntarily.

The Greek word used for fasting literally means, “to not eat,” and is first used of Jesus’ forty-day fast (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2). The early church continued the practice of fasting both individually and corporately (Acts 9:9; 13:1-3; 14:23), and actually committed two days of the week – Wednesdays and Fridays – to fast (Didache 8:2).

[The Didache was a second-century manual for church practice].

What does fasting achieve?

The discipline of self-denial is essential to walking with the Lord: **“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me”** (Matthew 16:24). Jesus made it clear that He is establishing a prevailing church with the building material of selfless, Christ-centred lives (Matthew 16:18, 24). Self-denial is not just a one-time response at our conversion, but a lifestyle of daily denying ourselves in order to choose God’s will even when it crosses our own intentions; that is, to **“take up [our] cross”**.

Prayer itself is essentially an expression of self-denial where we deny the natural human desire to lean on our own understanding or act in our own strength. Fasting thus intensifies this expression of self-denial as we practically deny the natural human desire to eat. We put our hunger for closer fellowship with God above our hunger for food, asserting the primacy of the spiritual over the natural realm. In this “intensified prayer” we become less self-reliant and less self-sufficient. ***Instead we learn to lean more fully on Him, we learn to trust more completely in Him and we learn to draw more deeply from Him.*** Through fasting we experience a renewed closeness to Him and a new release of His power.

There is an anointing released through fasting that is simply just not possible without it. This may sound like a loaded statement. Some may even feel that it smells of self-effort as if, we are advocating that, through fasting one can twist God’s arm and induce Him to act. No! We can in no way coerce God to act*. However, **God** has designed fasting as a means of drawing near to Him, and thus...and here is the key...as we draw nearer, ***He purifies our heart to reveal and reflect more fully His glory.*** Through this expression of self-denial His influence flows in and through us with greater purity and power.

Jesus made it clear that a greater degree of spiritual power only manifests when we set ourselves apart to Him through prayerful fasting (Matthew 17:14-21). Through fasting a greater anointing of the Spirit is released upon us: on our prayer life, our service and ministry, our witness and testimony; and a greater power released for spiritual breakthrough and answered prayer.

*Fasting, like prayer, is too often used to manipulate God. If we were to abstain from food for a whole month without a worshipful spirit and, with this clouded heart, made requests contrary to the will of God, we would horribly miss the point...and be terribly hungry! We would not succeed in twisting the Lord’s hand; we would only succeed in torturing ourselves!

There is the danger of turning the discipline of fasting, as with other spiritual disciplines including giving and prayer, into a means of earning God’s favour and blessing, and to then use it to become proud “little Pharisees,” condemning the perceived lack in others. The three dangers in misusing fasting are: (1) self-righteousness, (2) becoming judgmental and (3) hypocrisy.

What is the purpose of fasting?

Having made clear what is achieved through fasting, it is critical to clarify that *the primary purpose of fasting is to seek the Lord*. Jesus made it clear that His people would fast to deepen their fellowship with Him as they longingly wait for His return (Luke 5:34, 35). In other words, the primary purpose of fasting is not to try to “get” something from God, but to rather give ourselves to Him.

Even legitimate prayer needs and breakthroughs are not our primary reason for fasting. We do not fast in order to get results from God. We do not fast to “get a breakthrough,” or to “receive an answer to prayer”. No...we fast to draw nearer to Him. We fast to see Him more clearly. We fast so that we can have more of Him. We fast so that He can have more of us. We fast so that He can purify our motives. We fast so that He can shape our desires. *We fast so that we can enjoy renewed intimacy with Him knowing that through fasting He will reveal His will with greater clarity to us*. Then...as we determine to seek Him first and foremost, we can and should, in great expectation, bring our requests to Him...knowing that it is His desire to meet our every need, to answer our prayers and to break through any obstacles in our path.

What are the Biblical responsibilities of fasting?

