

A LAMPSTAND FOR MOUNT AIRY

COVENANT REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PASTOR SCOTT WILLET

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When You Fast...

Many people have lots of questions about the practice of fasting, often with much confusion. What is it? Why should we do it? How should we do it? When should we do it? The Bible doesn't actually answer those specific questions—it just assumes the existence and practice of fasting. Jesus simply says to his disciples, "When you fast..." assuming that they will. (Matthew 6:16) He urges them to avoid the hypocrisy of a merely outward show, but doesn't otherwise give any personal instructions.

Fasting is presented in the Bible as a helpful and important Christian discipline. It is presented as a "special" event that goes beyond the normal, everyday experiences of God's people rather than a regularly scheduled activity (such as weekly worship services on the sabbath day). But it is assumed to take place. It is not optional ("If you fast...") but a given ("When you fast..."). In that context, it is assumed to be part of the ongoing experience of God's people individually and as a church. Most generally, fasting is a biblical practice designed to be an expression of intensity in prayer. In the sermon on the mount (Matthew 6:16-18), Jesus teaches his disciples about doing good deeds and then prayer. Then, also, fasting. Elsewhere in the Bible, reference to fasting is given with direct connection to prayer. In other words, "prayer and fasting" is the familiar and repeated phrase. The context might be the ordination of elders (Acts 14:23) or, more generally, the need for an unusual intensity in prayer. (Matthew 17:20-21, 1 Corinthians 7:5) You might fast for medical reasons (pre-surgery, for example) or you might fast for nutritional or dietary reasons, but those are something different. Fasting, as a biblical practice, is a tangible expression of particular devotion to prayer that goes beyond your normal practice. You fast, denying yourself the food upon which your life depends, so that you can outwardly express your dependence upon God for your very life itself. You deny yourself food in the attempt to pray more earnestly, for a brief, specific period of time. That's it. Nothing more complicated than that.

With regard to the question of when to do it, I believe it is helpful to answer plainly: *whenever special circumstances make it useful and appropriate*. There is no exact timing defined that answer, but I think it is fair to say that Christians and churches in our day would benefit from a more frequent practice. So our Session has called for a day of prayer and fasting, set for April 13-14. Our focus will be upon evangelism and outreach, the special circumstances defined by the realization of how easy it is to neglect the need for evangelism and outreach in our individual lives and as a church. It is easy to be wrapped up in the more normal and regular affairs of our own lives, and there has been much to occupy our thoughts and energy in prayer these past few months and years. Thus in our leadership, the Session has determined to make note of our need to pray for those who are yet outside the kingdom of God, thinking in terms of our inner circle of family and friends, our broader community, our whole nation with all its current spiritual struggles, and the world at large.

But how? How do we go about it? Obviously, if we are going to do it together as a church, we need a set time. So a time was chosen with the hopes of being as convenient as possible. We will end our time of fasting together with a prayer meeting set for Friday, April 14, at 5 pm. We will then break the fast and enjoy a meal together (which will be provided by the church). If you decide to fast this week, the first question will be when to start. There is no single right answer to that question. You could choose to fast all day Friday, eating your last meal Thursday for dinner, thus fasting for 24 hours until we eat together after the prayer meeting on Friday. At a minimum, you could eat breakfast Friday and fast only for the lunch meal. Or you could extend the fast longer, eating your last meal before the fast at breakfast or lunch on Thursday. Please exercise your own freedom in that decision. No one will ask. There will be no sign-up. It is just a commitment you make before the Lord—an intentional commitment to intensify your devotion to prayer.

You should also decide whether or not you will drink water during your fast. You could even consider a partial fast, thinking that it would be wise to eat a modest amount of bread or something similar. You might also wish to fast for spiritual reasons and benefit, but decide that, for medical reasons, you ought not to do so. For example, those who wrestle with any issues related to diabetes would need to consider any threat of harm to their own health. Obviously, pregnant and nursing mothers would not only have to consider their own health, but that of their baby as well. If you are interested, there are further thoughts about fasting in my sermon last Sunday, available online. (<https://mtairyopc.org/sermons/when-you-fast/?player=audio>)

My emphasis in all of this is to give you the freedom to set your own parameters while urging you to take part if you are able to do so. Next week I will provide some helpful suggestions for your prayers, focusing upon evangelism and outreach, and I would also ask you to share with me (for distribution to the church) any particular people or requests in that regard that you would wish for others to know about. When we come together to pray on Friday, I will give direction to that meeting while inviting anyone present who wishes to do so to pray out loud, thus leading and speaking for the group with his or her own words.

I am always struck by the example of the early church following the arrest of Peter and John for preaching “the resurrection from the dead.” (Acts 4:2) The apostles continued to preach upon their release and their message about Jesus was plain: “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Fervent prayer by the whole congregation followed that sermon. “And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31)

As we pray together as a church this week, with fasting, let us pray for that same blessing of God upon our life as a church. As we exert an extra-ordinary effort to prayer, may the Lord hear those prayers in such as way as to bring to life those who remain separated from God. Let us pray for the blessings of salvation which we enjoy to be granted to others. That blessing is nothing less than this: “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14)

Yours with a pastor’s heart,

