

## WHAT IS FASTING?

It might be helpful to start with what fasting isn't...

**Fasting isn't abstinence.** You may hear someone say, 'I am fasting video games for lent; social media; wine/booze.' Most Protestant Christian traditions during Lent have exchanged traditional fasting with the tradition of "giving up" something for 40 days. You give up TV, or social media, or alcohol, or something like that. Abstaining from things as a means of being more wholly devoted to God for a season is an excellent act, which is worthy of your consideration. But that is not fasting. That is abstinence.

**Fasting isn't a restricted diet** like paleo, or gluten free, or vegetarian, or even the "Daniel Fast" of eating only meat and vegetables. Again, these might be worthwhile endeavors to take, but are different from fasting. Fasting is not a diet, or the act of intermittent fasting.

**Fasting is the act of going without food as a way to give our whole body over to God;** to consecrate our mind, our will, our attention, and indeed even our flesh over to God and to say, "Your kingdom come, your will be done..." in my life.

Christian fasting should not be considered a punishment, but rather, a way to be God-focused. When we voluntarily abstain from food (and sometimes from drink), we deepen our relationship with God and grow in greater spiritual maturity.

## WHY FAST?

Fasting is not commonplace today but was a core practice in the early church (1 Samuel 31:13, Exodus 34:28, Matthew 4:1-2, Matthew 6:16-18, Acts 13:3, etc.). Early Christians used fasting on the following occasions:

- Every Wednesday and Friday for regular observance,
- Every Holy Saturday (between Good Friday and Easter Sunday),
- To mourn loss (especially in instances of death),
- Before their baptism (for the individual being baptized),
- To prepare their hearts to hear from God, to focus during times of intense prayer, and to humble themselves in repentance.
- During the season of Lent (it is clear from church history that Christians abstaining from eating from sun up to sun down for the 40 days of lent was common, and predates the Muslim tradition of Ramadan which seems to have been largely influenced by this Christian tradition.)

We fast for the following reasons:

## 1. TO OFFER OUR WHOLE SELVES TO JESUS

Early Christians would fast on Wednesdays and Friday. They chose Wednesday because that was the day Jesus was betrayed. They chose Friday because that was the day of Jesus' crucifixion. And then on Resurrection Sunday, they would FEAST.

So, every single week, they were drawn into the Passion – betrayal, crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus; every single week they were rehearsing the gospel even with respect to when they ATE FOOD. They were living the church calendar in miniature every single week.

These early Christians were getting involved in what the apostle Paul calls ***voluntary participation in the sufferings of Christ.***

Not out of shame, or guilt, or to get shredded, or to lose weight, or out of dutiful obligation, or anything like that – but out of a burning hunger for Jesus and to be with Him, and to be like Him. This is the central reason why we should fast. To give ourselves to Jesus.

**John Piper** – “[Fasting is] whole body hungering for God.”

**Dallas Willard** – “Fasting is feasting – on our Lord and doing His will.”

**Matthew 4:4 & Deuteronomy 8:3** – “*Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*”

We starve the flesh to feed to soul. Fasting is one of the best ways to revive that latent hunger; to retrain your soul's appetite to hunger for the bread of life in Jesus.

Not your heart, mind, belief system – your bodies. Your whole person.

*“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”*

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Are you making your body a hospitable place for the Holy Spirit to call home?

## 2. TO GROW IN HOLINESS

In **Romans chapter 7**, the apostle Paul goes on a little rant that always puts a smile on my face because it always makes me feel like Paul is reading my own mail. He writes,

*“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?”*

Romans 7:15, 18-19, 24

Do you feel that?

The flesh is language that is repeatedly used by NT writers to name not just your physical body, but the part of ourselves that is often run by survival instincts and/or by our personal desire for pleasure. Your flesh is like a beast within. If you feed it, it grows stronger. But if you starve it, it loses its hold on you.

As we noted already, it should give you pause to note that the both:

- the garden temptation of Adam and Eve Genesis 3, and
- the desert temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4...

...had to do with food. That is not arbitrary or random. There is a correlation between our level of self-discipline with how we use our bodies (whether sexually, or with food, or alcohol, or where we wander with our feet like with shopping, to appease our appetites...) ... there is a correlation between the self-discipline we have with our bodies, and with our level of self-discipline with sin.

If you fast, here is what you will experience – you will be hungry (that’s obvious), but also before when you were craving all sorts of things to appease all of your wants and desires, fasting will make you more attentive to long for the things of God – to pray, to find rest in Him, to be attentive to His presence in your life.

### **3. TO STAND IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR & THE POOR IN SPIRIT.**

We fast because it puts us in touch with the realities of Genesis 3, when our first parents Adam and Eve took of the fruit in the garden. They trusted in their own instincts and their own passions rather than the promises of God.

And, since Adam and Eve, that’s what we do, too. So, we fast to remind ourselves of our poverty of spirit, but also to remember that where Adam failed, Jesus prevailed. Romans 7 says,

*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Romans 7:24-25

Jesus came in a body to offer Himself to make your body His home! Paul says in Romans,

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*

Romans 12:1

So, we offer our bodies, not out of legalism, or duty, or anything like that – but in view of God’s MERCY!

## **FIVE STEPS ON HOW TO FAST**

### ***STEP 1: SET A GOAL***

The first step is to determine your goal for fasting. These may include a desire for guidance, healing, spiritual renewal, etc. Humble yourself in prayer before God, ask Him to awaken your heart, and pray for the Holy Spirit to guide you in your fast. Prayer and fasting go hand-in-hand, so begin with this in mind.

### ***STEP 2: COMMIT***

Before you fast, you must decide:

- The duration of fast – one meal, one day, or?
- The details of fast – Will you work out/exercise? Will you pray a certain amount of time? If you are fasting by abstaining from eating, will you consume water only, water and juice, etc.?

Making these commitments ahead of time will help you when you are in the actual fast.

### ***STEP 3: PREPARE***

We must prepare our hearts and bodies for fasting.

- Physical prep: Do not rush into fasting. Eat smaller meals, fruits, and vegetables in the few days leading up to your fast. Avoid high-fat and sugary foods. Consult with your doctor, as some medications and bodily conditions may not allow for safe fasting.
- Spiritual prep: Confess sin, seek forgiveness, meditate on scripture, and begin your fast with a prayerful spirit.

### ***STEP 4: FASTING***

During your fast, use your time with God to pray, read Scripture, take a walk, worship, and reflect whilst avoiding food or the thing from which you are abstaining.

### ***STEP 5: BREAK YOUR FAST***

After you fast, do not rush into eating solid foods or immediately go back to the activity or thing from which you abstained. Start slow. If you are abstaining from food, start by eating fruit, then maybe a salad, then more substantial foods. Ending your fast gradually will help you develop healthy physical and spiritual habits.