Through the prophet Isaiah, God rebuked ancient Israel for their manipulation attempts at fasting (Isaiah 58:1-5). Not only did they try to coerce the hand of God, their whole attitude to the fast was contrary to the spirit of worship; they continued to exploit their workers, they continued to entertain strife and conflict among themselves, and they continued to act wickedly...while they sought to attract attention to their external, religious piety. In His rebuke, God outlined the true spirit behind fasting:

(1) To bring pleasure to God rather than impress man.

A clear implication of this passage is God’s disgust for Israel’s carnal need to use fasting to parade their self-righteousness. In the same way, Jesus countered the Pharisees’ gloomy, attention-seeking act of fasting, by urging His followers to rather embrace a joyful, God-only focus in fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). Rather than advertising the fact that we are fasting, we should be discreet knowing that our **“Father who sees in secret will reward [us] openly*”** (v. 18).

This of course does not mean that we should not inform family or others that we are fasting when they need to be informed for practical reasons. Furthermore, fasting in agreed unity with others is both Biblical and powerful. Jesus taught that giving, prayer and fasting must be done discreetly (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18) but this obviously does not forbid corporate giving (Acts 4:34, 35), group prayer (Acts 4:23, 24) or corporate fasting (Acts 13:2, 3).

*The individual intimacy promised through these worshipful acts of giving, prayer and fasting needs to be noted. Not only does Jesus promise that the Father is lovingly watching over us in our faithful acts of giving, prayer and fasting but He uses the singular **“your Father”** (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18) as opposed to the usual emphasis on our corporate relationship: **“our Father”**. Thus *my* heart motive in giving, prayer and fasting is first and foremost an act of love between *me* and *my* Father. Parading or promoting self has no place in a child’s intimate pursuit of Father.

(2) *To become more responsibly connected to our world.*

Through this passage, God reminded the Israelites of their responsibility to their world (vv. 6, 7). As we commit to fast, we should seek to become more connected to those afflicted by the pain and oppression of our fallen planet. Too often fasting is mistakenly seen as an act of withdrawing from these issues. While fasting is certainly a means of drawing away from the influence of worldliness, as we draw nearer to His holiness, ***true fasting connects us more compassionately (and responsibly) to the oppressed and less fortunate.*** It should awaken a renewed social conscience. The early church was known to give the food they saved during their twice-a-week fast and give it to the poor*.

*In 128AD, Aristides reported this practice to the Emperor Hadrian.

(3) *To develop a renewed spirit of worship.*

Through this rebuke, God called for a new purity of heart and a renewed spirit of worship* (vv. 9, 13, 14); urging His people to lay aside all wickedness, disunity and criticism. As we see Him more clearly so we see more clearly the condition of our own heart; and we leap out of the septic sewer of our own selfish soul and into the pure, sparkling waters of His refreshing! True fasting nurtures a new humility of heart, honest and sincere confession and a renewed resolve to live holy unto the Lord. And this is a springboard into joyful worship, inner peace and harmony... and an attitude of content celebration.

*The Old Testament obligatory fasts (Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:14, 26-32) and voluntary fasts (Zechariah 8:18, 19) were to conclude in celebrating God's faithfulness with a time of feasting. Fasting, like the self-denial principle it expresses, is not an end in itself. Through self-denial we lose self to find our true beauty in Him (Matthew 16:25). Likewise through fasting we starve self in order to feast more on Him. And it is with this expectation that we fast...with an expectation of worshipful celebration.

This aspect of fasting was understood and better applied by the early church. The early followers of Jesus caught His Spirit and knew properly how to fast and to feast. They understood Jesus cut away from true fasting the association with the Old Testament gloomy "sackcloth and ashes" urging them rather to **"anoint [their] head and wash [their] face"** (Matthew 6:17), which was actually a preparatory act before feasting and celebration. Jesus thus encouraged fasting with an eye on the feast to come.

It was with this thought in mind that Jesus defended His disciples' lack of fasting (Matthew 9:14, 15). In response to the criticism, Jesus said: **"Can the friends of the bridegroom [fast] as long as the bridegroom is with them?"** (v. 15). In other words, in the literal Presence of the Messiah His followers were to feast, and with the initiation of the Lord's Supper, they would regularly feast in anticipation of His literal return and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in the age to come (Revelation 19:9). Thus the early church community knew how to feast, celebrating the Lord's Presence in their midst.

Jesus then continued: **"But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast"** (v. 15). Anticipating His own crucifixion (resurrection and ascension), Jesus made it clear that when He was literally absent from His followers, they would fast. Fasting would thus also be a vital part of the church age as His followers played their part in advancing His Kingdom now. Therefore, the early church knew how to both feast and fast... and to fast with a worshipful anticipation of the feast to come!

What are the Biblical blessings of fasting?

Consistent with His Father-heart, laced throughout His rebuke of their errors in fasting, God outlines the blessings we can expect when we fast correctly (Isaiah 58):

(1) **Revelation and enlightenment** (vv. 8, 10).

[See Exodus 34:28; Daniel 10:1-3; Luke 2:37, 38; Acts 9:9-12].

(2) **Healing and wholeness of our soul** (vv. 8, 11).

[See 1 Samuel 1:1-7; Psalm 35:13, 14; 107:1-20; 109:4].

(3) **Spiritual breakthrough* and clear guidance** (vv. 8, 10, 11).

[See Deuteronomy 9:9; Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 19:8; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Esther 4:3; Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23].

*In his book "On Fasting," written in 208 AD, Tertullian advocated fasting as a key weapon to overcome the worst demonic powers.

And of course...

(4) **Answered prayer and renewed intimacy** (v. 9).

[See Psalm 42:1-11; 43:1-5; Ezra 8:21-23; Nehemiah 1:4; 9:1; Esther 4:16; Daniel 9:3].

How do you fast?

An **absolute fast** means to abstain from all food and water for a certain period of time. This fast should **not** be for more than three days, since the human body cannot survive without water beyond this period of time. Both Moses and Elijah were supernaturally sustained for forty days without food and water but this was clearly a divinely enabled experience. Let us repeat this for clarity: very importantly...when fasting, **abstain from food but not from water!** If the human body does not have water (or liquid) for three (3) days it will shutdown!

A **normal fast** means to abstain from all food for a certain period of time while consuming water (or other liquids). For example, we choose not to eat anything for an entire day or for a prescribed number of days as we prayerfully seek the Lord. A **partial fast** means to abstain from certain foods for a certain period of time. For example, Daniel fasted for twenty-one days eating just vegetables (Daniel 10:2, 3).

When committing to fast, you should decide for how long you plan to fast for and what foods you are going to abstain from. If you are just starting a lifestyle of fasting, we suggest that you first do a partial fast for one day. Miss a meal or two, or only eat vegetables as you seek the Lord. Do this once a week for a few weeks. Then turn this into a normal fast on this day. Miss all your meals as you devote time to prayer. Again do this for a few weeks. Following that, do a normal fast for three days.

We urge you to consider fasting once a week*. Choose a specific day of the week and commit to fast on it every week. Even look to synchronise it with the fasting day of others who you are in close fellowship with. This provides mutual support and accountability. Make sure you keep a journal of your prayer times on these days; record the lessons you learn from the Lord or the fresh insights you gain about your own soul. Then look at doing an occasional two or three or even seven day normal fast as you feel led by the Lord to do so.

*We as a ministry ask our leaders to consider fasting every Tuesday.

What about some practical advice?

Many people think that fasting is detrimental to a person's health. This is simply not true, certainly if it is done thoughtfully. In fact, *fasting can be healthy!* It cleanses the body from toxins picked up through eating junk or unhealthy food. Doctors may actually recommend fasting to cleanse the body. The following information will provide some helpful guidelines:

- The human body only experiences genuine hunger pains between seven (7) and fifteen (15) days of fasting. In other words, the 'hunger' we feel during those first few days of a fast is really just 'appetite' pains; the body's adjustment to the disruption of its feeding patterns. Our body is used to food at regular intervals (and often, on-demand) and during a fast suddenly cries out, "Hey, where is the food?" These appetite pains are not dangerous at all and are part of the self-denial power behind fasting.
- During a fast, headaches and physical weariness are common, and bad breath is inevitable. These are just part of the physical cleansing of the body. The more toxins in the body the more severe the headaches, weariness and bad breath will be. Refrain from taking aspirin on an empty stomach: the headache will go when the toxins are out. Bath regularly during a fast and suck a mint for bad breath if you have to. Or squeeze a few drops of fresh lemon juice into your drinking water to neutralise bad breath. Avoid chewing gum during a fast as chewing stimulates the digestion process.
- The physical reactions that can be expected over a longer fast:
 - Days 1-3 Appetite pains, discomfort, slight fatigue and the usual consequences of the cleansing of the body from toxins.
 - Days 4-6 Appetite pains subside, dizziness may occur, weariness, possible cold spells and the usual consequences of the cleansing process continues.
 - Days 7- Strength returns, spiritually strong and alert, energy increases and euphoria may occur – the best part of the fast*.
 - Days 10- True hunger pains start, indicating that the body's reserves are being significantly used up. It would be wise to involve medical counsel from this point forward.

*There is also a medical reason for this euphoric upturn. Once the body starts to auto-cannibalise between days seven and fifteen – when it begins to burn muscle to produce energy – it begins to produce "ketones" stimulating receptors in the brain to enter "survival-mode" producing these euphoric symptoms.

- During a normal fast of three days, there is no need to avoid physical work or exercise. Our physical strength will be slightly reduced, but there is no danger in continuing with your everyday activities. You may feel fatigued at times and should probably refrain from participating in very strenuous sport or physical exertion. Fasting longer than three days may need to be more carefully planned.
- During a fast one should drink a lot of fluids (8 glasses per day). Drinking tea, coffee and soft drinks will only continue to add toxins to your body. Water is simply the best hydrating drink for a fast. Also one should not take vitamins during a fast, as vitamins need to be digested with food.
- If a person is on special medication or has sugar diabetes, medical advice should be sought from a doctor. There are other things besides food a person in this position can fast.
- Be strict about the food you eat a day or two before starting a fast. Avoid eating big meals on these days; rather fill up on fruit and vegetables. Also, when coming off a longer fast, look to allow your stomach to adjust to eating again by breaking the fast gradually.
- Do not feel that the fast is ruined if you eat something by accident: just swallow quickly and continue the fast!

Final thoughts?

The early church thrived through fasting and feasting. The early followers of Jesus knew how and when to pray and fast...and how and when to play and feast. They committed to pray and fast as they waited for the Kingdom to come; they continued to play and feast as they celebrated the Kingdom that had come.

It is not too far off to say that a lot of church history has been plagued with the church's inability to know how and when to play and feast. Nothing has done Christianity a greater disservice than its association with black outfits and gloomy faces. True revivals of the Spirit have often occurred in communities of faith experiencing the pure joy of being alive and in love. Not only did these fellowships of holy joy know how to fast but they also knew how to feast.

However it is also more correct than we would like to admit that modern Christianity has often lost its ability to pray and fast. The rampant lukewarmness that plagues Western Christianity is, in part, due to a self-reliance and self-sufficiency that has flooded our prayer-less lives. We are too busy to pray...and living too fast to fast.

There is no doubt that the end-times revival – the greatest outpouring of the Spirit – will be poured out upon the altar of selfless, yet joyful, lives; this quality of character and faith forged in the furnace of a life of fasting and maintained in the joy of a community of feasting.

We close with a few words from the past...

“Genuine Christian fasting is a fruit of repentance, it helps to keep the flesh in check, and is a fine outward training in preparing to receive God’s grace”
(Martin Luther, 1483-1546).

“Fasting secures God’s power to assist us, it sharpens prayer, it demonstrates humiliation before God and it controls the body”
(Matthew Henry, 1662-1714).

“The soul and the body make the man; the Spirit and the disciplines make a Christian...One who never fasts will no more enter heaven than one who never prays!”
(John Wesley, 1703-1791).

“Our seasons of fasting and prayer...have been high days indeed; never has heaven’s gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer to the central Glory”
(Charles Spurgeon, 1834-1892).

**This article is part of a series entitled:
Prevailing Prayer.**

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